

Taliban Threat Unnerves Clerics in Afghanistan; The militia has killed five mullahs who spoke out against the group. Even those not allied with the government fear for their lives.

Kazem, Halima

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The cleric, a community leader in Kandahar province, a former stronghold of the ousted Taliban government, can be considered lucky to have received a warning. Another religious scholar, Qazi Niamatullah, who served as a district judge in Kandahar, was gunned down last week by suspected Taliban militants on his way home from the local mosque.

"Compared to the others, Niamatullah was a progressive cleric, and his beliefs crossed over in his court rulings," said Ajmal Mohamadzai, a resident of Kandahar. "I am not sure why he wasn't scared of the Taliban rebels." He was the fifth senior Muslim cleric to be killed by guerrillas in the troubled south of the country since late May.

Mawlavi Saleh Mohammed, a cleric in Afghanistan's southwestern province of Helmand, was shot to death by a Taliban fighter on a motorcycle about 10 days before Niamatullah's slaying.

FULL TEXT

The mullah sleeps in a different relative's house every night. But sleep has been far from the outspoken cleric's mind since local Taliban leaders warned him to stop saying that they're fighting an un-Islamic war.

"The Taliban have approached members of my family and warned them to tell me that they are watching me and want me to stop publicly criticizing them," said the cleric, who didn't want his name used because he feared for his life. "I know they can kill me in a minute. I am nothing to them."

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Mohammed was the head of the provincial cleric's council and considered a progressive religious leader who

supported President Hamid Karzai's Western-backed government.

"This is an old militant strategy, to go after the religious leaders, and this strategy has emerged again in Afghanistan," said Haji Asadullah Khalid, the Kandahar governor. "By killing one mullah, they will quiet down hundreds of them."

In Afghanistan, mullahs often serve as teachers, local government advisors and judges. They wield influence over village elders and decision-makers, and some use their Friday sermons to express political opinions.

The Karzai government has worked to bring mullahs under its guidance and has encouraged them to preach to their constituents about the importance of the democratic process and the upcoming parliamentary elections and against the Taliban guerrillas.

Not all clerics, however, are wholeheartedly supportive of the Karzai administration.

"Although I have been offered jobs with the Afghan government, I will not take them," the threatened cleric said. "I don't completely agree with the way the Karzai government is formed, but surely I don't agree with the Taliban jihad that kills innocent people."

The Afghan government says Mohammed was one of those innocent clerics. He was reportedly walking home after leading early-morning prayers at a mosque in Lashkar Gah, Helmand's capital, when the assassin struck.

"He was almost home when a motorcyclist pulled up to him and shot him in the chest five times," provincial spokesman Haji Mohammed Wali said. "The Taliban have claimed responsibility for the killing."

Clerics who appear to be allied with the government have paid a high price.

On July 8, Agha Jan and his wife, from Paktika province, were reportedly killed while sleeping.

A week before the couple's killing, Mohammed Mesbah was gunned down in Kandahar province.

Mesbah was on the provincial electoral commission and regularly denounced the Taliban insurgency.

The most high-profile killing of a pro-government religious leader occurred in late May, when Mawlavi Abdullah Fayaz was shot and killed by two men as he was leaving his office in the city of Kandahar.

Fayaz was the head of the National Islamic Council, a government-appointed body. A week before his killing, he gave a stern speech against the Taliban's reclusive leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar.

"Mullahs in Afghanistan are in a tough position," he said. "They want to support the reconstruction process but fear for their lives."

Fayaz was a widely respected cleric who was known for advising U.S. military leaders in Kandahar about cultural and political issues.

Kandahar security officials say two people are in custody in connection with the Fayaz slaying, but they have not provided details.

"It is too difficult to track down the killers of these clerics," said Khalid, the governor. "We have an open border with Pakistan where rebels can flee to, no national identification system or trained provincial police investigators."

Defense Ministry spokesman Gen. Mohammed Zahir Azimi said it was impossible to provide security for the more than 3,000 local religious leaders around the country.

"We know that they are in a dangerous position, but there is nothing we can do at the moment for them," Azimi said. "They have to live like every average Afghan."

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