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Understanding the Peoples' Crisis and Governance in Afghanistan: Before and After the Taliban Takeover

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Abstract

When viewed from an international standpoint, a country's fight for survival is often mistaken as aggression or extremism. If we look back at the history of South Asia, this is a common trend that can be noticed. But standing in 2023, this trend has become a continuing nightmare for the people of Afghanistan trying to survive in a land of insurgency, conflict, poverty, and an overall lack of human rights. Afghanistan has a long and complicated history with the rest of the world, from the rough terrain cutting it off from the mainland's or tribal clashes that have not been resolved in a century: there is nothing simple about the crisis of this place. In a post-Cold War world, where the bipolar world of the US and the Soviet Union clashed for control of this area, tensions mounted on the country and its people like never before. Everything that followed, has brought Afghanistan to the brink of its worst humanitarian and political crisis in history. As the long-drawn-out conflict with the US concluded in 2021, the Taliban took over the governance of the country, reestablished "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". Today, the place has been left marked by decades of internal conflict, and a constant threat of terrorist activities, and lost its status as a free nation. What remains more concerning is how the people of the nation are dealing with this change and what they look forward to in the future. Is it time for Afghanistan to stand up against the extremist government of the Taliban? Or is it finally time to accept defeat and find ways to survive in a nation ruled by guns and bombs?

Keywords: Afghanistan, Governance, Taliban Takeover, South Asia, Humanitarian Crisis

Introduction

A landlocked country with centuries of complex history stands today as one of the most complicated geopolitical areas of the South Asian region. Continuous internal conflicts between the people and the militant Islamist movement have characterized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The nation is often considered to be the epicentre of terrorism in Asia, if not the whole world. With the rise and eventual takeover of governance by the Taliban, a question resurfaces: "Can Afghanistan be called a free country under the present government?"

In the days following the Afghan Civil War in 1996, the Taliban had temporary leadership in the country. But the situation changed with U.S. intervention after the attacks of September 11, 2001, making Afghanistan the top country for terrorist activity.¹ As the conflict between Islamist militia and the U.S. military spread into the interior Afghan provinces, human security became a myth. In recent years, the Taliban's activity has made Afghanistan a central area of concern in terms of human security. With the takeover of the Taliban, new questions are being raised about the governance and security of the state.

While many factors played a role in making Afghanistan the vulnerable nation it is today, the ever-rising conflicts had the most lasting effects. Finally, as the Taliban took over the governance of the country in 2021, the long-standing threat of Islamist militancy became a reality again. This essay touches upon the country's historical changes and attempts to analyze the failure of a government that could never work to foster human security.

2. Afghanistan - A Nation's Vulnerability

Afghanistan's geopolitical condition has always been complex in the central part of South and Central Asia. From ancient to modern times, it has been a location with the disadvantage of difficult terrain, prone to natural disasters and external invasions. Many factors can be hinted at for the vulnerability of Afghanistan as a state:

Location: Afghanistan is highly prone to seismic activity on the Eurasian tectonic plate. The country is highly prone to powerful earthquakes around the mountainous regions. Most rural communities settled around these areas suffer the aftereffects of these disasters, like landslides and droughts, almost yearly. This is a principally landlocked area with arid areas of sparse vegetation, making the availability of agricultural land difficult and leading to a lack of access to food and water.

Shared Borders: Afghanistan shares a significant part of its border with Pakistan, an area that has been infamous for illegal activities for centuries. Drug and opium trading, human trafficking, and arms trade were some of the main problems that both sides had to deal with. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the rebel groups of the country took advantage of these routes to escape to Pakistan and build their militant groups. It is speculated that over the years, most terrorist activities have found their hotspots in the Afghan-Pak borders.²

Poverty Index: Afghanistan's poverty index has always been lower. After the internal turmoil of the country, they have suffered multiple setbacks that have finally made the country one of the poorest countries in the world at present. As a direct result of the Taliban takeover, significant international aid has been cut off, sending the country's poverty index sliding down in 2022.³

The reasons mentioned above were the main factors of how vulnerable Afghanistan has been as a country. However, the internal problems became the last nail in the coffin of a country that was never prepared to adapt to the fast-paced changes of the international world order.

