



Taliban: Why Dadullah's Death Matters

*Hekmat Karzai**

21 May 2007

ON THE evening of May 11, in a swift operation by the American forces, supported by Afghan and NATO soldiers, Mullah Dadullah, the top military commander of the Taliban was killed. His body was immediately taken to the southern province of Kandahar and displayed to the media. Dubbed as Afghanistan's Al Zarqawi, Dadullah was instrumental in the revival of the Taliban and for forging an alliance between Taliban and Al-Qaeda that included copying their tactics of suicide bombings, kidnappings and beheadings. The question is: What will be the impact of Dadullah's death on the Taliban insurgency?

Background

Dadullah rose to prominence as a notorious commander during the last few years of Taliban rule. He made a name for himself during the Taliban's attempt to control the northern part of Afghanistan where Dadullah brutally killed hundreds of innocent people. His cruelty was such that even Mullah Mohammed Omar, leader of the Taliban, removed him from command for a period.

More recently, Dadullah was considered one of the main architects of the Taliban revival. He sought financial assistance from various sources, including Al Qaeda and tribesmen and visited madrasahs in Karachi, Pakistan to recruit fighters. He motivated religious fervour among the religious students and persuaded large numbers of them to join a "holy war" against foreign troops in Afghanistan. For his efforts, Mullah Omar released an audio tape in June 2003, naming Dadullah as a member of a new 10-man leadership council that would 'confront the occupation'.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, Dadullah said: 'We and Al Qaeda are brothers. We and they are in one front. Our aim is one, our Islam is one, and our enemy is also one. We are with them in every operation. We sit down with them at the fronts and we participate in everything together, especially in fighting the enemy.' While before the Taliban did not care much for Al Qaeda's 'Global Jihad', they started referring to the oppression of Muslims in Iraq, Palestine and Chechnya. They also adopted the deadly tactics of Al Qaeda, including suicide bombings -- a phenomenon that was alien to the region.

Following the footsteps of bin Laden, and unlike other Taliban leaders, Dadullah took command of the strategic communication of the Taliban by giving interviews to print and electronic media. He appeared regularly on Al Jazeera and other major networks. In various DVDs that were released for propaganda, he appeared blessing would-be-suicide attackers.

Dadullah was also linked to various recent beheadings of alleged spies -- some of which were taped and broadcast over the internet.

Impact of his Death

Undoubtedly, Dadullah's death has dealt a serious blow to the Taliban, particularly in five key areas:

First, Dadullah led Taliban's day-to-day operations in the South and South-Western Afghanistan. While Mullah Omar is responsible for the occasional motivational propaganda, he is no longer as central to the Taliban command and control. Mullah Omar chose Dadullah's younger brother, Mullah Bakht Mohammed to replace him and lead the operational command in the south. Clearly, Bakht Mohammed lacks the experience and contacts that Dadullah had accumulated, thus, there will be a serious vacuum of operational leadership at least for the near future.

Second, Dadullah was one of the closest connections between Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Many of the statements regarding their growing alliance such as the claims that bin Laden organized the attack against Dick Cheney at Bagram air base came from Dadullah. He also claimed on various occasions that the Taliban had close connections with Al Qaeda in Iraq and would help them repel the US forces there. Dadullah's death would thus weaken the influences of Al Qaeda on the Taliban and may also increase the possibility of some type of negotiation in the future between the Afghan government and the Taliban as the Afghan government has expressed its readiness to talk with Afghan Taliban, but not foreign fighters.

Third, with Dadullah's death, Taliban have also lost their most effective spokesperson. Dadullah played the vital role in the strategic communications and he was the main connection between the Taliban and Arab media. In regular interviews with Pakistani, Afghan and Arab newspapers and television stations, he boasted of training suicide bombers, executing suspected collaborators and beheading hostages.

Fourth, Dadullah was also a key fundraiser for the Taliban and responsible for the increase in kidnappings which has been a major income earner for the Taliban, such as the estimated \$1-5 million paid for the two French hostages.

Fifth, with Dadullah's death, Taliban also lost their most charismatic recruiter, especially of suicide bombers.

Reduction in Violence?

The death of Dadullah represents the biggest setback to the Taliban command since the insurgency began, after its Islamic militia government was toppled by US-backed forces in 2001. The loss of an experienced commander such as Dadullah will hinder the gains made by the Taliban in the past year and the impact will surely be felt in the short term. His demise will also have an impact on the morale of the foot soldiers, which could lead to a reduced level of violence in 2007.

* *Hekmat Karzai is Director of the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul, Afghanistan. He graduated with a MSc (Strategic Studies) from the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, NTU in 2006.*