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How the Taliban Are Losing the Peace in Afghanistan

ASHLEY JACKSON AND FLORIAN WEIGAND

The Taliban have been back in power in Afghanistan for almost two years. There had been hopes that they might chart a different course than they did in the 1990s, creating a more representative government and allowing women greater freedoms. Those hopes have all but disappeared. Amid growing political divides within the movement, led by an emir who seems fearful of losing control, the Taliban state appears increasingly at odds with the international community and most of its own population. Yet the Taliban is also a political movement with nuances and fissures that are essential to understand. How differences of opinion and power struggles within the Taliban ranks play out may ultimately determine the government's chances of survival and shape the future of Afghanistan.

The Afghan population continues to suffer not only from increasingly limited freedoms and rights, but also from a deepening humanitarian crisis. This crisis has been caused mainly by the end of international support and the freezing of the Afghan central bank's assets. The international community is limiting political and developmental engagement with the Taliban, focusing on humanitarian relief instead.

Yet this relief is clearly insufficient, particularly in the absence of any serious political dialogue or aid focused on addressing the drivers of humanitarian need, such as drought, entrenched poverty, and weak service-delivery institutions. The number of Afghans in need is rising. The United Nations claims that some 28 million people—nearly two-thirds of the population—require assistance. In addition, the extremist group Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) presents a growing threat, orchestrating attacks on civilians and the government in Kabul and elsewhere in the country.

THE ROAD BACK TO KABUL

The Taliban movement was founded in the mid-1990s by religious students amid the brutal violence wrought by civil war. The Taliban—which, literally translated, means "students"—were a rural movement that gained momentum by launching an uprising in response to the violence and atrocities committed by the mujahedin, the guerrilla factions that had fought the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan.

The Taliban movement quickly gained control of the south and then expanded its influence throughout the country, ultimately conquering Kabul in 1996. Their governance at that time was characterized by particularly conservative traditions and interpretations of Islam, as practiced in some parts of rural southern Afghanistan. This resulted in women being banished from public life, including education and work, as well as the enforcement of strict dress codes and a ban on music.

Soon after 9/11 and the beginning of the "global war on terror" declared by US President George W. Bush, the Taliban were condemned for harboring al-Qaeda and ousted in a US-led military invasion. The invasion was conducted with the help of Afghan commanders, mainly former mujahedin, from the so-called Northern Alliance. Many senior Taliban leaders retreated to the borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In December 2001, the United States and its Afghan and international allies gathered in the German city for Bonn to draft a plan for a democratic future for the country, creating the foundation for what was now called the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

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The newly created state was supported with billions of dollars in international aid over the following years. However, the Taliban began to reorganize across the border in Pakistan from 2002 onward. The first few years of the insurgency were marked by scattered hit-and-run attacks, mainly in the south and east. Starting in 2006, violence spiked and spread across the country.

In late 2009, US President Barack Obama ordered a surge of military forces aimed at defeating the insurgency. But by the end of 2014, when the international coalition handed security responsibility over to the Afghan government, having greatly reduced its numbers in the country to around 20,000 soldiers, the insurgency was already regaining momentum. The Taliban took on Afghan forces in head-to-head battles, often retreating but still expanding their influence.

In addition to violence and coercion, the Taliban applied more subtle practices of governance aiming at building local support and legitimacy, and thereby expanding their control over the population. They established sharia court structures, based on their interpretation of Islamic law, in which the population could solve conflicts in a faster, cheaper, and often less corrupt way than in the government courts. The Taliban also began to co-opt—and take credit for—the internationally funded delivery of services such as health care and education in areas under their control or influence, shaping how these services were delivered at the local level. This also enabled them to bolster their claim to legitimacy.

This is a ruling system unlike any other in the world.

By contrast, the internationally supported Afghan state was plagued by corruption, which undermined its legitimacy and popular support. Although no definitive figures exist, reporting by agencies such as the office of the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction suggests that a considerable amount of international aid was pocketed by corrupt elites rather than used for the public good. Both the World Bank and Transparency International consistently ranked Afghanistan as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

The Taliban's violent attacks drove the state to focus on protecting itself instead of its citizens. An increasing number of walls went up in civilian areas like downtown Kabul, which were patrolled by heavy deployments of security forces with armored vehicles. As the United States once again increased airstrikes in 2017, such measures further undermined claims that the Afghan government could provide security to the population. By 2018, the Taliban had encircled every major urban center and moved freely in much of the countryside.

Direct negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, excluding representatives of the internationally supported Islamic Republic, resulted in a February 2020 agreement to end the US military engagement in the country. Under the deal, the United States would withdraw its forces in exchange for the Taliban agreeing to provide certain counterterrorism guarantees and to negotiate with representatives of the Republic. But as the US forces began withdrawing, making it clear that the international military presence would soon end regardless of dynamics on the ground, progress on an intra-Afghan dialogue lagged and fighting intensified.

