Waiting For War Again

The assassination attempt last month on Afghan President Hameed Karzai and the car bomb in the capital Kabul have drawn renewed attention to the country’s divisions. A year after the start of the campaign to end Taliban control, armed groups are just waiting for international forces to leave so that factional conflict can resume.

The main airport in central Kabul is the site of an attack. The airport has been renamed the Great Masood Road. From the Persian sign it is clear that the airport is named after Masood, rather than the usual Kabul. Masood is being the late Ahmad Shah Masood, Afghan warlord, legendary hero of the Panjshir Valley and friend of the west. He was killed last year, two days before September 11, whilst being interviewed by people disguised as a television team, allegedly on the instructions of Osama bin Laden.

Masood’s portrait is all over Kabul - in the streets, on vehicle windshields, and inside government offices, where it sometimes hangs alongside that of President Hameed Karzai. There are far more pictures of Masood than of Karzai, who has returned from nearly thirty years in exile in Rome to a quiet, more political life in the Afghan capital.

The death of Masood is not just a sign of his popularity as an emblem of which faction controls the capital. It is a powerful reminder to Karzai, who was styled the leader in Islamic-extremist bastions. In December, it was Masood who led the Northern Alliance in juxtaposing Kabul from the Taliban in the previous months. The armed militia on the streets of Kabul, some of whom have gunned down whilst others have less clearly defined responsibilities, are all Masood loyalists. Most say they come from Panjshir, the valley in northern Afghanistan which was once and still is Masood’s power base. His influence over post-Taliban Afghanistan is enormous.

The more Taliban troops expand Masood’s influence in resisting Russian soldiers from the country at the end of the 1980s. From the way they tell it, you would think he achieved this single-handedly, and that the relief of Kabul from the Taliban last year was likewise all down to one man. They have nothing to say about their hero’s role in the bloody invasion that followed the eviction of Soviet forces. Tens of thousands of Afghans were killed and half the capital’s two million people were forced from the city. The malevolent force behind the invasion was the Islamic equivalent of manslaughter.

Those in Kabul who are less enchanted with Masood’s virtues because they lived through the bloody invasion, are said to react with irony that the Great Masood Road sign could more appropriately be hanging in one of the devastated streets of eastern Kabul, where so many people lost their lives during 1996-4. The sentiment is
Armored backing

Massoud’s Abrams is the power that underwrites the Afghan government. Ministers who do not accept its protection have a low life expectancy. Two have been killed in the last two weeks of fighting, and another is on the brink of assassination. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are the visible enforcers of this power. In the city, it is the ISAF buildings that are the centers of activity, and there is a steady stream of ISAF personnel in and out of the main embassies.

Kabul is a divided city. The power brokers are divided along ethnic and political lines. The Afghan government is weak and divided, with no real authority. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are the visible enforcers of this power. In the city, it is the ISAF buildings that are the centers of activity, and there is a steady stream of ISAF personnel in and out of the main embassies.

Regular revolutions

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