

Effect of Talibanisation on Women and Ethnic Minorities in Afghanistan: Challenges and Consequences

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Abstract

The Taliban organisation was founded in 1993-1994 by Afghan Sunni Muslim clergy and students, largely from rural Pashtun areas. Many were former mujahideen, or anti-Soviet warriors. The Taliban's support of Al Qaeda (AQ) leader Osama Bin Laden became the most significant factor shaping global opinions of and connections with the Taliban. The Taliban's takeover in August 2021 has consequences for a variety of US national goals. It may create opportunities and challenges for the various terrorist groups with a presence in Afghanistan, and it complicates (if not renders obsolete) U.S. plans to partner with Afghan authorities to counter "over-the-horizon" terrorist threats. Advancing women's and other human rights protection has been another major U.S. policy goal in Afghanistan since 2001; those rights appear to be jeopardised now that the Taliban is back in power. Finally, the Taliban's takeover has thrown a wrench into regional diplomatic and security relations, with neighbouring and other nations reacting in a number of ways to the group's newfound power.

Introduction

The Taliban, now in their third decade, originated as an armed organisation that evolved from Afghanistan's civil conflict in the 1990s. By 1996, they had seized control of the majority of the country. They were overthrown by US, international, and Afghan forces in 2001, and the organisation quickly launched what would become a nearly twenty-year insurgency. They govern Afghanistan again in 2021, probably to a larger extent than they did in the 1990s. The history of the Taliban may be relevant in understanding the group's re-establishment in 2021.

Emergence and the Rise of Talibans: 1994-2001

The Taliban organisation was founded in 1993-1994 by Afghan Sunni Muslim clergy and students, largely from rural Pashtun areas. Many were former mujahideen, or anti-Soviet warriors. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the subsequent fall of the Soviet-supported Afghan government in 1992, a civil war between mujahideen parties erupted. Former combatants who had become disillusioned with the civil war became the Taliban's backbone. Several members of the organisation had visited seminaries in Pakistan and chose the word Taliban to differentiate themselves from the mujahideen. As per the 9/11 Commission Report, Pakistan supported the Taliban because it could "bring order to chaotic Afghanistan and turn it into a cooperative ally," providing Pakistan with "greater security on one of several borders where Pakistani military officers hoped for what they called 'strategic depth.'" Taliban religious practices were congruent with and derived in part from the traditional tribal traditions of Pashtuns, who make up a plurality of Afghanistan's complex ethnic mix and have traditionally ruled the nation.

The Taliban saw President Burhanuddin Rabbani's post-Soviet occupation administration as weak, corrupt, and anti-Pashtun. The four years of civil war between mujahideen groups (1992-1996) resulted in popular support for the Taliban, who were perceived as less corrupt and more capable of delivering stability; as former US Ambassador to Afghanistan and Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad noted in his 2016 biography, "I, like many, was enthusiastic about the Taliban" from the onset. The Taliban took control of the southern city of Kandahar in November 1994 and launched a series of deadly attacks across the country, ending in the seizure of Kabul on September 27, 1996. In their offensives, the Taliban reportedly received considerable direct military help from Pakistan.¹

The Taliban immediately lost domestic and international support when it imposed strict adherence to its brand of Islam in areas under its administration and employed harsh punishments, including public executions, to enforce its decrees, which included bans on television, Western music, and dancing. It forbade women from going to school or working outside the house in general. The Taliban earned widespread outrage in March 2001 when they destroyed enormous sixth-century Buddha images carved into hills above the city of Bamiyan, which the Taliban regarded blasphemous and against Islamic principles.

The Taliban's support of Al Qaeda (AQ) leader Osama Bin Laden became the most significant factor shaping global opinions of and connections with the Taliban. Bin Laden travelled to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996, where he had previously spent the majority of the 1980s as a high-profile fundraiser and organiser of humanitarian operations for the mujahideen.² Bin Laden formed an alliance with the Taliban in which he offered millions of dollars in financial help to the organisation (as well as military backing for the Taliban's efforts to finish their control of the nation), and the Taliban provided safe haven for AQ recruits and training camps. Over 10,000 AQ fighters may have trained in Afghanistan in AQ bases.³ In April 1998, Bill Richardson, the United States' Ambassador to the United Nations, was the highest-ranking US official to visit Kabul in decades. The Taliban "replied that they did not know where he was" in answer to Richardson's request that they evacuate Bin Laden." In any case, the Taliban said that [Bin Laden] posed no threat to the United States.⁴ In response to the August 1998 AQ bombings of US embassies in Africa, the US launched cruise missile attacks on AQ targets in Afghanistan. They were unable to kill or convince the Taliban to release Bin Laden. The US efforts to persuade Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (which, like the UAE, formally recognised the Taliban rule) to deport the AQ commander also failed. Sanctions were also placed on the Taliban by the US and the UN (see "Sanctions," below). The Taliban leadership remained unaffected; their connection with Bin Laden was "sometimes contentious," but "the basis was deep and personal."⁴