In the spring of 2021, the Taliban launched an offensive that would see them capture hundreds of Afghan districts in a matter of weeks. In early August, the Taliban began to seize provincial capitals. As the insurgents closed in on Kabul, President Ashraf Ghani fled the country by helicopter. Taliban fighters took control of the capital on August 15, 2021.

The withdrawal of the remaining international troops, many of whom had been pooled at the airport in Kabul, continued as international organizations, embassies, and aid agencies attempted to evacuate people in a variety of often poorly coordinated efforts. Thousands of people desperately tried to enter the airport and board one of the last flights out of the country. On August 26, a suicide attack (later claimed by ISKP) within the waiting crowds killed more than 170 Afghan civilians and 13 US soldiers. Acting on fears of another ISKP attack, a US drone strike killed 10 civilians, including children, in downtown Kabul on August 29. On the next day, the final US military plane departed.

The following weeks and months were just as chaotic. The Taliban themselves appeared surprised by the speed of their conquest and uncertain of how to run the country. Initially they kept most of the state's institutions and tried exercising

power through them, which created a false sense of continuity. But by September 2021 they had abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs and reintroduced the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (PVPV) in its place, making it responsible for enforcing the Taliban version of sharia.

Over time, the Taliban invested increasingly in their security apparatus, especially the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), which is slowly creating the foundation for a police state. Unmoved by international protests, they have introduced increasingly conservative policies, such as bans both on higher education for women and on women's employment by nongovernmental organizations.

THE EMIR'S WILL

Why do the Taliban continue on this uncompromising pathway, despite local protests and international condemnation? Different dynamics are at play. As in the 1990s, the movement is led by an emir based in the southern city of Kandahar, surrounded by loyalists and rarely interacting with people outside of his inner circle. The formal Taliban government, however, sits in Kabul, including the prime minister's office and the ministries. The divide is more than geographic; it represents to many the tensions between more pragmatic and politically savvy elements of the movement, based in the capital, and more extreme and ideologically focused elements, associated more closely with the emir in Kandahar, Haibatullah Akhunzada.

Although many in Kabul may not recognize the importance of female education, they do recognize that the restrictions decreed by the emir have been politically disastrous both domestically and internationally. Those in Kandahar simply do not care or adequately understand what is at stake, or they believe that the political consequences are a necessary pain to bear in order to achieve a pure Islamic society. This is a ruling system unlike any other in the world, run by a leader who rarely interacts with the population, does not meet with the international community, and sits in isolation from the country's capital and ostensible organs of government.

Yet the divide is hardly as simple as Kabul versus Kandahar, or pragmatists versus ideologues. Though the Taliban try to portray themselves as a unified front, different people, poles of power, opinions, and approaches compete within the movement. Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of Jalaluddin, the founder of the Haqqani network, and Mullah Yacoub, son of the first Taliban emir, Mullah Omar, are often pointed to as key players, holding the positions of interior minister and defense minister, respectively. They are also considered to be more pragmatic than the emir's circle, recognizing Afghanistan's precarious political position, and they are certainly more accessible to the population, attending public events and appearing in the media. Alongside these figures are a host of actors, mainly former military commanders, who control their own power bases within the movement and have complicated motives and alliances. But these players appear to have little influence over the emir.

A struggle for control of the Taliban movement is unfolding as the emir and the circle around him attempt to consolidate power. Increasingly, Afghanistan is at their mercy: the emir's decrees are the final word. The decrees are written and released in a profoundly untransparent manner, and often come as a surprise. The decree banning girls' education was a shock to both the Ministry of Education, which had several high-profile school opening ceremonies planned for that day, and key officials across the government.

The emir is using the GDI and the PVPV to carry out his will. These actors exist in competition with, and often at the expense of, the wider security sector and most other authorities—from ministries to provincial and district governors. They are often seen as an extension of the emir, and so have outsize influence. Those within the movement who are more pragmatic, or who understand how hardline policies undermine any domestic support and external legitimacy that the Taliban still has, dare not speak up. Some may be anxious to avoid undermining the unified appearance of the movement.

Communities and civil society activities might be able to shape the practices of the Taliban at the local level, operating in the gray areas outside of the emir's knowledge. But they have little chance to change the Taliban's policies, even if local-level commanders can be convinced. And these gray areas are increasingly shrinking as the emir continues to consolidate power at subnational levels.

