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International Recognition of the Taliban Government

SYNOPSIS

Afghanistan has plunged into political and humanitarian crises concurrently since the Taliban seized power in August of 2021. News out of Afghanistan portrays developments in the opposite direction of where the rest of the world is going. The Taliban regime is employing increasingly strict measures on all aspects of Afghan society, whereas the international community has yet to orchestrate a strategy to effectively deal with this Islamist regime. This report gleans insights into the current situation in Afghanistan with some inferences for the way forward.

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Problem

The Taliban swiftly seized power in August 2021, following the withdrawal of U.S. and international forces. Since then, Afghanistan has descended into a dire humanitarian crisis with wide-spread famine on the horizon. The situation is further deteriorating with the brutal suppression of women, arrest and torture of journalists and civil society activists, and extrajudicial killings of the former government officials. Women are banished from public life and the media is suppressed. Western governments and international organizations are struggling with the challenge of providing relief to Afghans while avoiding any moves which may recognize and legitimize the Taliban regime.

Essential Background

The Taliban takeover is a rather unconventional victory for an insurgent group, and many questions remain as to how the Taliban, as a Jihadist movement, will attempt to translate this victory into the formation of a functional government. The Taliban's triumph will inevitably shape its approach to politics. However, it is not clear whether the Taliban's military success will lay the groundwork for a functioning system or, if their victory in the battlefield – like other previous Jihadi-led governments in Afghanistan, including the Mujahideen-led Islamic State (1992-1996) and the first Taliban Emirate (1996-2001) – will set the stage for even harsher authoritarian rule.

Since the establishment of Afghanistan as a kingdom in the 18th century, the country has never been ruled by clerics; however, this has never led to the inquisition of the religious credibility of Afghan leaders as Muslims because Islam, as a historical and cultural tradition, permeates almost every aspect of life for many Afghans. In further contextualizing the religious history of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime, like the predecessor the Mujahideen government, remains an ahistorical anomaly. Its core beliefs are based on a specific ideological interpretation of Islam, as opposed to Islam being a faith rooted in history and culture for many Afghans.

While the Taliban is not a monolithic movement, as a whole it remains inflexible and consistent in its ideological orientation. Despite claims by some Taliban representatives on their respect for international laws, Taliban officials inside Afghanistan have continued with the same harsh policies as the first Taliban Emirate in the 1990s. The regime remains committed to reestablishing a draconian code of law based on a medieval conception of "vice and virtue." These include, but are not limited to the recent edicts (firmans) of banishing women from public life, closing girls' schools,¹ putting semi-literate clerics in charge of almost all government offices, changing the educational system by removing modern sciences, severely limiting the freedom of speech and media, engaging in extra-judicial killings of former government officials and employees,² public hangings of opponents, and the burning of musical instruments. Furthermore, Taliban-allied groups have already launched attacks on almost all of Afghanistan's neighbors,³ including Pakistan, the Taliban's main supporter.

The Taliban's political imagination is informed by its recent experiences as a militant Jihadi insurgency, this will tangentially saturate its state-society relations. This means that its organizational features as a fighting force have translated into its post-conflict modes of ruling. Unlike the Mujahidin parties, the Taliban's strong internal cohesion as a fighting force lent itself to the consolidation of

1 <https://bit.ly/3LHrOWe>

2 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/04/12/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-revenge.html>

3 <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/05/northern-afghanistan-and-the-new-threat-to-central-asia/>

an extreme authoritarian top-down approach.⁴ The group's main supporters come from a narrow demographic of mostly young Pashtun males from rural areas. They remain poorly suited for establishing and operating the complex bureaucracy required to provide welfare services to the Afghan population. This situation is exacerbated by the exodus of the majority of Afghan professionals and educated cadres who refused to work for the regime, the banning of women from public life, and the rigid exclusion of non-Taliban professionals in the new government.⁵

