**Returning to a repressive order**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-08-04

THE brutal killing of a comedian in Kandahar last week and a spree of reported executions raise questions about the claim of the resurgent Afghan Taliban having reformed. It`s not just the revenge killings as the civil war in Afghanistan gets bloodier that are of concern, it is also the looming return of an old and repressive political and social order.

Known for his crude jokes and funny songs that he also posted on social media, the comedian was reportedly picked up from his house in Kandahar by armed men and later his mutilated body was dumped by the roadside. He was shot many times.

A video of him being beaten and humiliated has been widely circulated, causing outrage across the country and outside. Taliban forces apparently executed the comedian because, according to some reports, he poked fun at Taliban leaders.

After initially denying they had a role in it, the Taliban spokesman claimed responsibility for the killing and accused the comedian of working for the Afghan police. He acknowledged that the armed men involved in the murder were Taliban fighters. The gruesome incident occurred despite assurance from the Taliban leadership that no harm would come to those who worked for the government, with the US military or with US organisations.

This was not the only violent incident of its kind perpetrated by the Taliban. Last month, the insurgents reportedly massacred some 20 Afghan army soldiers after they had surrendered. Although Taliban officials refuted the report, the widely circulated video of the incident confirms the brutality. In some areas, the insurgents are reported to have publicly executed alleged criminals bringing back memories of the former Taliban era.

According to a recent Human Rights Watch report, the Taliban forces are targeting known critics. It said that `in Kandahar, the Taliban have been detaining and executing suspected members of the provincial government and security forces, and in some cases their relatives`. That belies the Taliban leadership`s claim of restraining their fighters from killing as revenge. All these abuses demonstrate the tendency of the Taliban commanders to ruthlessly crush any opposition.These violent actions contradict the much-publicised account of the Taliban treating the surrendering Afghan soldiers well and even paying money to them to go back to their homes. Perhaps such show of magnanimity in some areas may have been witnessed, but it cannot be used as an example of the Taliban`s ideological transformation. There is no indication yet of the group demonstrating any softening of its hard-line position.

Buoyed by their battlefield successes, the Taliban now seek to restore the `Islamic Emirate` despite their pledge to strive for an inclusive and pluralistic system. Intra-Afghan talks on a future political set-up in the war-torn country have stalled because of the conflicting positions of the warring sides.

While internal discord may have contributed to the stalemate, there is no sign of the Taliban showing any flexibility in their position and taking a more moderate stance. The insurgents have not yet come up with a peace proposal that could allow the two sides to move forward. The group`s plan to win power militarily has become increasingly apparent with its relentless military push.

After consolidating their hold on large swaths of territory, the insurgents are now moving to seize control of some major cities. Kandahar and Herat are under siege, raising fears of growing civilian casualties that the Taliban leaders had promised to avoid. Violence has already forced thousands of people to flee their homes. The biggest fear is that Taliban control over the towns and cities will lead to more revenge killings of Afghan government officials. There will be no control over the local commanders.

Also troubling is the report of the Taliban maintaining links with Al Qaeda in violation of the Doha accord. A UN report has maintained that ties between the Taliban and Al Qaeda `remain close, based on ideological alignment, relationships forged through common struggle and intermarriage`. This is not the first time that the insurgents have been accused of collaborating with Al Qaeda.

But the details of their alliance are an eye opener.

The report acknowledges that the insurgents have begun to tighten their grip over Al Qaeda and are gathering information on foreign fighters andrestricting them, but it also raises the issue of whether the Taliban are willing to live up to their commitment to `suppress any future international threat emanating from Al Qaeda in Afghanistan`.

It particularly accuses the Haqqani Network, which is the most dangerous of the insurgent factions, of suppordngthegroup.

The Taliban`s commitment that they would not maintain contacts with the militant group had helped pave the way for the Doha accord last year that led to the exit of foreign forces from Afghanistan. But the report of the group`s connection with transnational militant groups including Pakistani Taliban factions is cause for serious concern.

While the Taliban political leadership appears more moderate and flexible in their views on social issues there is no evidence that the commanders leading the fighting would also be amenable to change. Some of the statements from the leadership recognising the right of women to work and education are, perhaps, meant to allay the fears of Afghans, as well as of the international community, regarding the possibility of the Taliban reverting to their old ways and attempting to re-establish a tyrannical rule.

The issue had been of considerable concern to Afghan women and rights groups who believe that the insurgents could reverse the strides taken in female education in Afghanistan over the past two decades.

Notwithstanding their solemn declarations, there is no indication of any tangible shift in the thinking and obscurantist worldview of the Afghan Taliban that previously rejected a pluralistic political process. The restoration of the old order under the banner of an `Islamic Emirate`in Afghanistan will not only be disastrous for Afghanistan but will also be ominous for regional countries. The spread of Taliban`s radical ideology would fuel regional instability. The writeris the authorofNo-Win War The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan`s Shadow.

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