The consolidation has proceeded through the frequent rotation of provincial and local government officials and military commanders—moves intended to prevent any one contingent or individual from developing or maintaining a local power base. They also limit local leverage over these actors, who are no longer from the community and so tend to be less concerned about its welfare. More recently, ulema councils comprising

religious authorities have been introduced at the provincial level, which many see as an attempt to link local governance with the will of the emir.

Responsibility and Revenue

Even before 2021, when the Taliban were still an insurgency, the movement governed populations in the areas under their control. They collected taxes from households, farmers, businesses, and truck drivers, as well as from development projects. They provided courts, where judges ruled on questions of land ownership, inheritance, or divorce. They also tried shaping the curriculums of schools and enforced restrictive rules on women. The movement had ministry-like commissions dealing with different subject areas and appointed shadow governors at the provincial and district levels.

But when the Taliban took control of the state in August 2021, they were suddenly responsible for a considerably more complex set of institutions and highly specialized technical governmental bodies, such as the central bank. Unprepared and having no experience in such sectors, the Taliban asked most of the technical staff who had remained in the country to stay in their positions. In some cases, however, these staff members were not paid and eventually left, and it took time to replace them. This resulted in challenges across sectors. For instance, the Taliban had difficulty establishing systems to manage weapons stockpiles. Large quantities of arms were sold off by corrupt commanders and fighters.

A struggle for control of the Taliban movement is unfolding.

Over time, the Taliban have increasingly brought state institutions under their control. There is at least some continuity between how the Taliban governed as an insurgency and how they govern as the de facto government of Afghanistan today. For example, the Taliban generate most of their revenue through taxes. A World Bank report released in January 2023 concluded that the new government's revenue generation was strong. It collected $1.54 billion between March and December 2022, primarily through levies charged at the borders. As in the past, though, these reports are not necessarily neutral assessments; they are primarily based on data provided by the Afghan government.

Nonetheless, the revenue has enabled the Taliban to pay more regular salaries to civil servants, even though the international aid covering more than two-thirds of the state's budget under the Republic has been cut off. Revenue has also allowed the Taliban to invest in infrastructure projects. The most prominent example is the Qosh Tepa Irrigation Canal, designed to provide for a large number of communities in northern Afghanistan. The project had long been discussed during the Republic era, but it was left unbuilt because of concerns about diverting water from the Amu Darya, the river that demarcates Afghanistan's border with Uzbekistan. In southern Uzbekistan, the agricultural sector, especially cotton production, relies on water from the river. By implementing the project, the Taliban risk severe tensions with Uzbekistan. But the benefits for Afghan farms and in terms of job creation promise to be both politically and economically substantial.

Drawing on their revenue base, the Taliban have also been investing in the security sector—especially the GDI and the PVPV. This has enabled the movement—especially the emir and his supporters in Kandahar—to expand their control by force, particularly in urban areas.

Meanwhile, through a series of decrees by the emir, the ideological stance of the movement has become more apparent. The list of discriminatory and exclusionary policies introduced by the Taliban continues to grow. For instance, in August 2021, they banned female students from attending secondary schools. In May 2022, the Taliban asked women on television to cover their faces. In December 2022, the Ministry of Economy announced a ban on women working for NGOs, citing allegations of immoral behavior. In the same month, they banned women from attending universities.

Opaque Decisions

Taliban decision-making is extremely opaque and difficult to decipher in real time. Part of the challenge is that within the Taliban movement a number of figures have considerable decision-making power, and they often hold different positions on policies. Among them are the emir, the prime minister, cabinet ministers, and provincial and district governors. The emir's decisions are often made unilaterally and are considered to be final, regardless of others' views. Those who are more pragmatic and perhaps more aware of the

realities in the country, including the threat that exclusionary policies may pose to the legitimacy of the movement, are frequently too afraid to raise issues that could contradict the leadership. Dissent is seen as an act of disloyalty.

Decrees, orders, letters, and other policy announcements come from multiple sources, creating confusion and contradiction. The PVPV banned women from going to gyms and parks without any decree from the leadership. The ban on female NGO workers was announced in a letter from the economy minister, but it was thought to have been imposed on the orders of the emir. The vagueness of the order led to panic and confusion. So-called exemptions quickly emerged, covering a range of activities, such as health care provision, and local workarounds continue. But the overall lack of clarity more often leads to self-censorship, risk aversion, and fear.

The Taliban leadership has sought to strictly enforce its interpretation of sharia, yet enforcement has unfolded on an ad hoc basis. Although sharia has been translated into relatively clear legal frameworks in many Islamic countries, including the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, it has not been codified by the Taliban, leaving considerable scope for interpretation. Since the Taliban regained power, new rules have been developed ad hoc and without much oversight by individuals within PVPV, based on their own interpretations of sharia.

