Key to governing Afghans: the clans

By Scott Baftaf | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

SALAR, AFGHANISTAN - A little over a year ago, this town was a veritable bee's nest of renovation. Turkish engineers were building a major highway to link Kabul and Kandahar. Afghan demining agencies were probing the earth for land mines lurking on footpaths and in wheat fields.

And then, in August, the attacks started. Just down the road in Ghazni, a Turkish engineer was kidnapped by Taliban fighters and held for ransom. Here in Salar, hoodlums fired rockets on a demining vehicle and stole another. In a matter of weeks, a handful of troublemakers had turned one of Afghanistan's few success stories into a scene of lawlessness.

And it never would have happened that way, says Malik Abdul Khaliq, the local tribal leader here, if the Afghan government had only asked for his help and for the tribe's protection.

"The road-project people didn't talk with us at all. They only talked with people who had money or power or guns," says Mr. Khaliq, the top elder of the Mirkhel tribe, which dominates this town. "If they had listened to tribal leaders, and asked for our assistance, this violence would never have happened. The US and [President Hamid] Karzai now realize that without the support of the tribes, they can't do any development in this country."

Two and a half years after the fall of the Taliban, the fight for control of Afghanistan continues tribe by tribe and village by village. It's a battle of hearts and minds, where the enemy - Taliban and Al Qaeda - know the rules and nuances of tribal society better than the Americans, and perhaps better than some of the urbanized Afghan officials who now rule the country.

It's a battle where alliances are made and broken over blood relationships and tribal feuds, rather than adherence to an extremist form of Islam preached by Osama bin Laden. The fluid power struggles present an opportunity for the US to cast its lot with tribal leaders to get intelligence and secure local protection for reconstruction projects. However, engaging in tribal politics risks deepening feuds and undermining the country's transition to a more modern, democratic system based on merit rather than blood.

"Tribes are arguably more important than ever," says David Edwards, an anthropologist with extensive experience in Afghanistan based at Williams College in Massachusetts.

"Given the fact that the present administration neither is very strong nor has a great deal of legitimacy, tribal structures have rebounded."

For centuries, it was tribal leaders rather than kings who truly ruled Afghanistan. The Emir of Kabul could pass edicts and demand taxes, but outside Kabul, his power was largely ceremonial. Out in the remoter desert oases, tribes ruled themselves.

Given this tradition of rugged individualism, Afghan intelligence sources and government
officials say it is no accident that the bulk of attacks against US and Afghan forces, and against Afghan and international aid workers, is occurring in the southern parts of Afghanistan. It is here that the Afghan tribes - especially those of Afghanistan's largest ethno-linguistic group, the Pashtuns - remain strongest.

Indeed, a look at the top Taliban leadership along the Afghan-Pakistani border shows that their power is based at least as much on their tribal relationships as on their religious credentials (see map).

One former CIA case officer, who worked with Afghan fighters during the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, says the Taliban have degenerated from a religious movement into a tribal cabal.

“They are tribal chiefs, who give themselves Islamist credentials for foreign consumption, but the real source of their power is their tribe,” says the CIA officer. “Their power does not extend beyond the influence of their tribe.”

Tribal structure

Most Pashtuns are divided into two major tribes, the Ghalji and the Durrani. The Ghalji are larger in number, but the Durrani have long been dominant. Mr. Karzai is a Durrani.

In parts outside Afghanistan's Pashtun-dominated south, tribal identity takes a backseat to broader ethnic, sectarian, and regional affiliations which form the backbone of support for many of the country's powerful warlords.

But in southern Afghanistan, where the tribal system has primacy, power is much less concentrated. Within the two larger tribes there are numerous sub-tribes, conflicting claims to leadership, and small-scale militias. Each village has a tribal chief, and these chiefs choose from among their own ranks leaders who will represent the tribe in Kabul. Most tribes, however, have a number of factions claiming to represent the whole tribe, leading to rivalries and chaos. While the multilayered and fractious nature of tribal authority can be exploited by outsiders, those same traits make it a perilously complex game.

