

# A Car with No Engine: Drain of Human Capital and Taliban's Reality Test

*The discussion about the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan since August 2021 has had many facets. The focus has justifiably been on the issues affecting democracy, human rights and the plight of the common people. Yunus Abakay here takes a long term view of the problem, pointing out that the flight of human capital – of the educated and professional segments of the population – needs attention too, as the recovery from the current problems will be severely affected by this relatively hidden factor.*

In August 2021, we witnessed scenes of panic and fear from Afghanistan as thousands of people gathered around Kabul airport, and on the border with neighbouring Pakistan, to flee the country. The number of [Afghan nationals who had collaborated with the US](#) and were evacuated in August reached tens of thousands. A striking fact about those who left the country, therefore, was being educated and skilled workers of their country that included [scholars and students in higher education](#).

That this was also a concern for the Taliban was seen from the fact that they called on the US to stop evacuating [Afghan experts](#) and even set up checkpoints to prevent more people from fleeing the country. Although they declared a general amnesty, particularly for the public employees, to ensure continued running of the bureaucracy, it did not stop the country from experiencing swift brain exhaustion – a drain of its skilled and promising human capital.

Although refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and security and human rights abuses are well-recognised concerns regarding the rapid political changes in Afghanistan, the drain of human capital needs to be recognised as a fundamental problem for the country too, and a vital challenge for the Taliban's rule to overcome.

## Achilles' Heel of Taliban

Returning to power after twenty years, the Talibs face challenges of a technologically advanced world, where the division of labour is more specific, and globalisation is inevitable. This seems to constitute a great hurdle for a movement whose young generation is experiencing modern urban life for the first time. Grappling with the musts of a modern-day economy has hit the Taliban from day one. After capturing the capital, they had to plead for help from the international community to even run some essential services such as flights as [US-trained pilots](#) also left the country. [Turkey](#) and [Qatar](#) provided technical help while Pakistan provided training support to run the Kabul airport, but dealing with administrative, economic, and humanitarian challenges together, pushed the Taliban to request more aid, mainly from the very Western countries they had fought for decades.

By leaving Afghanistan, but taking much of the country's human capital with them, the US handed a car with no engine to the Taliban; thus, [pleading for help](#) has become the proverbial Achilles' heel for the regime. This has made it more susceptible to considering the demands coming from the Western states, such as making pledges concerning human rights, primarily women's rights, in exchange for global aid and the release of frozen [Afghan assets](#) worth \$10 billion. Although the sincerity of such consideration is a matter of question, it has become a litmus test for the Taliban doing its best to prove that it is not the same as twenty years ago. Consequently, it has made several regulations, such as a [recent decree prohibiting forced marriages](#). However, people remain sceptical about the Taliban grasping further control of the state apparatus. As the Talibs increase their domination, fear among former public employees – some of whom have been executed and some [stay in hiding](#), and amongst women in general, spreads further. This has made leaving the country a priority for many who form long queues outside foreign consulates and public offices in Kabul to get visas or [passports](#).

In general, the Taliban's controversial view of women being in the economic life seems to deepen the human capital crisis. By causing hardships for women in public- and private- sectors and [prescribing stereotype jobs](#) to limit women's participation in economic life, the Taliban seems to shoot itself in the foot. In addition to the human resources lost by the flights that took off from the Kabul airport, ironically, the Taliban also forces [women to flee from the economic life](#) when the country is going through what is feared to be the world's [worst humanitarian crisis](#). The United Nations recently estimated that the loss to Afghan economy from limiting work opportunities for women is [\\$1 billion or up to 5% of the GDP](#).

## Taliban's Jihad in the McWorld

Although this may not seem surprising considering it comes from a men-only political organisation, it shows how the Taliban is also experiencing a lack of enough human capital to administer the state and regulate economic life. Taliban has been a paramilitary organisation operating in the countryside that, as a state actor, seems to be overwhelmed in the urban space. In studying contemporary politics,

[Benjamin Barber](#) portrayed Jihadist movements as reactions to the global economy (McWorld), a response to the advance of multinational corporations to protect their cultural and communal life.

A Jihadist movement in power in the globalised world now faces a crossroads: it must choose between pursuing the motive to protect the communal life it has idealised, and being part of the global economy, thus giving up the hard-line ideological ambitions.

In June 2021 the [World Bank](#) called for investment in human capital for a speedy recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and advised governments to prioritise accumulation and utilisation of human capital in their budget plans. In the [published index](#), a direct correlation could be seen between economic development and the strength of human capital in a country. Hence, a reverse reading of the proposal and data suggests that the drop in Afghan human capital will continue to overwhelm the country's economic, political, and social life. Moreover, given that Afghanistan has lost most of its refined human capital, recovery may take a generation even if the Taliban abandons its fundamentalist politics and takes a pragmatic course. If their rule of the last few months is taken as a measure, the Taliban seems to be teetering about what course to take. Although this teetering could give the proponents of liberal democracy hope, China has amply shown that liberal democracy is not a prerequisite for economic development; hence, this current reasonableness in the Taliban's posture will not necessarily become a step towards the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy.

*The views expressed here are those of the author and not of the 'South Asia @ LSE' blog, the LSE South Asia Centre, or the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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