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Death of Karzai's brother stirs questions over U.S. strategy in Afghanistan

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, July 15 (Xinhua) -- With the funeral of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's half brother on Thursday, questions arise over whether his death will disrupt the political climate in the embattled country and impact the U.S. drawdown.

Ahmed Wali Karzai, who was assassinated earlier this week, was an influential player in the Karzai administration and played a crucial role in trying to garner Pashtun support for Karzai. His death came during the lead-up to the U.S. troop withdrawal, to be completed by 2014.

Wali Karzai's funeral was marred by a suicide bombing, deepening the sense that violence is worsening in a region where U.S.-led coalition forces claimed to have made gains. The political uncertainty left by the assassination raises questions about the U.S. political strategy, said Lisa Curtis, senior research fellow for South Asia at the Heritage Foundation.

Although the Karzai administration says it is seeking to exploit openings for talks with the Taliban, there are no visible signs the Taliban is ready to compromise for a political solution, she said.

Instead, the Taliban appear committed to proving they are still a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield and continue to rely on targeted killings and suicide bombings to cow the Afghan people, she said.

The assassination demonstrates the complexity of the U.S. effort to stabilize Afghanistan and reinforces that the Taliban remain a powerful force in the country, she said.

Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said the assassination and funeral attack were Taliban attempts to send a message that the Karzai government is a target and, what's more, that the government is incapable of protecting itself.

Stratfor, a global intelligence company, noted on its website that Karzai has struggled to create a support base among his fellow ethnic Pashtuns, especially in the Taliban heartland in the south. The Taliban movement represents the single largest group among the Pashtuns.

Wali Karzai, however, went to great lengths to work with an array of elements in establishing a sphere of influence in Kandahar, the province in which the Taliban movement was founded in 1994. His efforts earned him immense notoriety, especially among the Karzai regime's principal patron, the United States, Stratfor argued.

Critically, his death will likely weaken the president's position in his native south -- and by extension, in the entire country -- at a time when the Afghan leader is navigating the drawdown of U.S. forces. Karzai had intensified efforts to talk to the Taliban, and Wali Karzai's death means he will be negotiating from a position of weakness and will, Stratfor contended.

Pashtun tribal forces that have thus far been aligned with the president as a result of Wali Karzai's efforts will now be forced to re-evaluate that alliance, given that the Taliban have the upper hand in negotiations for a post-NATO Afghanistan. Losing ground among his fellow Pashtuns could in turn weaken his position among his non-Pashtun partners, who are already wary of the Karzai administration's efforts to seek a political settlement with the Taliban, Stratfor contended.

Washington, meanwhile, needs all anti-Taliban forces to be on the same page so they can serve as an effective counter to the Pashtun jihadist movement and facilitate an orderly drawdown of U.S. forces from the country, according to Stratfor.

For its part, the Obama administration said on Tuesday the troop reduction will go forward based on what commanders see on the ground.

"The president has drawn the larger map, but the commanders and our new ambassador will make the call as to how we ensure working with Afghan security partners and our international partners -- where, how, when -- to ensure that the gains that have been made through the surge are not lost," said U.S. State Department Spokeswoman Victoria Nuland.

Michael O'Hanlon, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington, said the argument that Wali Karzai's death could improve the situation is just as powerful as the argument that his death could make things worse. O'Hanlon emphasized that he does not condone the killing.

"The idea that we should be lamenting his death and become even more despondent over the state of the mission, I think, probably goes too far. It's a sad day in human terms, but in political terms, there are reasons to hope that what comes next might be better," he said.

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