Motivations, however, are not hard to discern. If a tribal chief isn't seen as an adequate provider for the tribe, he risks being overthrown by rivals.

Survival instincts

For a tribal chief, the "primary goal is simply to stay in power, both for reputation and his ability to squeeze money out of his position," says the CIA officer. "So he will resist central intrusion if he does not benefit, but will welcome it if it is in the form of subsidy to himself."

For coalition forces - and in particular the new Provincial Reconstruction Teams run by US Army civil affairs units - this presents an opportunity to drive a wedge between different Taliban groups, based on their tribal affiliations. Aid that makes life better for one tribe - or one faction within a tribe - will inevitably incite the passions of traditional rivals, regardless of their ideological common ground.

And Afghan intelligence and military officials say they are making progress, using close relatives and rivals of Taliban leaders to kill or capture them.

"You have to remember that the Pashto word for cousin is the same word as enemy," says Samiullah Qatra, commander of the new Afghan Border Police. "You might have noticed that most of the problems in Afghanistan emanate from tribal rivalries and monetary gains."

Last month, Afghan military officials crowed over the successful capture of Mullah Rozi
Khan, a Taliban commander and Ghalji tribe member from the southwestern province of Zabul. Mullah Khan was thought to be responsible for most of the kidnappings and attacks on the Kabul-to-Kandahar road project, particularly around the town of Shahjoy. Afghan intelligence officials confirm that the capture of Khan was the result of careful surveillance carried out by members of his own tribe.

"If you give money to somebody in a tribe, you can get information; that is the main source of intelligence in Afghanistan," says a senior Afghan intelligence officer. "The information we get is from cousins, uncles, relatives. The first thing is trust, and for that you turn to your family. But the second thing is always there: money."

Yet American efforts to work with the tribal system have been spotty at best, US officials and academics say. The biggest hindrance is the practice of cycling American diplomats and soldiers in and out of Afghanistan on one-year assignments. Many US intelligence officers serve even less time. This makes it difficult for American diplomats - most of whom are already restricted to the heavily fortified US embassy - to establish the personal bonds of trust necessary in a tribal system.

"The British learned this lesson of tribal relations a long time ago," says Thomas Barfield, a sociologist at Boston University with extensive experience in Afghanistan. "They also learned the importance of keeping people on the ground for long periods of time as political agents so they could learn the system and try to manipulate it."

Mr. Barfield notes that the US "system of rewards focuses on the individual - characteristic of our culture - in a land where you need to involve the community. Thus, the people who shelter Osama may be unlikely to give him up, but their rivals might be happy to, not just for the reward but because of the embarrassment it would cause the next valley."

A danger in meddling

While UN officials and humanitarian groups say that involving tribal leaders is crucial to securing peace in Afghanistan, they caution against using tribal rivalries for military gains. "The last thing they want to do is create tribal animosities," the UN official says.

Already many of the attacks on aid projects in southern Afghanistan are attributable to tribal rivalries, rather than the Taliban. Aid agencies new to the region sometimes initiate projects without consulting tribal elders about their priorities. Some of these projects are later sabotaged, and blamed on Taliban forces, although UN officials say they suspect the elders may have organized the attacks themselves to avenge the slight.

With the central government unable to provide security, many tribes are starting to look after themselves. The Mangal tribe of Khost Province, for instance, has formed its own tribal militia, called an \textit{arbakai}. During a recent day of voting registration in Tapia village, the local \textit{arbakai} - four teenagers with Kalashnikovs - protected the village voter registration site - a local gas station.

"We are a strong tribe because we obey our elders," says Musa Khan, an 18-year-old with a gift for gab. He looks at the two truckloads of provincial soldiers sent to protect reporters on a trip toward the border. "We don't need soldiers like those, we protect ourselves."