Downfall and the Beginnings of Insurgency: 2001-2014

AQ agents carried out a series of terrorist strikes in the United States on September 11, 2001, killing approximately 3,000 people. In a nationwide speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush demanded that the Taliban hand over AQ commanders and permanently demolish terrorist training camps.

US military and development personnel and funds for Afghanistan, a "surge" of resources that peaked with the deployment of approximately 100,000 US troops and other foreign forces in Afghanistan in 2010. The influx of multinational soldiers weakened but did not remove Taliban dominance in the south and east.⁵ Afghan troops took over security responsibilities from foreign forces in mid-2011, as planned. These troops were crippled by high death and attrition rates, as well as a corrupt chain of command, and remained heavily reliant on the US for logistical and tactical support. The Taliban, on the other hand, had

a huge and powerful intelligence network, its members were The organisation was highly motivated, and it employed a range of tactical and strategic strategies to expand its influence and combat US and Afghan forces (such as infiltrator or “green on blue” assaults).⁶ Successful Taliban operations regularly reduced the Afghan government’s own capabilities, eroding Afghan public faith in the government and its security forces. As the surge of US troops ended in September 2012, US authorities declared that it had “broken the Taliban’s momentum,” while continuing to outsource security to Afghan forces.

As early as late 2010, the Obama Administration recognised that there was no military solution to the war and began low-level talks with the Taliban. The talks were mostly on confidence-building measures, including as the formation of a temporary Taliban political office in Doha, Qatar. The Taliban’s refusal to engage with the Afghan government, along with the Afghan government’s opposition to US contacts with the Taliban in which the government was not represented hindered and eventually stopped talks in 2014.

Returns of Talibans: 2015-2021

At the start of 2015, Afghan forces formally claimed full responsibility for national security, albeit they were still reliant on US air power, training, and logistical support to keep their operations running.⁶ The year 2015 was also a year of transition for the Taliban, as the group announced that its founder, Mullah Mohammad Omar, had died in 2013 and named Mullah Akhtar Mansour as the party’s new leader, amid rumours of division among Taliban leaders over succession. Internal strife did not appear to have an impact on the Taliban’s military capabilities, as the group conquered Kunduz, the Northern Province capital, for two weeks in September-October 2015, their first control of a major urban region since 2001.

As stated in successive Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) quarterly reports to Congress, the Taliban temporarily captured Kunduz in 2016 as the group made steady inroads across the country. In July 2016, President Obama stated that the United States will remain 8,400 troops in Afghanistan until the conclusion of his presidency, a greater number than previously intended, stating that “Afghan forces are still not as robust as they need to be.”⁶

In August 2017, the Taliban sent an open letter to President Trump, encouraging him to remove US soldiers from Afghanistan, citing the

Afghan government's fragility and inefficiency.⁷ Later that month, President Trump allowed an increase in US targeting authority and troop levels, although admitting that a complete pullout was his "initial impulse."⁸ Within a year, President Trump allegedly became dissatisfied with the lack of military success against the Taliban, and he initiated official and direct U.S.-Taliban discussions for the first time without Afghan government participation.⁹

These discussions culminated in the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement, in which the two sides agreed to two "interconnected" commitments: the withdrawal of all US and international forces by May 2021, and unspecified Taliban action to prevent other groups (including Al Qaeda) from using Afghan soil to threaten the US and its allies.

Before the February 2020 deal, the US began reducing forces and continued to do so later, reaching a low of 2,500 by the time President Trump left office in January 2021.¹⁰ Following an administration review of US policy in Afghanistan, President Biden announced on April 14, 2021, that while the US-Taliban agreement was "perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself," the US would stick to it by beginning a "final withdrawal" on May 1, 2021, to be completed by September 11, 2021.

