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Overture to Taliban Jolts Afghan Minorities

By **DEXTER FILKINS**

KABUL, Afghanistan — The drive by President [Hamid Karzai](#) to strike a deal with [Taliban](#) leaders and their Pakistani backers is causing deep unease in [Afghanistan's](#) minority communities, who fought the Taliban the longest and suffered the most during their rule.

The leaders of the country's Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara communities, which make up close to half of Afghanistan's population, are vowing to resist — and if necessary, fight — any deal that involves bringing members of the Taliban insurgency into a power-sharing arrangement with the government.

Alienated by [discussions between President Karzai and the Pakistani military](#) and intelligence officials, minority leaders are taking their first steps toward organizing against what they fear is Mr. Karzai's long-held desire to restore the dominance of ethnic Pashtuns, who ruled the country for generations.

The dispute is breaking along lines nearly identical to those that formed during the final years of the Afghan civil war, which began after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989 and ended only with the American invasion following the Sept. 11 attacks. More than 100,000 Afghans died, mostly civilians; the Taliban, during their five-year reign in the capital, Kabul, carried out several large-scale massacres of Hazara civilians.

"Karzai is giving Afghanistan back to the Taliban, and he is opening up the old schisms," said [Rehman Oghly](#), an Uzbek member of Parliament and once a member of an anti-Taliban militia. "If he wants to bring in the Taliban, and they begin to use force, then we will go back to civil war

and Afghanistan will be split.”

The deepening estrangement of Afghanistan’s non-Pashtun communities presents a paradox for the Americans and their **NATO** partners. American commanders have concluded that only a political settlement can end the war. But in helping Mr. Karzai to make a deal, they risk reigniting Afghanistan’s ethnic strife.

Talks between Mr. Karzai and the Pakistani leaders have been unfolding here and in Islamabad for several weeks, with some discussions involving bestowing legitimacy on Taliban insurgents.

The leaders of these minority communities say that President Karzai appears determined to hand Taliban leaders a share of power — and **Pakistan** a large degree of influence inside the country. The Americans, desperate to end their involvement here, are helping Mr. Karzai along and shunning the Afghan opposition, they say.

Mr. Oghly said he was disillusioned with the Americans and their NATO allies, who he says appear to be urging Mr. Karzai along. “We are losing faith in our foreign friends,” he said.

Adm. **Mike Mullen**, chairman of the **Joint Chiefs of Staff**, said he was worried about “the Tajik-Pashtun divide that has been so strong.” American and NATO leaders, he said, are trying to stifle any return to ethnic violence.

“It has the potential to really tear this country apart,” Admiral Mullen said in an interview. “That’s not what we are going to permit.”

Afghanistan’s minorities — especially the ethnic Tajiks — have always been the most reliable American allies, and made up the bulk of the anti-Taliban army that the Americans aided following the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001.

The situation is complicated by the politics of the Afghan Army, the centerpiece of American-led efforts to enable the Afghan military to one day take over. The ethnic mix of the Afghan Army is roughly proportional to the population, and the units in the field are mixed themselves. But non-Pashtuns are widely believed to do the bulk of the fighting.

There are growing indications of ethnic fissures inside the army. President Karzai recently decided to remove Bismullah Khan, the chief of staff of the Afghan Army, and make him the

interior minister instead. Mr. Khan is an ethnic Tajik, and a former senior leader of the [Northern Alliance](#), the force that fought the Taliban in the years before Sept. 11. Whom Mr. Karzai decides to put in Mr. Khan's place will be closely watched.

One recent source of tension was the resignation of Armullah Saleh, the head of Afghan intelligence service and an ethnic Tajik. Mr. Saleh, widely regarded as one of the most competent aides, resigned after Mr. Karzai said he no longer had faith that he could do the job.

Along with Mr. Khan, the army chief of staff, Mr. Saleh was a former aide to [Ahmed Shah Massoud](#), the legendary commander who fought both the Soviet Union and the Taliban. Since leaving the government, Mr. Saleh has started what appears to be the beginning of a political campaign.

Other prominent Afghans have begun to organize along mostly ethnic lines. [Abdullah Abdullah](#), the former foreign minister and presidential candidate, has been hosting gatherings at his farm outside Kabul. In an interview, he said he was preparing to announce the formation of what would amount to an opposition party. Mr. Abdullah, who is of Pashtun and Tajik heritage, said his movement would include Afghans from all the major communities. But his source of power has historically been Afghanistan's Tajik community.

Mr. Abdullah said he disagreed with the thrust of Mr. Karzai's policy of engagement with the Taliban and Pakistan. It would be impossible to share power with Taliban leaders, Mr. Abdullah said, because of their support for terrorism and the draconian brand of Islam they would try to impose on everyone else.

"We bring the Taliban into the government — we give them one or two provinces," Mr. Abdullah said. "If that is what they think, it is not going to happen that way. Anybody thinking in that direction, they are lost. Absolutely lost."

The trouble, Mr. Abdullah said, is that the Taliban, once given a slice of power, would not be satisfied. "They will take advantage of this," he said of a political settlement, "and then they will continue."

The prerequisite for any deal with the Taliban, Afghan and American officials have said repeatedly, is that insurgents renounce their support of terrorists (including [Al Qaeda](#)), and

that they promise to support the Afghan Constitution.

Beyond that, though, Mr. Karzai's goals vis-à-vis the Taliban are difficult to discern. Recently [he has told senior Afghan officials](#) that he no longer believes that the Americans and NATO can prevail in Afghanistan and that they will probably leave soon. That fact may make Mr. Karzai more inclined to make a deal with both Pakistan and the Taliban.

As for the Pakistanis, their motives are even more opaque. For years, Pakistani leaders have denied supporting the Taliban, but evidence suggests that they continue to do so. In recent talks, the Pakistanis have offered Mr. Karzai a sort of strategic partnership — and one that involves giving at least one the most brutal Taliban groups, the Haqqani network, a measure of legitimacy in Afghanistan.

Two powerful Pakistani officials — Gen. [Ashfaq Parvez Kayani](#), the army chief of staff; and Lt. Gen. Ahmad Shuja Pasha, the chief of the [Inter-Services Intelligence](#) agency, or ISI, — are set to arrive Monday for talks with Mr. Karzai.

Afghanistan's non-Pashtun leaders are watching these discussions unfold with growing alarm. So far, they have taken few concrete steps to resist them.

But no one here doubts that any of these groups, with their bloody histories of fighting the Taliban, could arm themselves quickly if they wished.

“Karzai has begun the ethnic war,” said Mohammed Mohaqeq, a Hazara leader and a former ally of the president. “The future is very dark.”

Thom Shanker contributed reporting.