

The implication of Mullah Omar's death on peace talks and Taliban's future

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The confirmation of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar's death, reveals fractures inside the Taliban movement. Omar's death has intensified existing divisions among the Taliban over whether to keep fighting or negotiate a peace process with the National Unity Government. Taliban now faces serious crisis that could lead them to a permanent division, with some factions deciding to negotiate with the government and others continue the fight. At the moment there are three groups of Taliban that Afghan government is dealing with.

The first group is the Taliban who wanted to negotiate a peace deal with the Afghan government during Hamid Karzai's leadership without consulting or taking permission from their godfather, the Pakistani military establishment. This group was led first, by Mullah Ghani Beradar, the former first deputy of Mullah Omar and second, by Mullah Mutasim Agha Jan, the Taliban Finance Minister. All the attempts for peace of this group were foiled by the Pakistan military establishment, they arrested Mullah Beradar and tried to assassinate Mutasim Agha Jan. Agha Jan was shot and critically injured in an attack (Masterminded by ISI) in Karachi in 2010, apparently because of his quest for a peaceful solution to the Afghan problem. Agha Jan managed to escape to Turkey, while Mullah Beradar landed in the ISI prison. In the meantime the Pakistani military establishment continuously hunted all those med and senior level

Taliban commanders who wanted to negotiate with the Afghan government and follow the path of Beradar and Agha Jan. It was clear that Pakistan's military establishment did not like the group to talk to the Afghan government, bypassing Islamabad.

The second group is the Taliban that accepted to negotiate with the Afghan government under direct pressure from Pakistan. This group was led by Mullah Abbas Akhund, the Taliban's health minister from 1996 to 2001 and also included its interior affairs committee chief, Mullah Jalil, both are considered important Afghan Taliban leaders. This group also has the support of the Qatar delegation. This group had its first direct talks with the Afghan government on July 7, brokered and facilitated by Pakistan in the town of Murree, a hill resort on the outskirts of Islamabad.

The third group is led by recently appointed Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, who replaced Mullah Omar. New Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor rejected peace talks amid reports of fractures in their ranks following the announcement of the death of Mullah Omar. He called upon Taliban for unity in his first audio message. "We will continue our jihad until the creation of an Islamic system. The enemy with their talk of peace is trying by this propaganda to weaken the jihad," a voice introduced as Akhtar Mohammad Mansour said in a speech on the Taliban Web site.

"We should all work to preserve unity, division in our ranks will only please our enemies, and cause further problems for us," he said in the recording released by the group.

The conundrum of new Taliban leadership

Jalaluddin Haqqani, was the only senior Taliban commander who backed Mullah Mansoor's ascendancy. The Haqqani network posted a statement on Taliban's website quoting its founder, backing the appointment of Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour whose legitimacy has been challenged by many other senior Taliban leaders.

"We are sure that the new leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour is appointed with complete legitimacy and after due consultation and he is the most suitable successor of ... the late Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid," the statement from the Haqqani group, which is allied to the Taliban, said.

However, many other senior Taliban leaders including Mullah Omar's family refused the election of Mullah Mansoor as their new leader. According to Express Tribune, a Pakistani newspaper, Mullah Abdul Manan, brother of late Taliban leader Mullah Omar, representing his family, rejected the selection of Mullah Mansoor as the new chief of the Taliban and refused to pledge allegiance to him.

Other Senior Taliban members also opposed Mullah Mansoor selection, launched a parallel Shura and declared themselves as 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'.

"A few people announced Mullah Akhtar Mansoor as the new leader at a meeting where neither majority of the Shura members nor Ulema were invited", the council said in a statement. "They imposed Mullah Mansoor's leadership on the Islamic Emirate for vested interests".

The new Shura said they would organize a meeting of the council members, Islamic scholars and national figures to elect a new leader.

The Express Tribune also reported that Mutasim Agha Jan, the former finance minister and a close friend of Mullah Omar, has also rejected to submit to the leadership of Mullah Mansoor. Similarly, Mansoor Dadullah, who leads the Dadullah Front, has also refused to endorse Mullah Mansoor's selection.

The future of peace talks

The cracks emerging at the highest level of the Taliban leadership raise many questions about the Taliban movement including who was leading Taliban over the past 2 years while Mullah Omar was dead. Who authorized the delegation of Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan government? And importantly, why the death of Mullah Omar was disclosed at this critical juncture when Taliban is ready to negotiate? The answers has important implications for the prospect of any negotiated peace.

For now, the talks, which opened with a meeting on July 7, appeared to be off while the Taliban discussed their future. Fissures within the Taliban movement could now intensify, and it will become more difficult for the Afghan government to know whether the Taliban that are attempting to negotiate with would be able to end the war implement any truce or agreement.

Much will depend on how Taliban will manage to come under one command, as there is no agreement among different groups on the selection of Mullah Mansoor. And again, it will be difficult for the Afghan government to choose between a weak Taliban taken over by the ISIS or a united Taliban under Pakistan's control. The result of peace talks won't be desirable if Taliban and Pakistan talk peace and pursue violence.

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