



Friday prayer at cleric Mawlawi Mujib Rahman Ansari's mosque in Herat, Afghanistan, last year.

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A potential threat lurks in Herat

By: Fahim Ahmad Yousufzai

Last month, Mujeebur Rahman Ansari, the Imam of Gazargah Mosque in Herat city, addressing a Friday Prayer, bluntly declared that those who were at the service of the Afghan government and Afghan security forces commit a 'grave sin'.

This is not the first time the hardline cleric is promoting extremism. Last year, he undertook a hijab-wearing campaign, urging women to wear the hijab. Ansari called on his followers to punish anyone who did not comply in accordance with his ordinance.

Traditionally Afghanistan is a land of conservative mullahs who have been on an unquestionable platform to preach the society. The role of religious leaders and Imams to influence the daily life of many people in the country is undeniable. Mosques and religious leaders are sources of obtaining religious knowledge. A national opinion poll titled "Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People," conducted by the Asia Foundation across 34 provinces of Afghanistan, revealed that an overwhelming majority of Afghans have

confidence in religious leaders, and nearly half of Afghans rely on mosques as the main source of obtaining news and information. Furthermore, more than half of the survey participants say that politics and religion should be mixed – i.e. local religious leaders should be regularly consulted on the problems facing an area. Thus, the role of religious leaders and Imams is highly significant in shaping Afghans' views and opinions as religious actors retain considerable influence on the social practices and political opinions of many Afghans.

But the country is standing at a critical juncture.

Afghanistan is experiencing a rise in religious extremism that can pose a potential threat to peace and fuel insurgency. For instance, the case of Farkhunda, a young girl who was baselessly accused of burning the Quran, could be a clear example of how easily the hardliner Afghans can be influenced by extremist religious leaders. In daylight, Farkhunda was attacked by an angry mob who beat her to death and then set her dead body ablaze in Kabul River, just a few miles away from the Afghan presidential palace.

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Mujib ul Rahman's recent remarks, however, provoked a surge of backlash from government officials. For instance, the provincial governor of Herat, Sayed Wahid Qatali, reacted to his remarks and said Herat is not the place for producing Daesh terrorists and he will not allow anyone to promote extremist ideas. Hamdullah Mohib, the National Security Adviser of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, mentioned that Ansari's remarks are contrary to the views of Afghan and Muslim scholars who consider the war in Afghanistan forbidden. Anyone who provokes the people against the current government is a rebel, Mohib said.

Although the response of Afghan officials to Ansari's remarks is reassuring, the support he has among people and his ability to influence ordinary Afghans are alarming. Ansari is fostering anti-democratic ideologies. His remarks were widely shared on social media and several Facebook pages/groups have been created with his name which share his comments that overtly promote religious extremism. His remarks on social media are polarizing, with Afghans either supporting him or backing the current government – dividing Afghans into two groups. On one hand, some Afghans suspect him of being provoked and supported by neighboring countries that seek to fuel the insurgency in Afghanistan. On the other hand, those who are in favor of his statements frequently blame the Afghan government's inability to eradicate widespread government corruption.

A study, conducted by a US think tank, suggests that religious ideologies combined with poor governance are significant drivers in youth joining violent extremist groups. The rhetoric that sets the stage for vulnerable youth to engage in violence will fuel the insurgency in Afghanistan. Afghans, given the higher

level of illiteracy, can be triggered, motivated, and steered into any certain path by such extremists who can easily justify their agendas because the public suffers daily from rampant corruption.

For the Afghan government, it must be an urgent matter to take legal actions against those who preach religious extremism such as Ansari and to prevent them from overstepping the law in the name of religion. The Afghan government needs to launch a probe and find out who are behind the curtain before the extremists get more clout in the public arena.

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