¹ Brookings Institution, "Recognition of the Taliban", September 30, 2022. Retrieved from <<https://www.brookings.edu/research/recognition-and-the-taliban-2/>>

² Mir, Asfandyar. Afghanistan-Pakistan border dispute heats up. *United Nations Institution of Peace*, January 12, 2022. Retrieved from <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/afghanistan-pakistan-border-dispute-heats>>

³ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Economic roots of the humanitarian crisis", 01 March, 2022. Retrieved from <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/01/afghanistan-economic-roots-humanitarian-crisis>>

3. What is the Taliban?

The word 'Taliban' originated from the Arabic word 'Talib' with the Pashto suffix '-an'. The word means 'two students' but denotes a group of people or even a person. A predominantly Pashtun, militant, and fundamentalist Islamic Group, the Taliban has been at the centre of Afghanistan's political turmoil since its inception.⁴ The Taliban emerged as a result of the Afghan Civil War in 1994, with traditionalist students coming together to uphold their ideology. Under the leadership of Mohammed Omar Mujahid, the group started a political movement that went on to change the geopolitical situation of Afghanistan in the next few decades.

The Taliban originated as a Deobandist Islamic group in 1994 with 50 students of Afghan, Tajik, and Uzbek origins. Mullah Muhammed Omar was not happy about the strict Islamic ideals being abandoned after the Soviet forces were ruled out of the country. He brought together students who believed in establishing a strong Islamic identity in Afghanistan, freeing the nation from warlords who threatened the peace and security of the country. The earliest members coming under the title of Taliban were students and commanders of the Afghan-Soviet war. It was also around this time that the question of Pakistan's involvement came in, and it is speculated that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Agency of Pakistan supported the Taliban in 1994 in terms of finances and other resources. The primary foundation of Pakistan's support was because of the Taliban upholding Deobandism and creating an ethnoreligious identity in Afghanistan.⁵

By 1994, the Taliban had gained around 15,000 members, primarily Afghan refugees and Pakistani students studying in madrasas. On November 3, 1994, the Taliban launched a surprise attack on Kandahar city, and by January 1995, they had control over twelve provinces in Afghanistan. There were direct military attacks on the existing Afghan authorities, promising a change in governance. In these early days, the Taliban received massive support from the ordinary people who received assistance from them, and there were new infrastructural programs carried out. It was in September 1995 that the Taliban shifted to extremist tactics when the Islamic State of Afghanistan was defeating them, a name given to the government established by a fraction of the Mujahedeen groups. The group started shelling Kabul, and once the Taliban captured Herat, they prepared for a full-fledged offensive. This became the last confrontation between the two Afghan forces, leading up to the Taliban taking power. They proclaimed their ideology of establishing a pro-Pashtun government with stricter laws in line with traditionalist Islamic views. In 1996, the Taliban took power as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The first step taken by the Taliban was the imposition of the Sharia law in full force. They claimed their ideology was an innovative form of this law, allowing people to live a righteous and religious life. At the heart of it, the Taliban propagated an ideology that was a mix of Pashtun tribal laws and the Sharia laws, a sort of code-of-conduct laid down by the edicts of Mullah Omar. Under their ideology, the Taliban started imposing restrictions on various activities like the consumption of alcohol, visiting movie theatres and museums, or participating in different kinds of recreational activities. By 2000, television and the internet were considered illegal; no one could procure or possess photography or paintings, and sports such as football and kite-flying were abolished or

⁴ A historical timeline of Afghanistan. *PBS News Hour*, 30 August 2021. Retrieved from <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>>

⁵ Ruby, Mellen. "The shocking speed of the Taliban advance: A visual timeline". *The Washington Post*, 16 August 2021. Retrieved from <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/16/taliban-timeline/>>

discouraged. Places of entertainment, such as parks, museums, and theatres, were converted to mosques. There was a no-interference policy that was started by the Taliban that included stopping all kinds of external aid and resources.⁶ A UN Press Release from April 1996 mentioned that foreign interventions in Afghanistan could further damage an already unstable situation. Between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban had stopped all forms of U.N. aid for civilians, mentioning a majority control of the country. Taliban forces controlled more than half of the Afghan provinces, which were in constant conflict with the nominal central authorities, which were controlling only five provinces. The worst impact came based on gender and individual freedom of people in society. Under the Sharia law, no girl or woman was allowed to be educated. When leaving their homes, they must always wear burqas and be accompanied by a male relative.⁷ Under no circumstance would a woman take up employment or attend schools or universities. Men must respect all religious obligations, keep their beards, and wear turbans outside their houses. Prayer was a compulsory activity, and men found disrespecting religion in any way were punished, sometimes with the death penalty. Gambling, drinking, or drug abuse were considered an abomination, and men could be punished by getting their limbs chopped off.

