



Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

Sarah Chayes

Kandahar, October 15, 2007

That's the name by which Mullah Naqib was known here, kind friends. Hajji Mullah Gul Akhund, or: "Mullah flower" -- and some honorifics.

I am writing to tell you that another mighty tree has fallen, leaving a great hole in an already sparsely wooded landscape. The repercussions will be significant.

I wasn't in the convoy this time. I watched it coming, from the flank of the small hill at the foot of Elephant Rock that had been graded by bulldozers through the night to receive his body. Spread out below is all of Arghandab, a sharp swathe of deep green. Elephant Rock, Kandahar's northern sentry, towers above. Across the bony ridge lies Kandahar, the town whose fortunes and welfare Mullah Naqib held so close to his big heart. The convoy approached, moving at a walking pace, Afghan National Army troops escorting it in formation. Behind, rank upon rank of cars, cresting the ridge. Dignitaries came: the governor, and the former governor of Kandahar, Gul Agha Shirzai, the former foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah. Two other ministers, all whisked down on a special flight from Kabul. They sat on plastic chairs under an awning. But the work of burial here is that: work. Men, tears streaking their dusty faces, stand in the grave, taking the body -- removed from its coffin -- in their arms, lowering it to rest on the floor of the grave, and then crouching down to brick it in. Metal bowls of moistened gypsum are passed hand to hand for sealing the joints. Then shovels pierce the waiting mound of earth.

Mullah Naqib died on Thursday night, of a heart attack. The manner and time of his passing are consequential: To die on the eve of the sabbath is taken here to mean that the gates of Paradise are thrown wide to the deceased; no questions will be asked of him. This particular Thursday was the last night of Ramadan; Mullah Naqib's death came after the end of the month-long fast. For the holiday marking the end of Ramadan to fall on a Friday is also considered propitious -- though some say it heralds a change of rulership. That Mullah Naqib passed on a sabbath eve, just as the sliver of moon marking the end of Ramadan was sighted, is unanimously taken as a sign of his great virtue in God's eyes. Moreover, everyone I have spoken to breathes relief that "God killed him" -- that is, that he died of natural causes, not in some violent attack that would have fueled calls for blood.

He was one of the truly great figures of this region. A man whose default state was a kindly chuckle, a bellowed greeting at the sight of a friend. "Sarah," he cocked his head and informed me once, out of the blue: "You're REALLY REALLY dear to me!" He was a man unafraid to express his love. Here was the paradox of him. He was the best military tactician in a region of warriors. His fellows have related countless times, these past few days, how he held off 10,000 Soviet troops, with tanks and air power and multiple rocket launchers -- everything they could

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throw at his Arghandab -- for 38 solid days. From his seat there, he ran the resistance to the Soviet occupation for the whole southern region, and in the end drove the bear out. He was fearless as well as brilliant in battle, never shunning the front line. And yet...Mullah Naqib, more than perhaps any other Afghan leader I have met, was a man of peace, a man devoted to the point of sacrificing his own interests, and even sometimes the long-term interests of the wider community, to the immediate avoidance of bloodshed. When, after the Soviets withdrew, an extremist leader and darling of Pakistan tried to capture Kandahar, Mullah Naqib was on the verge of acquiescing, so painful to him was the thought of fighting Afghans. Similarly after the fall of the Taliban. Gul Agha Shirzai made a nasty grab for the job of governor -- which President Karzai had awarded to Mullah Naqib -- and rather than become a pretext for civil strife, Mullah Naqib withdrew. "Now is not the time for fighting," he told his outraged followers.

In the intervening years, he has proven an immovable bulwark for President Karzai. No matter how disgruntled his tribesmen have become at real or imagined slights, Mullah Naqib has calmed them down, promising to intercede, or helping them perceive the likely consequences for local stability of their "acting out." This loyalty was a personal trait: the result of a friendship forged during the anti-Soviet resistance, and unshakable. He would never humor my own complaints about Karzai's poor decisions. He knew what the local impact of a misplaced comment might be. A word from him could have sent the whole region into revolt. This loyalty in friendship extended to the US presence here. His constant recollection of the stinger missiles with which the US government eventually furnished him reminded me of nothing so much as the indelible gratitude of elderly Norman peasants at the sight of an American.

I stopped by to see him the day he died. The agony of Ramadan was ending; Arghand members were rushing home to prepare, except Abd al-Ahad, who kindly accompanied me. I knew Mullah Naqib's house would be packed throughout the holidays, as tribesmen came down from Arghandab or other districts for the collective prayer at the great mosque, and to ceremonially renew their fealty to him. I wanted to catch him in a quiet moment before the rush. He was sitting with his wife on the back veranda of his house. He shouted no greeting as I approached, just watched me coming. I hesitated. "Do I have permission?" I called. "OH! Sar-AH!" came the answer. That patented grin cleaved his face. "God brings you!! How ARE you?!" I had forgotten that I've gone back to wearing full Afghan men's dress complete with headgear, given the drastically deteriorated security situation. He and his wife were laughing as I mounted the steps: "We were wondering who that pretty beardless boy was coming towards us."

