

Under pressure to quit, Afghanistan's president pledges only to end 'instability.'



By Adam Nossiter

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Several of his close political associates have surrendered to the Taliban without a fight or fled into exile. His army has all but collapsed, and the warlords he was counting on have proved ineffectual or are bargaining for their lives.

Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, is more isolated than ever, facing pressure to step aside — and not just from the Taliban. His dominion is shrinking by the day. He governs the capital, Kabul, two other cities in the north and east, and pockets in the interior.

Yet Mr. Ghani is stubbornly clinging to office.

In a brief recorded speech televised early Saturday afternoon, Mr. Ghani promised to “prevent further instability” but did not resign. With Taliban forces having captured Pul-i-Alam, another provincial capital — this one only 40 miles from Kabul — Mr. Ghani said he had begun “extensive consultations at home and abroad” and that the “results” would soon be shared. He said “remobilizing” Afghanistan's defense forces was a priority.

On Wednesday, he flew to one of his loyalist redoubts, the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, in attempts to rally pro-government forces; the city fell to the Taliban on Saturday night. On Thursday, officials said, he spoke by phone with Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III. On Friday, he was said to be leading a national security meeting in the Kabul presidential palace.

The Afghan president's options appear limited. He has little discernible support at home or from his former foreign backers. Street demonstrations supporting his army quickly fizzled out.

Thousands of his soldiers are surrendering, deciding that Mr. Ghani is not “worth fighting for,” Omar Zakhilwal, a former finance minister, tweeted on Friday.

Far from hinting at resignation, the president has only suggested that he would not run for re-election if the Taliban agreed to elections. Their battlefield rampage appears to have made the offer irrelevant. As his country slips away and provincial capitals fall, Mr. Ghani and his advisers have said little, sometimes even refusing to acknowledge the losses.

Even Mr. Ghani's substantial corps of bodyguards, said to number in the thousands, poses a potential threat. Many are from villages now controlled by the Taliban.

Leading Afghanistan is a dangerous business. For more than a century, most Afghan rulers have been killed or have died in exile, the Boston University anthropologist Thomas Barfield pointed out.

Still, if — as seems increasingly likely — Mr. Ghani is deposed by the Taliban, he can lay claim to a singular distinction. “This will be the first insurgency that has ever driven a Kabul government from power that has also had the backing of a foreign power,” Mr. Barfield said.

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The last time the Taliban seized control, in 1996, one former ruler wound up swinging from a noose on a lamppost in downtown Kabul, and the other fled hundreds of miles to the north to govern a postage-stamp rump state for five years.

Mr. Ghani shows no signs that the cruel lessons of the past sway him any more than the uncertain present and the fearful future.

“He's hunkering down,” said Torek Farhadi, a former Afghan presidential adviser. “He's refusing to admit the reality. The news is relayed to him through a filter.”

Mr. Farhadi added that “trusted lieutenants surrendered just this morning,” referring to the recent capitulations of governors Mr. Ghani had appointed in Ghazni and Logar provinces.

“He’s at risk from his own bodyguards,” Mr. Farhadi said. “This is how it happens in Afghanistan. The last days of any leader are like this.”

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.

Mr. Ghazni’s youthful finance minister, Khalid Payenda, fled the country several days ago.

Leadership characteristics that in the past merely annoyed his fellow citizens — Mr. Ghani’s refusal to delegate authority or listen to others more knowledgeable than himself, especially on military matters, according to those who know him — are now proving lethal to the Afghan state.

“He is isolated, confused and deeply mistrustful of everyone,” said Tamim Asey, a former deputy minister of defense. “He doesn’t know how to reverse this.”

Unless a compromise can be reached, Mr. Asey said, “I would say that Kabul could become a blood bath very soon.”

The Taliban have said that the fighting will not end unless Mr. Ghani is removed. As the “polarizing figure,” in Mr. Farhadi’s words, Mr. Ghani has “demeaned the Taliban time and time again, saying, ‘You are the stooges of the Pakistanis.’” In return, the Taliban see him as the “stooge” of the Americans.

Analysts place much of the blame for the current disaster on the head of Mr. Ghani, a former World Bank anthropologist and published author with an outsize faith in his own intellect.

The Americans tried to construct republican institutions on Afghan soil, but they proved to be a flimsy facade. Instead, they helped bring Mr. Ghani to power through political deals struck during a contested presidential vote. Since then, Mr. Ghani has personalized power to disastrous effect.

He needed the militias in the north and west, yet showed contempt for their leaders. On Friday, Ismail Khan, a key militia leader in the western city of Herat, surrendered to the Taliban.

Mr. Ghani “did not take advice from anybody,” said Mr. Barfield, of Boston University. “If he had delegated power to the military, it might have been saved. Now, it’s a case of reality biting.”

Adam Nossiter is the Kabul bureau chief.

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