While civilians had a tough time adjusting to the new and strict laws of the state, Afghanistan's internal situation slowly improved. During the early years of Taliban rule, there were significant infrastructural changes, and opium production and drug trafficking in the country were almost wiped out by 2001.⁸ The attack of the Taliban came from another side - the persecution of religious identities and erasing of identities. Members of the Shia sect and other religious groups in Afghanistan were considered outsiders. Hindus and Christians were made to wear special badges as a sign of their identity.⁹ Idolatry was considered a crime in the eyes of the Taliban, which resulted in the group destroying many historical monuments in and around Afghanistan. The most significant was the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan, a carved idol of Buddha from the seventh century that was destroyed by dynamite.¹⁰ The Taliban finally rose to global prominence after the attack of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Center in the United States. When two planes simultaneously flew into the Twin Towers in New York, the Taliban was held responsible for being the haven for the militant Islamist group Al-Qaeda. Soon after this incident, the U.S. launched a full-fledged offensive on Afghanistan, claiming it to be a part of their 'War on Terror'. However, the situation seemed to have improved by December 2001 when the Taliban forces fled their capital of Kandahar. This was followed by choosing an interim government that would later be formed by public elections. However, what followed was a two-decade-long strife between two political power units and the destruction of Afghanistan as collateral damage.

4. Governance in Afghanistan - Where Did It Go Wrong?

In the first decade of Afghanistan's elected government, there were hopes of civilians getting back the freedom they lost under Soviet and Taliban rule. This included the ease

⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, "The Taliban in Afghanistan", 17 August 2022. Retrieved from <<https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>>

⁷ Cost of War Project. "Afghan Civilians," Brown University, March 2023. Retrieved from <<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/afghan>>

⁸ Limaye, Yogita. "Inside the Taliban's war on drugs - opium poppy crops slashed". *BBC News*, 06 June, 2023. Retrieved from <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-65787391>>

⁹ Brown University. (2023).

¹⁰ Centlivres, Pierre. "The death of the Bamiyan Buddhas". *Middle East Institute*, 18 April, 2012. Retrieved from <<https://www.mei.edu/publications/death-buddhas-bamiyan>>

of religious restrictions, allowing more gender equality in education and employment, and making provisions for an elected government. This took Afghanistan to international platforms where their situation could be recognized and discussed more diplomatically. But the reality of the nation was short-lived. The country's internal situation deteriorated with the Al-Qaeda and Taliban continuing their border activities and trying to gather more followers not only in the country but around the world. A religious agenda aimed towards solving the economic and political crisis of the country became the Taliban's ground for recruiting young people.

A recent study by the Freedom House created a profile of Afghanistan's political freedom over the years. This study kept the status of Afghanistan as "Not Free", with political and civil liberties being less than ten on a scale of 100. From 2021's pre-Taliban score of 27, the country has slipped to 10 this year.¹¹ 2022 has brought in a new wave of fear and insecurity for Afghanistan that is taking the country's future to a darker path.

4.1 Taliban in 2021

In April 2021, the newly elected president of the US, Joe Biden, announced that he would follow through with his predecessor's decision to withdraw U.S. Special Forces from Afghanistan. The withdrawal was to be completed by September 11, 2021, the 20th year of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This date was discussed with the high-level government officials of Afghanistan and started in early May of the same year.¹² This announcement of the U.S. President threw the whole of Afghanistan into a frenzy. Civilians and foreign nationals started fleeing the country as the U.S. troops started the process of withdrawing from the outer provinces. Frightening images of people being airlifted and children being handed off to U.S. troops started surfacing on the internet as the Taliban forces started moving into the national capital. By August, it was clear that the process of U.S. withdrawal had escalated, and the elected government of Afghanistan started vacating offices. On August 15, 2021, President Ashraf Ghani fled the country as the Taliban leaders walked into the government offices to hoist the Taliban flag.