Impacts of the Talibanization: An Overview

The Taliban's takeover in August 2021 has consequences for a variety of US national goals. It may create opportunities and challenges for the various terrorist groups with a presence in Afghanistan, and it complicates (if not renders obsolete) U.S. plans to partner with Afghan authorities to counter "over-the-horizon" terrorist threats. Advancing women's and other human rights protection has been another major U.S. policy goal in Afghanistan since 2001; those rights appear to be jeopardised now that the Taliban is back in power. Finally, the Taliban's takeover has thrown a wrench into regional diplomatic and security relations, with neighbouring and other nations reacting in a number of ways to the group's newfound power.

Emphasis on Human Rights: Women and Ethnic and Religious Minorities

The Taliban had "one of the worst human rights records in the world" under its previous administration, according to US assessments; one US official declared in November 2001, "The human rights violations

that the Taliban have imposed on Afghanistan are in a class by themselves.” They rank in the poorest possible sector in a lot of areas.”¹¹ While many human rights violations remained under the US-backed former Afghan government, overall conditions appear to have improved, raising concerns that the Taliban takeover may reverse human rights progress made since 2001. The rights of Afghan women and girls, as well as the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, are two of the most important and highly followed concerns in this field. In both situations, the Taliban’s activities since August 2021 indicate that the group’s authority would limit numerous previously granted rights and safeguards for Afghan women; the picture for minorities is more muddled.

Conditions of Afghan Women during Taliban’s Rule

Since seizing power in August 2021, Taliban officials have pledged to protect women’s rights “within the Sharia framework.” Some observers question if the Taliban’s statements are an attempt to calm worries that women’s rights will be curtailed and to dispel “rumours” about the group’s alleged acts before to its takeover, such as forced marriages and targeted murders of women.¹³ In the immediate aftermath of the takeover, Taliban leaders demanded that female government workers return to work as long as they wore the hijab (headscarf), and they granted “amnesty” to men and women who had worked with foreign forces.¹² Taliban officials then asked for women to stay at home for the time being, citing fears about new Taliban soldiers who “had not yet been educated very well” and may mistreat, hurt, or harass women.¹³

The Taliban are frequently depicted as the primary perpetrators of Afghan women’s oppression. Others have remarked that many individuals in Afghan culture have limited ideas on women’s rights that frequently predate the Taliban movement, especially in rural areas, where 76 percent of the population lives.¹⁴ If the Taliban can avoid additional violence and improve security circumstances, the Taliban takeover may represent an improvement over the high levels of violence that have marked previous years for certain Afghan women.¹⁵ This may be especially true for people living in conflict-affected rural areas. Fieldwork undertaken in 2019 and 2020 discovered that “peace is an absolute necessity for some rural women, even if it is on Taliban terms.”¹⁶

For some women, the Taliban’s takeover has increased fears over sexual assault, retaliation, and displacement, as well as longer-term concerns on the future of women’s rights under a Taliban rule. A small number Afghan woman have rallied in Kabul and other cities, seeking protection

of human rights and participation in Taliban leadership. According to accounts, some women protesting were attacked by Taliban members, and some journalists were arrested while covering the demonstrations. The Ministry of Virtue Propagation and Vice Prevention, which enforced the Taliban's interpretation of Islam in the 1990s, has been reestablished by the Taliban. The Ministry of Women's Affairs, which did not exist in the previous Taliban government but was part of the previous Afghan government, is not part of the Taliban administration.

The Ministry of Education announced the reopening of public secondary schools on September 18, 2021, and instructed all male instructors and students to attend. Because there was no mention of girls, most people stayed at home, prompting some to call to a Taliban "ban" on girls' education.¹⁷ On September 20, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated that the Taliban was completing plans to reopen secondary schools for girls in a "secure learning environment," which will take place "as soon as feasible."¹⁸

Many advocates for women's rights view these allegations with scepticism and feel that the organisation would never permit such a directive. In the 1990s, the Taliban did not overtly limit secondary or higher education for girls, but did so on an ostensibly temporary basis for unclear security concerns, a *de facto* restriction that lasted the entirety of the organization's five-year government.

