

IN PANJSHIR, THE ODDS WERE AGAINST REBELS

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Battle pause: Anti-Taliban forces taking rest on a hilltop in the Panjshir province, in this September 1 photo. AFP

At no point in Afghanistan's multi-directional civil war that started in the 1970s, was Panjshir taken over by forces that were hostile towards the local guerrillas. It is from the Valley, ringed by the Panjshir mountains in the north and the Kuhestan mountains in the south, Ahmad Shah Massoud, the renowned Tajik commander who was assassinated by al-Qaeda two days prior to the 9/11 attacks, resisted the Soviets and later the Taliban.

In the 1980s, the Soviets made several inroads to the Valley, but they couldn't hold it in the face of repeated attacks by Massoud's guerrillas. In the 1990s when the Taliban were in power, they were kept at the foothills of Panjshir by the Northern Alliance. But now, three weeks after the Taliban recaptured Kabul, the Islamists have claimed that they are in total control of Panjshir, for the first time.

When Kabul fell on August 15, the First Vice President, Amrullah Saleh, a Panjshiri himself, retreated to the Valley where he joined hands with Ahmad Massoud, the 32-year-old son of Ahmed Shah Massoud. Their National Resistance Front (NRF) of Afghanistan vowed to continue fighting against the Taliban, reliving the memories of the past. But this time, the odds were against the resistance from the very beginning.

Resistance in the past

In the 1970s, when Afghanistan became a republic, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was a member of the Muslim Youth, the student wing of the Jamiat-e Islami, started an uprising in Panjshir against President Daoud Khan with help from the Pakistani intelligence. When Khan put down the rebellion, Massoud fled to Pakistan. But he would return to Panjshir after the communists took over Kabul in 1978.

In the Panjshir Valley, literally the valley of five lions, Massoud built a guerrilla resistance against the communists, with help coming from the U.S., Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The aid, along with the rugged terrain and guerrilla warfare, allowed Massoud to hold out against the Red Army.

In 1996 when the Taliban took power in Kabul, Massoud, who was the Defence Minister of the post-communist Mujahideen government (1992-96), retreated to Panjshir along with President Burhanuddin Rabbani, who was his mentor from the anti-Soviet days. They formed the Northern Alliance, a broad coalition of anti-Taliban warlords, who established their control in northern Afghanistan, including Panjshir Valley and Badakhshan and Takhar provinces.

Badakhshan shares a long border with neighbouring countries, including Tajikistan and China. The Northern Alliance had direct access to Tajikistan and thereby Central Asia through the border crossings, which allowed them to sustain the resistance against the Taliban. The Northern Alliance also got support from other regional players, mainly India, Russia and Iran. In 2001, when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, northern Afghanistan became the staging ground and the Northern Alliance fought with the Americans to topple the Taliban regime.

Twin-pronged strategy

In their second coming, the Taliban seemed to be aware of the challenges that could emanate from the north. On May 1, the day the remaining U.S.-led international troops started withdrawing as part of President Joe Biden's plan, the Taliban launched a new offensive targeting the northern provinces of Afghanistan. They took districts by districts, finally taking over Badakhshan province, including the crossings with Tajikistan. The Taliban did not attack Panjshir, but seized all provinces around Panjshir. So by the time provincial capitals started falling on August 6, Panjshir had already become an island surrounded by the Taliban with no direct access by land to Tajikistan.

Secondly, the Taliban had started a charm offensive to win over Afghanistan's neighbours, who had backed anti-Taliban forces in the past, long ago. The Taliban delegation had visited Moscow many times starting in 2018. Mullah Mansour, the former Taliban leader, was killed in a U.S. strike in 2015 when he was travelling from Iran to Pakistan, suggesting that Tehran had also established contacts with the Taliban leadership.

China was one of the first countries that declared a willingness to work with the Taliban after the fall of Kabul. What the Taliban did in all these cases was to turn their biggest weakness — ties with transnational terrorist organisations — into an opportunity. They promised Iran, Russia and China that they would not host or aid terrorist groups that are opposed to those countries' interests. In return, the Taliban want those countries not to help any resistance forces within Afghanistan.

Fall of Panjshir

So when Mr. Saleh and Mr. Massoud Jr. started resistance against the Taliban from an isolated Panjshir after the fall of Kabul, they were on their own. They neither had any direct access to a friendly border (say, Tajikistan) nor direct military assistance from regional players such as Russia, Iran or Tajikistan.

They still called for resistance, perhaps to extract concessions from the Taliban before the new government was formed. The Taliban held talks with Panjshir representatives but did not make any concessions. The Taliban wanted a total surrender. Immediately after the U.S. troops were out of the country on August 31, the Taliban launched the Panjshir offensive aimed at taking over the Valley.

The Taliban now claim that they have the control of the entire Panjshir province. Their supporters have posted photos of the Taliban's white flag raised at the provincial headquarters at Bazarak, Panjshir's capital. But the NRF says their guerrillas are in the strategic locations and that the fight is not over, while the whereabouts of Mr. Saleh and Mr. Massoud Jr. are unknown.

It's likely that the NRF, under attack, has retreated to the mountains, allowing the Taliban to take over the provincial capital and the main artery to the Valley.

But any NRF plan to regroup and counter-attack the Taliban would depend on regional support, which would, in turn, depend on whether the Taliban could establish a stable government in Afghanistan and whether they could keep the promises they made to regional powers.

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