

Afghan coup shakes superpower scheme

by Ramtanu Maitra

Just when Moscow and Washington were getting ready to applaud each other for bringing about a "solution" to the messy Afghan conflict, a coup attempt on March 6 threw a bucket of icewater in their faces. From this standpoint alone, the coup attempt, even if it fails to remove Afghan President Najibullah in the short term, will have a decisive impact on the future of Afghanistan.

The coup bid, which began with a bombing of the presidential place by the Afghan Air Force based at the Bagram military air base near Kabul, was led by Gen. Shahnawaz Tanai, an officer highly respected within the Afghan Army and a prominent leader of the Khalq faction of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Tanai's discontent with Najibullah, head of the Parchami faction, became known at least two years ago.

In the fall of 1988, when Moscow was reportedly toying with the idea of removing Najibullah, it was reported that Tanai and Sayed Mohammad Gulabzoy, then-interior minister and head of the Khalq faction, were plotting a coup to overthrow Najibullah. Then-Soviet Ambassador and First Deputy Foreign Minister Yuli Vorontsov intervened to prevent the arrest of the two. Gulabzoy was subsequently taken to Moscow as the Afghan ambassador and kept under Soviet control, and Tanai was kept in place as the minister of defense.

The feud between the Khalq and Parcham is an old one and a determining factor within the PDPA politics. The fact that the Afghan military is dominated by the Khalqis made it necessary for Moscow to protect the two coup-plotters during their 10-year occupation of Afghanistan. Moscow well understood that to allow Najibullah and other Parcham leaders to go full tilt against the Khalqis following withdrawal of the Red Army, would be tantamount to an invitation for victory to the Mujahideen rebels.

A realignment of forces

There are two intriguing aspects of the coup. First is Najibullah's appointment of Aslam Watanjar, a top Khalqi and minister of interior prior to March 6, as minister of defense, while expelling eight of Watanjar's associates, including Gulabzoy, from the PDPA and military council. It was Watanjar, along with Gulabzoy, who led the coup that brought down King Zahir Shah and later his replacement, Daoud Khan, in the 1978 Saur Revolution. The appointment

of Watanjar indicates that Najibullah is constrained to follow Moscow's dictum, namely to keep a Khalq leader in charge of the Afghan military. Did Moscow author the coup? There has been no indication lately that Moscow is unhappy with Najibullah. Still, while the level of Moscow's involvement is not clear, at least not until a "smoking gun" is found, it is inconceivable that the Soviet Embassy, which runs a parallel intelligence operation in Kabul, was not aware of what was afoot. Since Dr. Najibullah was not forewarned, as became evident from the air strike on the presidential place, it can only be surmised that Moscow was not eager to intervene. *Pravda* stated that the coup attempt was not a surprise—a hint, perhaps, that Moscow would not have been surprised if Najibullah had been toppled.

The second significant aspect of the coup attempt is the revelation that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of the Mujahideen's Hezb-i-Islami group and an Islamic fundamentalist, has been working in league with General Tanai. It has been well known for some time that both Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami and the Khalq faction of the PDPA are strongly opposed to the imposition of a Moscow-Washington scheme for Afghanistan. By contrast, Dr. Najibullah has already accepted such an "external solution" as bringing back the deposed King Zahir Shah, under pressure from Washington and Moscow.

This connection between Hekmatyar and Tanai has made both the Soviets and Americans extremely uneasy. While there are futile attempts to label reports of the alliance as a "propaganda ploy" by Najibullah, the fact remains that the nexus was already in existence. Unlike the Parcham party, whose members are drawn from the urban, Westernized, established bureaucratic families, the Khalq party recruited its members from the urban middle and lower middle class, students, and teachers and others with a strong Pushtun identity. Hezb-i-Islami's base is from the same social strata.

The coup attempt signals that a realignment of forces in Afghanistan is now in progress. General Tanai, who has reportedly escaped Dr. Najibullah's net, was promptly applauded by Pakistan. This is not surprising. Pakistan has all along been a reluctant backer to the superpower synthetic schemes, and it is expected that it would be looking for a realistic alternative that is coherent with realities on the ground. Hekmatyar, who is strongly detested by many outsiders and also some Afghan groups, does head one of the most well-organized Mujahideen groups and has been meeting various PDPA leaders. Pakistan intelligence was well aware of it.

The fallout from this event can already be identified. With the Afghan Army split, the fall of the towns of Khost and Jalalabad to the Mujahideen, with the help of a faction of the Afghan Army, is a possibility. More importantly, a major blow has been struck to Najibullah's legitimacy, and his approval of a solution proposed by the superpowers will have little meaning.