

Pastun Push

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He was once Washington's most important ally in Afghanistan, but today Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is seen as one of the biggest threats to internal stability and to the rule of beleaguered President Hamid Karzai. And the fugitive warlord appears to be gaining support among Islamic extremists and the majority Pashtun population, who feel that they are being discriminated against.

The growing danger within Afghanistan was starkly illustrated on September 5, when a gunman tried to assassinate Karzai in the southern city of Kandahar just hours after a huge car bomb ripped through a busy central Kabul street, killing at least 30 people.

These were just the latest and deadliest challenges to Karzai's rule. And while no one has claimed responsibility, analysts say the indiscriminate nature of the Kabul blast was reminiscent of the handiwork of the ethnic Pashtun Hekmatyar, who killed thousands of civilians in a vain bid to capture the city in the early 1990s.

Moderate Pashtuns, moreover, say the attack on Karzai was a grim reminder of his precarious support among his own people. Karzai, himself a Pashtun, was attacked in his hometown by a Pashtun. The fact that he was saved by his American bodyguards only served as an embarrassing reminder of whom he depends upon for his security.

Karzai tried to brush off the threat. "These incidents do not indicate any problems. They are done by terrorists in an isolated manner. This means they are no longer capable of mobilizing as groups," he told reporters.

But Afghan officials and Western diplomats in Kabul beg to differ. They say there is clear evidence that Hekmatyar has joined forces with remnants of Al Qaeda and the former ruling Taliban in the south and east, where they are receiving support from the Pashtuns. "The Pashtuns are fed up and there is seething unrest in the eastern and southern provinces," says an international aid worker in Kandahar.

The officials and diplomats say Hekmatyar has emerged as the key leader of anti-government Pashtun extremism since slipping back into Afghanistan from exile in Iran earlier this year. He is believed to be hiding in the east. In a clear attempt to whip up nationalist fervour, he recently accused the United States of genocide against the Pashtuns.

"All true Muslim Afghans who want an Islamic government in their country must know it is possible only when the U.S. and allied soldiers are forced out. We must all unite and rise against them," said Hekmatyar in a taped message sent to the Associated Press on September 4.

He is tapping resentment among the Pashtuns, which is fuelled by continuing raids on their villages by U.S. forces hunting for Taliban and Al Qaeda fugitives; by the paltry Pashtun representation in the ethnic Tajik-dominated central government and security apparatus; and by the donor community's failure to deliver on promised reconstruction aid.

But the U.S. has clearly started taking the threat from Hekmatyar seriously and he is becoming the focus of U.S. military efforts in the east of the country, where special forces have been hunting the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

American troops launched an offensive in the eastern province of Kunar more than a month ago, primarily to try to capture their former ally against the Soviet occupying forces in the 1980s, according to United Nations officials.

Washington has also just dropped its opposition to expanding the Kabul-based 4,500-strong International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, and deploying foreign troops in other cities in a bid to ensure stability. The Americans are also now calling for reconstruction efforts to be speeded up.

But the Pentagon is not ready to take the initiative. It would like to see the ISAF expand, but wants others to provide troops and leadership. Others, including Karzai, the UN and the European Union, say a direct U.S. role is vital.

"We cannot simply stand on the sidelines," says Bill Durch of the Stimpson Centre, a Washington-based think-tank. "The longer the United States waits to take steps to close the security gap, the more responsibility for doing so is likely to fall on its shoulders, in an unplanned fashion. For example, sending a special forces detail to guard President Karzai."

If the U.S. waits too long, Hekmatyar and his allies will seize the moment to further weaken the government.