As the Taliban announced a more progressive and empowering approach to governing the country, the people were less than convinced. A mass exodus of civilians started overnight, leading to a massive wave of internal displacement. An estimated number of 700,000 people fled Afghanistan within the fortnight of the Taliban takeover. The situation worsened as airports were targeted as weak spots, where civilians and government officials were airlifted from the nation.¹³ A suicide bombing was carried out on August 30 2021, to stop people from fleeing the country. This attack took the lives of 170 people and was suspected of having been aided by the terrorist organization ISIS-K. The situation did not hinder evacuation but started a new wave of fear for the newly established Taliban government.

While the bombing was regarded as a strategy of a rival group to make matters worse for Afghanistan, the developments during the Taliban takeover were almost a repetition of the country's past. The Sharia law was imposed in its full form, all forms of public

¹¹ Freedom House. "Freedom in the World 2021: Afghanistan". Retrieved from <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/afghanistan/freedom-world/2022>>

¹² US Department of Defense, "Message to the force - one year since the conclusion of the Afghanistan war", 30 August 2022. Retrieved from <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/31444082/message-to-the-force-one-year-since-the-conclusion-of-the-afghanistan-war/>>

¹³ Warden, Scott. "You can't choose your neighbors: The Taliban's testy regional relationships". *United Nations Institute of Peace*, 01 September, 2022. Retrieved from <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/you-cant-choose-your-neighbors-talibans-testy-regional-relationships>>

demonstrations were banned, and the people of Afghanistan were now completely under the rule of an insurgent group. Women, children, and gender minorities suffered the worst of it, including displacements, alleged executions, and prison. Though Afghanistan's new government has kept the door open for conversation with the international community, the tensions remain high. Reports from the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan show that there are disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and detentions being carried out by the Taliban government.¹⁴ Reports from the de-facto government have been "extremely limited", and the country's internal situation lacks transparency for the international community to participate directly in any peace process in the area.

4.2 The U.S. factor

In a statement released by the U.S. Department of Defense on the one-year withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. Secretary of Defense discussed the long-drawn conflict in the area. He mentioned that what started as a "necessary war of self-defence" was drawn out for two decades, affecting the lives of millions of people on either side.¹⁵ While the U.S. has consistently defended its standing in Afghanistan as a mission to free the country from Taliban rule, the result has been quite the opposite. On July 31 2022, the U.S. forces assassinated a former deputy of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. In addition, another major operation carried out by the U.S. since 2011 was when a U.S. Navy SEAL operation in Abbottabad, Pakistan, killed the founder and first leader of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. As the news of the death of the 9/11 mastermind spread across the world, then-president Barack Obama released a statement praising the work of all military forces and remembered the horrific events of the terror attacks. Assassination attempts and multiple military missions against key Al-Qaeda leaders became the order of the hour in Afghanistan and surrounding areas of Pakistan. As the U.S. Department of Defense allowed airstrikes in the area as part of the war on terror, the collateral damage to civilian life was not considered.

The CIA military forces sent to fight the Taliban forces in Afghanistan carried out multiple extrajudicial killings that were often never accounted for.¹⁶ In addition, Afghanistan soon started becoming a nation with the highest number of amputees in the world, owing to the landmines and unexploded explosives placed in active war areas as well as public spaces. During 2017, there was a drop in the number of air strikes by the U.S. under the Obama administration. When Donald Trump took over as president, he stated the idea of strengthening the U.S. forces in Afghanistan before the withdrawal of troops. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of civilian deaths increased by 330 per cent. For the American economy, the Afghanistan war was not good news either. Federal spending reports showed that the finances drained by the Iraq and Afghan wars amounted to hundreds of billions of dollars. There was a prospect of 1.4 million jobs being created in the U.S. with the money that went into Afghanistan. The war spending was entirely on a debt basis, causing higher interest rates for the U.S. economy, directly affecting their GDP post-9/11.¹⁷ The public did not favour U.S. forces being deployed in Afghanistan after the initial years. By 2008-09, there were public demonstrations requesting the withdrawal of troops. Nearly half a million soldiers lost their lives in active

¹⁴ "Afghanistan's Taliban responsible for revenge killings, torture of former officials". *UN News*, 23 August 2023. Retrieved from <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/08/1139962>>

¹⁵ US Department of Defense. (2022).

