

The insurgents' success in northern Afghanistan is an ill omen for Kabul.

By Sharif Hassan

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Since the Taliban emerged in the 1990s, Afghanistan's north has been the heart of resistance to the insurgents — predominantly ethnic Pashtun and from the south — and a bulwark against a complete takeover.

But as the insurgents have carried out their sweeping military offensive this summer, they have pushed deep into northern Afghanistan.

Now, they have seized six cities in recent days, five of which are in northern parts of the country. And experts fear that if government forces are unable to stop their advances in the north, Afghanistan's capital is more vulnerable than ever.

"The north is strategic for the Taliban, because they believe if they can capture these non-Pashtun areas, then they can easily take control of the south and the capital, Kabul," said Ramish Salemi, a political analyst in Kabul.

The Taliban did seize control of Kabul in 1996, ushering in the group's five-year rule of much of the country. But an armed coalition of northern militias known as the Northern Alliance deprived them of a complete takeover.

For years, the militias waged running battles against the Taliban and carved out small pockets free from Taliban rule in northern Afghanistan. That resistance was led by people like Ahmed Shah Massoud, the famed anti-Taliban commander who was killed by Al Qaeda before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

In more recent years, recognizing the fierce resistance that the insurgency faced in the north, the Taliban have capitalized on local grievances to recruit northern fighters. That laid the groundwork for their current military campaign.

They have also courted fighters from neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan who were unhappy with the presence of foreign forces and despised the Northern Alliance leaders, analysts say, for corruption and cooperating with the "occupation."

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