Some indications imply that the Taliban may allow schooling for women and girls in some situations. Girls' education up to the sixth grade is said to have resumed in gender-segregated classes.¹⁹ Women have returned to a number of colleges, while a Taliban minister has stated that Separated by gender, Islamic dress will be mandatory for female students. At the beginning of October 2021, media websites reported that secondary education for girls had been resumed (or never ceased) in several northern districts. It is unclear if this development represents a greater movement in Taliban philosophy or merely a response to local conditions (which would itself constitute a break with how the group governed in the 1990s). Foreign officials from Turkey, Indonesia, and other Muslim-majority nations are expected to visit Kabul in order to persuade the Taliban to allow females to attend school.

Challenges Faced by Ethnic and Religious Minorities

In general, Taliban language and action toward ethnic and religious minorities has been friendlier than their stance toward Afghan women's rights. The situation looks to be ambiguous and fluid, especially in the

lack of official policy orders from senior Taliban commanders.

The Hazaras, who are predominantly Shia Muslims and account for 15-20% of Afghanistan's population, are one of the country's major ethno religious minorities. They are concentrated in their traditional homelands of central Afghanistan (the Hazarajat) and some areas of western Kabul. Their persecution at the hands of Afghan authorities dates back to the late 1800s. Several times between 1996 and 2001, Taliban soldiers slaughtered Hazara people.¹⁹ Because of this history, many Hazaras are concerned about the Taliban's likely comeback in the run-up to 2021.²⁰ The Taliban (who have historically been largely ethnic Pashtun Sunni Muslims) make some steps to "project themselves as a countrywide organisation," such as appointing a Hazara leader in northern Afghanistan in 2020.²¹ In recent years, Hazaras have undoubtedly faced more dangers from the ISKP, on anti-Shia sectarian grounds, it has repeatedly targeted Hazara schools, mosques, and other locations in Kabul.

Since their takeover in August 2021, despite reports of executions and forced migration in the Hazarajat, the Taliban has maintained a friendlier public stance toward Hazaras, particularly in metropolitan areas. Taliban fighters allegedly guarded Shias' celebration of the holy day of Ashura in August 2021, which has previously been marred by bloodshed in Afghanistan.²² One Hazara was appointed as an interim deputy minister of health in the Taliban administration. These and other apparent supporting activities have occurred in tandem with allegations that Taliban forces in central Afghanistan have forcibly evicted hundreds of Hazara families from their homes.²³ According to Amnesty International, Taliban insurgents killed Hazara peoples in July and August 2021.²⁴ In early September 2021, one observer suggested that "the Taliban political leadership's more pragmatic stance toward the Hazara is vital to retain its weak hold over all of Afghanistan," but that persecution might rise in the absence of foreign attention.²⁵

Other religious minorities, such as Hindus and Sikhs, have also lived in Afghanistan.²⁶ Tens of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs originally lived in Afghanistan, but their numbers plummeted as the country was mired in bloodshed and instability in the 1970s. The Taliban purportedly issued an order in 2001 mandating non-Muslim minorities to wear distinctive markings on their clothing, one of the group's most egregious atrocities against religious minorities. It is uncertain how many of Afghanistan's few Hindus and Sikhs are still in the country following the Taliban's 2021 takeover. The Taliban appear to be demonstrating greater tolerance than in the past. In September 2021, a group of Hindus and

Sikhs met with the Taliban-appointed mayor of Kabul, who supposedly told them that his administration will work in their favour, including the protection of their places of worship.²⁷ A Sikh house of worship in Kabul was destroyed a few days later, allegedly by Taliban fighters;²⁸ a Following that, a Taliban official stated that people who had “harassed” the “Hindu minority” had been imprisoned.²⁹

Conclusion

Several variables are contributing to the nationwide increase in VAWG. VAWG increases when women are confined to their homes, as it does in every crisis. Because of limits on women’s fundamental freedoms, many women are trapped in their homes, fearful for their safety and unable to seek help. Furthermore, multiple displacements, loss of livelihoods, increased poverty, inflation, and soaring prices of basic necessities are aggravating variables that heighten the susceptibility of women and girls to violence. This is seen, for example, in higher rates of child marriage reported as a result of economic hardship. Some Afghan women have observed that the Taliban takeover has produced a fertile setting for VAWG, with some interlocutors describing an attitude of greater permissiveness toward women’s abuse. Women and girls are now much more frightened to reach out, limiting their capacity to make decisions about their future.

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