

An Afghan Mayor Expected to Die. Instead, She Lost Her Father.

Zarifa Ghafari, one of the few female mayors in Afghanistan, has been subjected to death threats and assassination attempts, and believes her father was gunned down because of her.

By Fatima Faizi and Thomas Gibbons-Neff

Published Nov. 6, 2020 Updated Nov. 12, 2020

KABUL, Afghanistan — Zarifa Ghafari, one of Afghanistan's first female mayors, had been expecting to be assassinated. But on Thursday night, it was her father who was cut down by gunmen in front of his house in Kabul, the capital.

Ms. Ghafari, 27, has survived several attempts on her own life. Her position as a reform-minded woman in public office — she is the mayor of Maidan Shar, a town in Wardak Province, which borders Kabul — has exposed her to grave danger in Afghanistan's predominantly patriarchal society.

But the reason for the killing of her father, Abdul Wasi Ghafari, an Afghan Army colonel, was unclear. Was it just one more in a flurry of anonymous, targeted killings in Kabul? Or was it retaliation for Ms. Ghafari's recent firing of several subordinates, which drew the latest in a series of death threats against her?

Ms. Ghafari believes she knows. "It is the Taliban," she said on Friday. "They don't want me in Maidan Shar. That is why they killed my dad."

"I am so broken," she said. "I don't know who to rely on. But I won't stop now even if they come after me again. I am not scared to die anymore."

A spokesman for the Taliban said he was "still seeking information" about the attack and declined to comment.

While there have been other female mayors in Afghanistan, their postings were in areas generally seen as more culturally tolerant. But in Wardak, a traditionally conservative province, Ms. Ghafari was thrust into a nearly untenable position. The Taliban — known for their harsh interpretation of Islam that bars women from most jobs — have widespread support in the province.

"I have been threatened several times," Ms. Ghafari said through tears. "They targeted me. I survived and continued my job. They wanted to see me broken, so they killed my father."

But Ms. Ghafari had also received threats from within her own office. As part of a series of reforms in Maidan Shar, a town of roughly 35,000 people, she had dismissed several of her employees, drawing condemnation and threats, she said.

Her father, 53, was a commander in the Special Operations Corps, a high-profile job in a unit that was especially loathed by the Taliban because of its effectiveness. Military officials had warned Mr. Ghafari that he was being targeted because of his daughter, Ms. Ghafari said, adding that he had served for years in the military and survived unscathed.

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Ms. Ghafari is used to setbacks and even attacks — she was nearly killed in an assassination attempt last month — but never anything as damaging as the loss of her father, which she believes was because of her.

"He had my back," she said. Without him, she added, she would not have been able to endure the death threats or the constant harassment she has received from her own constituents for being a woman.

Men with sticks and rocks mobbed Ms. Ghafari's office on her first day in office in the summer of 2018, after she was appointed by President Ashraf Ghani. Whisked away by Afghan security forces for her safety, she was only able to return nine months later and assume her post — this time for good. She soon started implementing public works projects, such as road repairs, and a campaign to clean up the city.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Her father's death comes on the heels of a particularly bloody week in Kabul. Less than a week earlier, a military prosecutor was assassinated by unknown gunmen. And on Monday, self-proclaimed members of the Islamic State killed at least 22 people, most of them students, at Kabul University, Afghanistan's largest academic institution, sending the capital into newfound depths of despair.

Targeted killings, in the form of point-blank shootings and magnetic bombs, have roiled Kabul in recent months, causing a public outcry. The Taliban have refused to claim credit for the attacks, but they have used them for propaganda purposes, pointing to the government's inability to keep the capital safe as a sign of its weakness.

Since reaching an agreement with the United States in February that prompted the start of an American troop withdrawal and the beginning of peace talks with Afghan officials, the Taliban have abandoned high-profile attacks in urban areas in favor of assassinations, officials and experts have said.

From July to September, unclaimed insurgent attacks in Afghanistan were up by more than 50 percent from the previous quarter, accounting for nearly half of civilian deaths, according to a U.S. government watchdog report released on Thursday.

October was the deadliest month in Afghanistan for civilians since September 2019, according to data compiled by The New York Times. At least 212 people were killed as Taliban fighters launched offensives in the country's south and east.