

Mass Rioting Reveals Depth of Afghan Opposition to US Occupation

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The mass rioting that broke out in the Afghan capital of Kabul Monday has exposed the intensity and breadth of popular opposition to the four-and-a-half-year US-led occupation of Afghanistan and the fragility of the hold on the country by Washington and the puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai.

According to official and press reports, at least 20 people died Monday in clashes between demonstrators, US troops and Afghan security forces, while more than 140 were wounded. A doctor at the Khair Hana Hospital in northern Kabul told the New York Times that a seven-year-old child was among the dead, while several other school children were severely wounded.

The upheavals were touched off by a traffic incident, in which a US military cargo truck, part of a convoy speeding to the capital from the US base at Bagram, slammed into cars caught in a traffic jam, killing at least one person. When an angry crowd gathered, witnesses said, the US troops, supported by Afghan police, opened fire, killing at least four more civilians. Some witnesses and at least one Afghan newspaper claimed that some of the US soldiers appeared drunk.

Ghulam Rauf, a shopkeeper, told the Los Angeles Times that he first saw the convoy of about six military vehicles racing towards a taxi that was crossing the intersection.

"As the first vehicle crashed into the taxi, two other [American] vehicles started hitting other cars on the sides of the road," he said. "They destroyed all the vehicles that were standing there.

"And the soldier sitting on top was dancing and singing and shouting. Then they drove toward shops and into mobs of people standing there. They drove over them, and I saw people shouting, 'Help!' because their legs were cut open as the vehicles drove onto them."

Rauf and other witnesses said that when Afghans crowded around the vehicles and attempted to block the US convoy from fleeing the scene, soldiers opened fire with roof-mounted heavy weapons.

News of the incident spread rapidly through Kabul, bringing crowds of thousands of young men and students into the streets chanting "Death to America," "Down with Karzai" and "Down with Bush."

The speed with which the demonstrations erupted reflected seething anger over the recent killing of civilians in US air strikes as well as growing unrest over the repressive character of

the occupation and the impoverished social conditions for the masses of the Afghan people.

The rioting dwarfed similar outbreaks touched off a year ago over revelations of the desecration of the Koran by US guards at the Guantanamo prison camp in Cuba and again last February in response to the Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. It marked the most intense violence in the Afghan capital since the US invasion in 2001 toppled the Taliban regime.

Some of the demonstrators were shot dead when the crowds attempted to march on the presidential palace and the US Embassy compound and were turned back by gunfire. Television news videos showed demonstrators ducking for cover amid the sound of gunfire as US military vehicles sped past them in the streets. Some of the protesters were reportedly armed and exchanged fire with foreign troops and Afghan security forces. The vast majority, however, were unarmed civilians, including many schoolboys carrying their book bags.

The protesters turned their rage on other targets, setting dozens of police posts on fire and attacking foreign aid organizations, the United Nations headquarters, offices of multinational companies and the Serena Hotel, a recently opened luxury hotel in Kabul that caters to foreign guests. The crowd attempted to storm the hotel, but was turned back by firing from inside. All of the hotel's ground floor windows were smashed in the fighting.

The local office of Roshan, a mobile phone company, was burned down, as were the headquarters of CARE International's Afghan operations, which put the damage in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. The offices of Oxfam and ACTED, a French non-governmental organization, were also looted.

"They attacked everything that was written in English," Frederic Roussel, director of ACTED, told the French news agency AFP. "I saw them attack a pizzeria simply because it had a sign written in English."

The attacks on aid agencies, however, were not merely a matter of anti-foreign sentiment. Large numbers of Afghans are bitterly angry over the failure of US-led aid and reconstruction efforts to spell any discernable improvement in the conditions of life for the masses of working and poor people.

More than 90 percent of the Karzai regime's budget is funded by foreign aid. Yet many see this money flowing into the bank accounts of government officials and contractors. The official unemployment rate remains at more than 35 percent. Only 20 percent of the population has access to clean water, and barely 6 percent to electricity.

US and NATO troops evacuated American and European embassy personnel and aid workers to secure military bases during the rioting.

In the wake of the rioting, the US-backed regime deployed tanks at key intersections, and thousands of troops armed with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenade launchers roamed the streets of Kabul. A curfew was declared in the Afghan capital for the second night in a row Tuesday. A spokesman for the NATO "peacekeeping" force said that foreign troops were continuing to conduct patrols, but were maintaining a lower profile at the request of the Karzai government.

The Kabul upheavals were widely seen as a turning point in Afghanistan. Karzai has long been derided by his critics as the “mayor of Kabul,” because of the government’s inability to secure any territory outside of the capital. But now Kabul itself, long seen as an island of relative stability, has burst into flames.

