

Taliban Supreme Leader Uses Gathering of Religious Leaders to Consolidate Power

By Peter Mills

Co-produced by the Institute for the Study of War and the Critical Threats Project

Key Takeaway: Taliban Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada leveraged a recent gathering of Taliban-aligned religious leaders to consolidate power and advance efforts to implement a hardline governance program. Akhundzada is taking on a more proactive role as the Taliban navigates internal tensions and faces continued attacks from the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province (IS-KP).

The Taliban gathered more than 3,500 people from across Afghanistan for an “Assembly of Ulema [Religious Scholars]” from 29 June to 2 July. The attendees were primarily religious leaders affiliated with the Taliban movement, indicating that the gathering intended to shore up support for the Taliban instead of broadening its base of support.¹ Each Afghan district sent two religious scholars and one local or tribal elder as representatives. Each province also sent two elders, a religious scholar from the provincial capital, and five representatives from the provincial Ulema Council.² The Taliban pointedly did not describe this event as a *loya jirga*, or grand assembly, the traditional Afghan format for resolving issues of national importance, such as forming a new constitution. Tribal elders were represented at the ulema gathering but were not the primary or majority constituency as they would have been in a *loya jirga*. Akhundzada appears to be prioritizing support from the ulema at the expense of other stakeholders in Afghanistan, such as civil society groups or local leaders from minority groups.

Akhundzada appears to be taking a more assertive role within Taliban decision-making. The Taliban Supreme Leader traditionally seeks consensus with the *Rahbari Shura*, an advisory leadership council.³ Analysts have previously seen Akhundzada as a weak leader who is unwilling to make decisions against the consensus of the *Rahbari Shura*.⁴ His participation in a March cabinet meeting upended the Taliban’s plans to reintroduce girls’ education. Some accounts indicate that Akhundzada played a passive role and allowed a few conservative religious leaders to dominate the conversation while others indicate that Akhundzada actively opposed reintroducing girls’ education.⁵ Akhundzada’s involvement—either tacitly or explicitly—in this controversial last-minute decision marked a shift in his prior ruling style of following consensus-based decisions made from his seclusion in Kandahar. Akhundzada broke more fully with his past leadership style by publicly visiting Kabul for the first time to speak at the June to July ulema gathering, indicating that he is taking a more assertive role in Taliban decision-making.

Akhundzada used the ulema gathering to assert his authority over the Taliban movement and receive pledges of obedience from religious leaders across Afghanistan. Akhundzada gave a keynote address on his vision for the Taliban government that included several anecdotes calling for unquestioning obedience. The chairman of the gathering, Sheikh Habibullah Haqqani, used his opening remarks to emphasize total obedience to the Taliban leadership.⁶ The gathering concluded with an 11-point resolution that included a pledge of allegiance to Akhundzada.⁷ These repeated demands for and declarations of loyalty indicate a concerted effort by Akhundzada to consolidate his control over

the ulema. They also suggest that Akhundzada is concerned about his ability to exert control in the face of divisions within the Taliban movement.

Akhundzada’s speech and its chosen audience indicate that internal tensions within the Taliban remain a problem. The predominantly pro-Taliban composition of the gathering indicates that Taliban supporters were the primary audience for Akhundzada’s speech. It also suggests that this gathering was concerned with addressing factional infighting instead of building a broader base of legitimacy for the Taliban government. Akhundzada repeatedly admonished Taliban leaders for fighting with each other over personal conflicts and “worldly desires,” likely referring to financial resources.⁸ Taliban leaders continue to compete with each other for control of mining revenues in Afghanistan.⁹ Akhundzada implicitly acknowledged that Taliban in-fighting could bring down the government.

Akhundzada’s speech did not directly address IS-KP despite several IS-KP attacks targeting the ulema gathering. IS-KP militants attempted to attack the ulema gathering on June 30 and fired rockets targeting the gathering on July 1.¹⁰ The June 30 attack involved a brief firefight between several attackers and Taliban special forces from the Ministry of Interior.¹¹ These attacks indicate that extensive Taliban security preparations did not eliminate IS-KP’s ability to conduct attacks in Kabul but did prevent IS-KP from meaningfully disrupting the gathering.¹² Akhundzada’s speech did not mention the security threat posed by IS-KP but did proclaim the Taliban’s purity and righteousness compared to other Islamic groups.¹³ This comment may have been intended to rebuke recent IS-KP rhetoric undermining the Taliban’s legitimacy as an Islamic organization.¹⁴

Akhundzada’s speech indicates that he remains ideologically extreme and unlikely to compromise on social policy or acquiesce to demands from the international community. Akhundzada emphasized that ideology, not land or money, was the root of the Taliban’s insurgency against the international coalition supporting the former Afghan republic and, more importantly, that this fight continues.¹⁵ He emphasized that he would not let nonbelievers establish their laws or culture within Afghanistan.¹⁶ Akhundzada claimed that the international community does not want Afghanistan to be independent.¹⁷ Akhundzada’s speech makes it clear that he does not believe the international community will ever agree to his vision of Shari’a law, and that, therefore, no lasting agreement can exist between the Taliban government and the international community. Akhundzada claimed that he would refuse any pressure that the international community might apply to the Taliban government, even if the international community used “nuclear weapons” on Afghanistan.¹⁸

Women were not represented at the ulema gathering, and it is unlikely there will be any significant change in the Taliban government’s policy toward girls’ education. Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi said no women were permitted to attend this gathering and that they would be represented through their sons.¹⁹ Sayed Nasrullah Waizi, a Shi’a scholar from Bamiyan Province, called for the gathering to re-open secondary schooling for girls.²⁰ This statement by a Shi’a scholar indicates that the gathering did include at least some non-Sunni scholars and that there was at least some discussion surrounding girls’ education. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the reopening of girls’ schools would be discussed during the gathering but provided no details.²¹ It is unclear if other scholars felt similarly but were dissuaded from voicing their objections to the current Taliban policy on girls’ education. The closing resolution for the gathering made no specific mention of reopening secondary schooling for girls. It stated only that the Taliban should protect the

rights of women, children, and minorities in line with Shari'a.²² Akhundzada's speech did not mention girls' education, suggesting that it is not among his policy priorities.

Akhundzada's vision for the Taliban government will maintain an exclusive system where power resides with long-time Taliban commanders and religious leaders. He stated that the implementation of Shari'a will depend upon unity between Taliban rulers and the religious leadership.²³ Akhundzada reaffirmed a general amnesty for former Afghan government officials but noted that "forgiveness does not mean to bring them to the government."²⁴ As such, power in the Taliban government will continue to reside with Taliban-affiliated religious leaders and long-time Taliban commanders. Akhundzada's decision to maintain an exclusive government, rather than build a more inclusive government, will limit the ability of non-Taliban powerbrokers to influence government policy.



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