Beside the institutional limitations, the Taliban is ruling a country whose citizens have transformed dramatically since their first emirate. The Afghan population is young and the average citizen, in many parts of the country, has no experience of life under Taliban rule. The Taliban has never attempted to establish a functioning government even in areas controlled by the insurgency during the last decade. It relied predominantly on the services provided by the Afghan government or NGOs. The current citizenry is young, connected, more urbanized, ethnically diverse, educated, networked, and globalized than was the case during the first Taliban Emirate. Many of the new Afghan generation enjoyed access to higher education and unprecedented professional and personal opportunities over last two decades. They have remained invested in a democratic governance, while imperfect and amputated in its performance, and support policies and ideas that are in stark contrast to the Taliban's brand of governance. These realities manifested themselves in almost daily protests by women's groups, public intellectuals, journalists and media activists, as well as, the ordinary citizens across the country. Social media has also offered a new space for political expression which challenges, and even threatens, the Taliban narrative in meaningful ways. Furthermore, a palpable armed struggle is also taking shape in different parts of Afghanistan that could seriously undermine the regime.

So, what will be the Taliban's response to this new political landscape? Will the regime try to move beyond basic government control and establish political legitimacy? Though it is early to have a clear answer, so far, the Taliban has showed little to no interest in changing their political behavior. Throughout Afghan history, authoritarian governments hardly succeeded in maintaining power without substantial foreign support. Political stability of different governments had involved direct foreign aid and limited intervention by the center in the affairs of the periphery.⁶ On these points, the Taliban are failing and their main international supporter, Pakistan, has limited means of providing long-term financial aid for the regime.

Strategies and Solutions

In terms of international engagement, the U.S. talks with the Taliban in Qatar assumed that the movement's main objective is international recognition, and even integration. But once the U.S. forces ended its direct military presence, the Taliban simply ignored the Doha agreement, took over the country, and conceded nothing. The forcible capture of Kabul resulted in the Taliban's isolation, as well as sanctions imposed by the U.S. and international community. Yet, it is premature to assume that these sanctions will provoke a shift in the Taliban's policies. In fact, the ideological arm of the Taliban, especially the hardliners in Kandahar, considers global integration to be a threat to their ideological struggle and does not see international recognition as credible means to legitimize the regime. The Taliban Emirate's disinclination to cater to Western diplomatic pressure will therefore likely persist,

4 <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/16/1028053171/will-taliban-rule-be-any-different-this-time>

5 <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/afghan-exodus-story-civil-disobedience-198051>

6 <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3147>

especially because other global Jihadists can continue to provide the Taliban with material and ideological support for the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, current international pressure could bring the financial collapse of the Afghan economy and may fuel further forms of violent and non-violent protest against the Taliban regime. Even still, if the Taliban were to make major changes to its policies, or ease its rigid ideological stance, it could undermine its credibility among its own core Jihadist supporters. This is a risk that the Taliban government may be very reluctant to take. The Taliban is therefore likely to continue to prioritize its ideological political project above all else.

Many in Afghanistan, including Taliban leaders, see the Western policy of providing humanitarian aid as a political act, sustaining and strengthening the regime by providing core services to the population. However, unconditional political engagement and aid will not help the Afghan population in the long term, but will inevitably lead to further disaster, as a stronger and more entrenched Taliban regime will provide space for other extremist groups to flourish.

For the Western allies, given their near-zero leverage and no strategy, the choices are limited. On the one hand, Western analysts fear that recognition of the Taliban regime and its radical policies may create serious political backlash at home; on the other hand, ignoring the Taliban risks turning Afghanistan into a terrorist hub. Given this troubling dilemma, the international community ought to condition its political engagement with the Taliban to exploit division within Kandahar and Kabul-based ruling councils. Furthermore, the West should see its engagement with the Taliban not just as means of securing their own narrow interests, but as the continuation of the larger political and ethical project of advancing human rights, women's rights and human dignity can be encompassed under the category of human rights.