¹⁶ UN News. (2023).

¹⁷ Knickmeyer, Ellen. "Cost of the Afghanistan war, in lives and dollars". *AP News*, 17 August 2021. Retrieved from <<https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-afghanistan-43d8f53b35e80ec18c130cd683e1a38f>>

missions, and several others who returned suffered from severe physical and mental health conditions.¹⁸ Veteran welfare organizations talked about the lives of soldiers who returned with severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or had to check into rehabilitation centres after losing the ability to live a healthy, civilian life. The U.S. Department of Defense has always been vocal about the service of the U.S. military to the nation and their bravery in Afghanistan. In 2022, Lloyd J. Austin mentioned that “work is not done” on the grounds of counter-terrorism and that the U.S. will be directly involved in managing the situation of Afghanistan and the threat of terrorism.

4.3 Humanitarian Aspect and the Failure of Governance

The ‘Cost of War’ Project by the Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, shows that since 2001, numerous airstrikes, landmine explosions, and internal attacks have caused the death of approximately 2,43,000 people in the war zones. Almost 80,000 were civilians.¹⁹ The public health situation in Afghanistan had suffered more than ever after the U.S. intervention, raising the number of children suffering congenital and fatal health conditions. Post 9/11, Afghanistan became among the lowest nations in the Human Development Index, which includes the high rise in poverty levels, lack of access to nutrition, clean drinking water, and sanitation. In 2022, Afghanistan’s HDI score stood at 0.496, ranked 180 (The Global Economy 2022). Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, one of the worst expected outcomes was in terms of the freedom of women. The Taliban did not allow the education and employment of women in any form, which briefly changed over the last two decades. Though women had to follow certain restrictions in their personal lives, they were allowed to take up jobs and pursue education. Soon after the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan, there were public demonstrations by women to preserve their right to education.²⁰ However, these demonstrations were stopped very early, announcing that women would not be eligible for political rights in the country. They were to be accompanied by a male relative in any outdoor appearance and would be required to observe purdah. In addition, the Taliban never recognized the LGBTQ+ community and, therefore, does not have the right to any civil liberty.²¹ At present, a tiny group of LGBTQ+ lives in fear for their life, given the Taliban’s stance on gender in the new regime. Though the pro-Pashtun Taliban cabinet promised ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities equal rights, these groups were considered minorities. They did not share the same rights as those in the elected government era.

5. Conclusion

If we look at Afghanistan nearly three years after the Taliban takeover, we are left with a number of observations on the country’s political, economic and social situation. A few of the key takeaways have been listed below:

¹⁸ Malkasian, Carter. “What America didn’t understand about its longest war”. *Politico Magazine*, 06 July, 2021. Retrieved from <<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/07/06/afghanistan-war-malkasian-book-excerpt-497843>>

¹⁹ Brown, Frances Z. “Aiding Afghan local governance: What went wrong?”. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 08 November 2021. Retrieved from <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/08/aiding-afghan-local-governance-what-went-wrong-pub-85719>>

²⁰ Mondiale, Medica. “Women’s rights in Afghanistan”. August 2021. Retrieved from <[Nine facts on women's rights in Afghanistan \(medicamondiale.org\)](#)>

²¹ O’Donnell, Lynne. “Millions of Afghans Want to Flee. LGBTQ Afghans Have To”. *Foreign Policy*, 05 May, 2022. Retrieved from <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/05/afghanistan-taliban-lgbtq-danger/>>

-Afghanistan's vulnerability over the last hundred years has made this place one of the most complicated countries in the international order. Food, gender and economic insecurity of the people, added to the recent development of the Taliban government, has left the place open for further damage.

-As the new cabinet of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan formed under the Taliban in September 2021, Afghanistan entered a new phase of its political existence in the international community. In 2022, there are talks of giving the Taliban governance legal recognition if they are interested in holding talks in line with international law. At the U.N., the discussion regarding Afghanistan is regarded as establishing "negative peace" on humanitarian grounds.

-Bringing in a radical militant Islamist group into the sphere of international law might be a far-fetched idea in the current situation of global world affairs. However, the rise of the Taliban is a clear example of how different forms of governance have failed in a country with an already complex background. In the future, the world has to wait for the next decade and see how the country's situation plays out for the people who have become the centre of a worldwide crisis.

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