

String of Attacks Have People in Kabul Pointing a Finger, at the Government

The assaults not only highlight a city under siege, they have exposed a growing, and very public, discontent with an Afghan government unable to protect its people.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — A famous journalist, the father of an oft-threatened mayor and at least 22 others, many of them university students — all were killed within the span of a week in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, the victims of targeted assassinations and a terrorist attack.

The series of assaults, while highlighting a city under violent siege, has also exposed growing, and very public, discontent with an Afghan government unable to protect its people despite its many public promises.

The public cry for security has juxtaposed starkly with the stalled peace negotiations between Afghan and Taliban officials in Doha, Qatar, where both parties have haggled for weeks over ground rules for the talks with little progress.

Hundreds of miles away from the gilded ballrooms and fancy hotels in Doha, rising violence across Afghanistan has left many deeply skeptical of the notion that the talks could reach a peaceful resolution anytime soon.

That has been especially acute in Kabul, where constant targeted killings, carried out by unnamed attackers, have bred an environment of fear and anxiety. In rural areas across the country, daily life is dominated by pitched battles between the Taliban and the government.

October was the deadliest month in Afghanistan for civilians since September 2019, according to data compiled by The New York Times. At least 212 civilians were killed.

The most recent was Yama Siawash, a former anchor for Tolo News, Afghanistan's first 24-hour news network, who was killed Saturday morning, along with two others. The cause of death: a magnetic bomb — a signature weapon of the unclaimed attacks that have become commonplace around the capital. His death was a discouraging coda to a violent week.

Mr. Siawash's close friend and former colleague, Parwiz Shamal, pointed to the Afghan government's failures before singling out the attackers.

"I have no faith in the government. They can't control anything. We see that day by day the situation gets worse," Mr. Shamal said. "The government is literally like a grasshoppers' group. They jump from one thing to another without any plan. People die on a daily basis and the government doesn't bother to provide them with security."



The wreckage of a car targeted by a bomb Saturday, killing the journalist Yama Siawash and two others. Jawad Jalali/EPA, via Shutterstock

Two days earlier, Abdul Wasi Ghafari, an Afghan Army colonel and the father of Zarifa Ghafari, one of Afghanistan's first female mayors, herself often threatened, was shot at close-range in front of his house in Kabul, even as the military was warning that he could be attacked.

The Taliban claimed credit for the killing, though the insurgent group often uses unclaimed attacks as well to spread fear and undercut the Afghan government — all while trying to avoid committing high-profile urban assaults under a February agreement with the United States that encouraged, but did not say outright, that all sides would reduce violence.

In turn, under that deal, all U.S. troops would eventually withdraw from the country, and direct Afghan-Taliban negotiations would get underway following the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners. Those talks began in September.

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After a surge of crime and violence in Kabul this fall, President Ashraf Ghani appointed the senior vice president, Amrullah Saleh, to take charge of security in the capital, so far with mixed results.

“There have been a lot of statements and meetings by the government,” Shaharзад Akbar, the chairwoman of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, said of the rise in violence. “But when you look at the daily life of civilians they don’t see an increased confidence in their security.”

Mr. Saleh’s plan, called the “Kabul Security Compact,” has drawn critical public scrutiny, particularly his decision to post pictures across Kabul, some drawn from social media, of people accused of crimes, detailing their offenses on the posters. But in at least two instances, an Afghan official said, officials mistakenly used photos of people not accused of a crime.

A document detailing the security compact, and provided to The New York Times, says that “naming and shaming” people would “increase social pressure” hopefully deterring future crimes.

Mr. Shamal called the program a “failure,” a judgment disputed by Rizwan Murad, spokesman for the first vice president.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

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“Crime has dropped dramatically,” Mr. Murad said. “Before the implementation of the Kabul Security Compact there were areas with 80 to 90 incidents.” Now, Mr. Murad, said, the figure had dropped to seven or nine, though that number could not be independently corroborated.

In a prank of their own, Kabul residents posted pictures around Kabul of key government officials, half jokingly identifying them as criminals.

“I think everyone in Kabul feels unsafe, they feel like the government isn’t delivering,” said Said Sabir Ibrahimi, an Afghan researcher at New York University’s Center on International Cooperation. “The Ghani administration is focusing on individuals by giving Saleh the security profile as if it’s a silver bullet.”

“At the end of the day, the issue is much deeper,” he said.



Amrullah Saleh in September in Kabul. President Ashraf Ghani appointed him to take charge of security in the capital. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

If Mr. Ghani intended Mr. Saleh to be “a silver bullet,” it backfired this past week after an attack on Kabul University that killed at least 22 people Monday.

Despite the Islamic State’s claim that two of its gunmen had carried out the attack, Mr. Saleh and other Afghan government officials accused the Taliban of the massacre. The Taliban, after publicly condemning the attack, then accused the Afghan government of sheltering and supplying the Islamic State.

The back-and-forth was criticized in a Twitter post by Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy for Afghan peace.

“This barbaric attack is NOT an opportunity for the government and the Taliban to score points against each other. There is a common enemy here,” Mr. Khalilzad said.

The sideshow also distracted from the crisis at hand: People were dying across the capital in alarming numbers.

People are “blaming the government; they are much angrier at the government than the Taliban or ISIS,” said Mr. Ibrahimi, the researcher. “The government keeps claiming the Taliban did this or ISIS did this, but they are not publicizing evidence, adding to the anger of the people.”