“I have been in Kabul for nine months and there has never been anything like this before,” wrote Tim Albone, correspondent for the Times of London, who narrowly escaped an attack by rioters. “There is a real feeling in the air that today Kabul changed. There has been fighting in the south but this has mainly been between the militias and the American forces.

“Today it was angry teenagers–kids who have got nothing else to do. They are angry because they see all of the money being pumped into Afghanistan but still have no jobs.

“They are angry at the Americans who they see driving around as if they own the place and appear to have caused this accident and then tried to drive away.

“I’ve spoken to friends who work in Iraq and they say that there was one day when it all changed. That could have been the case here. They have realized that they can take on the police and take on the Americans. They could easily do it again.”

The rioting in the capital has unfolded against the backdrop of intensifying violence throughout the country, particularly in the Pashtun heartland of the south, where guerrillas have mounted a major offensive against foreign occupation and Afghan government forces. Another five Canadian soldiers were wounded in the area Monday when their convoy was ambushed.

More than 400 people have been killed in counterattacks by US forces in the last two weeks alone. While the Pentagon routinely classifies all the victims of US-NATO bombing raids and other military operations as “Taliban,” many of those who have lost their lives are civilians, including women and children.

In the latest attack on Monday, warplanes dropped two 500-pound bombs on a mosque killing at least 50 people. While a spokesman for NATO claimed that all of the victims were Taliban fighters, the Taliban itself said that none of its members had died and that all of the victims were civilians.

The attack follows last week’s air strike on the southern village of Azizi, which claimed the lives of at least 34 civilians along with a number of Afghan resistance fighters.

Significantly, the rioting in the capital involved mainly ethnic Tajiks, the dominant population in Kabul. Some of those participating in the demonstrations carried posters bearing the image of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Tajik Northern Alliance guerrilla commander, a bitter opponent of the Taliban, who was assassinated in 2001.

Violent attacks on US-led occupation forces as well as aid workers have also been reported in the north and east as well as in the western province of Herat, which borders on Iran. All are dominated by groups opposed to the Taliban. What is emerging is a nationwide movement of resistance to the US occupation.

Washington’s position is further complicated by the fact that it has aggressively antagonized two regional powers–Iran and Russia–that maintain substantial influence in Afghanistan and the ability to facilitate the growth of such a movement. It has likewise created an

increasingly untenable position for its ostensible ally, the military regime in Pakistan, by cross-border military attacks that have stoked Pakistani anti-American sentiments.

With the situation in Afghanistan spinning out of control, the Pentagon has quietly reinforced the US occupation, raising the number of American troops deployed in the country from 19,000 to 23,000. Another 9,000 European and Canadian NATO-led troops are also supporting the occupation, but they operate under different rules of engagement than the Americans, with their governments having agreed to deploy them for “peacekeeping” and reconstruction, rather than waging full-scale counterinsurgency campaign.

Karzai delivered a televised address in the wake of the rioting, attempting to strike a hardline pose. He described the rioters as “opportunists and agitators,” calling them “enemies of Afghanistan.”

Yet, a measure of the crisis that the incident has created for the US-backed government is Karzai’s demand for an investigation into the accident and for those responsible to be held accountable. Likewise, Afghanistan’s parliament convened in a special session to pass a resolution demanding the immediate arrest of the US soldiers responsible for Monday’s deadly crash, while also denouncing the demonstrators.

The widow of a man killed in the incident, who was brought to parliament as a representative of the victims, was unimpressed by the gesture. Samira, a mother of two girls and a boy, told the Afghan news agency Pajhwok, “They asked us to come here just to tell us that they were sorry. This is all just a show.”

Another victim, whose 17-year-old brother was killed in the incident, told the news agency, “If the situation continues unchanged, the people may raise against them.”

Meanwhile, the independent Kabul daily Cheragh commented: “The 29th of May was a general day of mourning and tragedy for Kabul residents.... The incident was painful and shameful because the peacekeepers and protectors of people’s lives and properties carried out a terrorist act and killed dozens and injured hundreds of people.... Yesterday people learnt some new meanings of the terms like ‘cooperation’ and ‘human rights’.... [T]hey came to realize how much importance their international friends give to them....”

The pitched battles in Kabul erupted just two days after US President George W. Bush gave a speech to the graduating class at the US Military Academy at West Point proclaiming once again that the American military had brought “freedom” to the Afghan people.

“Difficult challenges remain in both Afghanistan and Iraq, but America is safer and the world is more secure because these two countries are now democracies and they are allies in the cause of freedom and peace.”

As the events in Kabul have once again demonstrated, however, the US-installed regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq have no genuine base of popular support and are viewed by the large sections of the population in both countries as stooges of US occupation.

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