

Chaos within Afghan Taliban as leadership struggle intensifies

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As if recent events in Afghanistan were not calamitous enough – the fall of the city of Kunduz to the Taliban (since reclaimed), the appearance of the militant Islamist group Isis, the collapse of peace talks between the government and the Taliban, the continuing economic crisis – the recent shoot out between Taliban groups could exacerbate the chaos and infighting as the leadership struggle intensifies.

The [Taliban issued a recording](#) on December 5 apparently claiming that their leader Mullah Akhthar Mansour had [not been killed in a dispute](#) in Quetta, in Pakistan, in which at least five Taliban chiefs were killed and others injured. It was first reported by the Kabul regime that Mullah Mansour himself had been killed. It is still not clear if he is wounded or dead.

The lack of clarity from the Taliban is typical of its obsession with secrecy as it tries to grapple with growing political divisions and blood feuds within its ranks. Mullah Mansour came to power in July this year after it emerged that the founding Taliban leader Mohammed Omar had died in 2013 and Mullah Mansour had kept the news hidden for two years to cement his position. He came in for intense criticism but was nevertheless chosen as Taliban leader with pressure from Pakistan, which was anxious to oversee a smooth leadership transition.

Mullah Mansour has since been seen by many angry Taliban as being a stooge of Pakistan. Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, his main rival and the leader of a hardline breakaway faction, was killed recently and it is believed that the attack on Mullah Mansour on December 2 was carried out by Dadullah's supporters. Reports that the deputy leader Sheikh Haibatullah Akhunzada will be nominated as acting head has increased suspicion that the [chief is either dead or dying](#).

Now, not only does Mullah Mansour or his successor face angry, hardline political rivals opposed to any peace talks but also, according to strict Pashtun tribal code, a blood feud has been set in motion that could go on for years and decimate the leadership.

There are many victims of this chaos. The first is Kabul. The Afghan government has become progressively weaker, unable to implement its policies and programmes outside the major cities. Its credibility with the people falls as it loses more rural areas to the Taliban. Kabul had high hopes of gathering support for talks with the Taliban at a regional conference held in Islamabad this week and – despite a blistering speech by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani criticising Pakistan for not doing enough to contain the Afghan Taliban – both countries and their neighbours did back a proposal for greater regional co-operation in ending the Taliban menace.

However, the growing fragmentation within the Taliban makes it unlikely that peace talks can start any time soon. Just this week, AP reported that in Herat province at least 100 insurgents were killed in clashes between rival factions – the mainstream loyal to Mullah Mansour and a breakaway group led by Mullah Mohammad Rasool. The situation is also highly embarrassing for Pakistan's ubiquitous intelligence services as the attack on Mullah Mansour happened on Pakistani soil in Quetta, where much of the Taliban leadership lives.

The US and Nato have been more discreet than Kabul in criticising Pakistan for allowing the Taliban to remain in the country. But they are increasingly worried at the chaos and the presence of the militant group Isis in at least three of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, and now plan to [leave a small residual force](#) in the country for the next two years.

The most tragic victims will be the Afghan people as Taliban infighting over territory, populations, control of borders and the drugs trade further divides the country. Afghanistan is also scarred by clashes between the Taliban and Isis as the former try to stop the military advances of the jihadis and their wooing and bribing of dissatisfied Taliban fighters to their side.

Pakistan remains the key player. How its military will deal with the fractured Taliban and its leadership struggle is critical to any hope of a peace process. If Islamabad again tries to influence the election of a new Taliban leader it could provoke even greater criticism and anger from both the insurgents and Kabul.

But if Islamabad does nothing, the Taliban factions could be at each others' throats for a long time to come, which could endanger Pakistan's own security. It is time perhaps Islamabad gave the Taliban a deadline by which to leave their comfortable houses in Quetta and Peshawar and return home. Such an ultimatum would put enormous pressure on them to come to some kind of settlement with Mr Ghani.

Kabul, too, needs to realise its lack of choices and help Pakistan take the right decisions rather than waste what little diplomatic capital it has in criticising Islamabad. There are no easy answers for Afghanistan.

The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia, most recently 'Pakistan on the Brink'