I asked if he'd been to Arghandab since his return from India, where he and one of his sons were treated for wounds they suffered when a remote-controlled bomb almost killed them in March. "My back hurts me," he replied, with a glance at the metal crutch leaning against the wall. "I can't take the car ride." It must have been like a tree uprooted for him to spend so long away.

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We talked about the situation here, which has, since my departure in August, plunged another sudden notch towards the abyss -- like a man hanging from a rope over a chasm...some tortured threads part, and the man abruptly lurches a few yards lower. Mullah Naqib was disconsolate. "I just don't understand it," he said. "The Taliban are NOTHING. I don't understand this progress they're making." "Well, the government hasn't been doing such a good job either," I responded. For the first time, he nodded. "The government is nothing too."

We talked about the lack of honor and courage of the Taliban tactics. The horrific desecrations they are now operating on corpses, cutting them in pieces and putting them in gunny sacks. "What Book calls for that?" I asked. "They're not Muslims," he thundered, noting discussions he's had with local mullahs on the topic.

I asked him what he made of all the recent talk about negotiations with Taliban leadership. "Negotiations?" he retorted. "Let's FIGHT them. There are 85, with us, 86 countries here. And we're choking up on 5 or 10 Taliban?!"

The exclamation rang in my ears today, as I sat in a carpeted room off another verandah on the receiving side of his house. Below, carpets and cushions covered his vast yard; tenting was strung overhead. Hundreds of tribal elders were seated in rows, sipping tea and joining in collective prayers. The commander of the Canadian contingent here arrived to pay a condolence call. It was a lovely gesture, deeply appreciated by the family and assembled guests. The friendship Mullah Naqib had shown foreign forces was seen as being recognized. Inside the room, plates of grapefruit-sized pomegranates, split in quarters for easy eating, were placed in front of the guests. The general read the text of a message he had recorded for broadcast on the radio. He vowed unflinching support from the Canadian troops. Mullah Naqib's twenty-three or -four year old son, eyes glistening, returned the polite words. As minutes passed, and news got out around town that the Canadians were there, individuals who are jockeying for leadership, of the tribe and in the region, began hurriedly showing up. It was totally unseemly. At some point the grieving son, a bit overwhelmed at the duties suddenly thrust on him at this moment of vulnerability, and at a loss for words, glanced at one of these "nouveaux venus" and said, "You talk to them, Doctor." The doctor obliged. He was praising Mullah Naqib, and his flair for consensus-building, how he always worked to bring peace among people, how, in his constant consultations, he also consulted with the Taliban, and was in favor of bringing them back into the fold. My jaw fell. "NEGOTIATIONS??" Mullah Naqib's voice echoed in my ears. "JANG wu sera wuku: We'll FIGHT them!" Here was a man -- whose loyalties lay with other power brokers in town -- who had elbowed his way into an important private gathering, and was using the gravity of the moment and the resulting reticence of anyone present to contradict him, to push a political agenda. And what an agenda. Somehow, after six years of blood and effort, international decision-makers are coming around to thinking that the Taliban -- the unreconstructed Taliban --



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are suddenly partners we can work with? What has changed since 2001? To think that in all this time, the alternative the international community has been able to offer is so unbearable that Afghans are willing to return to Taliban oppression and the subjugation of their country to Pakistan, just for the sake of a moment's peace... Deeply depressing.

That was the first egregious piece of jockeying. There was more. What I then witnessed made me think of the lurid succession struggles Shakespeare sometimes wrote about, with the scheming royal uncles maneuvering for power over the unfledged heir to the throne. I won't go into tribal politics this missive. But what I witnessed was a travesty, a barefaced attempt to hijack the tribe, and place one of the most important segments of population in the Afghan south under the tutelage of the ruling family of this country. What is deeply reassuring is that indigenous democratic structures in Afghanistan are as strong as the Arghandab river. You can try to re-channel it, but eventually the river will return to its natural bed. The wishes of the tribe will, with time, emerge and prevail.

Why this is important in the broader context is because Mullah Naqib's Arghandab is currently acting as the dyke protecting Kandahar from a surge of Taliban presence in the three districts immediately to the north of it. And Arghandab, as Mullah Naqib proved during the anti-Soviet Jihad, is a formidable place for a resistance movement to be based. Once well ensconced there, the Taliban would be nearly impossible to dislodge. So, the healthy unity of the Alokozai tribe behind an elder they have chosen by way of their own organic processes, their continued loyalty to the current government, which accords them a modicum of respect, is crucial to the security of Arghandab, and via Arghandab, of Kandahar, and via Kandahar, of Afghanistan.

These are weighty days, and I was stricken to see the stakes juggled with for short-term, self-serving purposes. I found myself thinking as I glanced at Elephant rock again, etched against the evening sky, that I hope there is another Afghanistan in heaven, a happy one. Because, if from his perch in Paradise, Mullah Naqib is forced to watch what's going on here now and what will transpire, then he won't be happy there. And that wouldn't be Paradise.

Love to you all,

Sarah