In Afghanistan's university dormitories, for instance, women and men had long been strictly separated. Within the Taliban, some argued for banning women from staying in dormitories without a close male relative (*Muharram*). This ultimately resulted in the closure of most women's dormitories across the country.

To what extent and how national-level policies are actually implemented varies, especially when the policies are unpopular. Local authorities, aware of the population's views, avoid enforcing new regulations in some cases. The new rules on female education have not been implemented consistently; in some parts of the country, female students are still able to attend secondary school. But the space for diverging local practices is at risk of shrinking due to the growing influence of the Taliban leadership.

FROZEN RELATIONS

Following the withdrawal of international troops and the takeover of the state by the Taliban in 2021, most Western countries closed their embassies and limited their political engagement with the new de facto authorities. No country has officially recognized the Taliban government. This leaves the movement with even less international recognition than it received before 2001, when at least Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) acknowledged the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan. Now the country's seat at the UN is still filled by a representative of the Republic.

Much of the development aid that sustained Afghanistan for 20 years was stopped after the Taliban's return to power. The focus shifted to humanitarian aid. On paper, this approach promised to maintain support for the Afghan population without allowing funds to pass through the Taliban-controlled state.

In addition, the assets of the Afghan central bank abroad were frozen—around $9.1 billion held in the UAE, Europe, and, to a large extent, the United States. This action was driven by concern that the assets would fall into the hands of the Taliban rather than be used to support the Afghan economy. With the central bank unable to perform its regulatory functions and short of bank notes, the national currency rapidly lost value and the economy collapsed. Afghans have often been unable to withdraw money from their accounts. A foundation has been established in Switzerland to make disbursements and monitor whether the central bank can act independently, but it is not yet operational.

The freezing of assets and the end of development assistance drove the humanitarian crisis. With the economy in freefall, millions of Afghans, an estimated two-thirds of the population, require support to survive. The lack of funding for state institutions is bound to make it more difficult to distribute humanitarian assistance, which is already curtailed by the ever more restrictive policies of the Taliban. After being criticized for taxing development projects in the past, the Taliban have also found ways to benefit financially from humanitarian aid through taxes, levies, fees, and bribes.

Although Western governments have repeatedly criticized the Taliban for their policies, especially with regard to women's rights, they lack leverage to achieve any meaningful change. They cannot influence the practices of the key decision-makers within the movement. Meetings with ministers of the de facto government may help convey to domestic audiences that the international

community has not given up on issues such as women's rights, but they have not translated into any substantive improvement of the situation in Afghanistan.

Having lost hope of gaining international recognition, the Taliban reject foreign interference in what they deem domestic issues. They dismissed the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's criticism of their ban on women's employment by NGOs. Even threats to reduce humanitarian aid have not resulted in any change in the Taliban's policies. Many within the movement appear to believe that they simply do not need the West.

Countries such as Russia and China have continued operating their embassies in Kabul. After the fall of the Republic, many observers had speculated that China would become a major economic partner of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Trade relations between the two countries have expanded, but slowly. In January 2023, the Taliban signed an agreement with a Chinese company to extract oil reserves in the north, following a similar deal that China had signed with the previous government. Talks on other mining concessions continue.

Neither China nor Russia have publicly raised human rights expectations or complaints with the Taliban. But so far they have also been reluctant to extensively support the de facto authorities or to substantially invest in the country, evidently concerned about regional and local stability and security. Attacks claimed by ISKP targeted the Russian embassy in September 2022 and a hotel frequented by Chinese guests in December.

NOTHING TO LOSE?

The international community has little chance of changing Taliban policies, regardless of what minister it talks to or what consequences it says it would impose. In its wariness about giving the Taliban external legitimacy, the West has further reduced its own leverage with the Taliban government. Those within the Taliban who argued that Western countries could be engaged have been proved wrong and consequently disempowered.

Many within the movement feel that they initially tried to conform with the West's demands and have nothing to show for it. Because the international community has refused to give the Taliban anything they have asked for, such as sanctions relief or official recognition, the Taliban have nothing to lose by offending it. There are few foreign diplomats left to be recalled should the Taliban do something egregious; they hold no seat at the UN. Afghanistan already is a pariah state.

Meanwhile, the United States and other Western donors have no coherent or realistic strategy for Afghanistan. They deal with the country as if it were a nightmare from which they can only hope, at some point, to wake up. Donor governments continue to use humanitarian action as a fig leaf for political indecision and incoherence.

Afghanistan's civil society and the media are being silenced. Demands for women's rights or an inclusive government are increasingly unrealistic. There is no real political or armed opposition within the country, beyond the growing threat of ISKP. Without a more strategic international approach, the situation for the Afghan population is likely to go from bad to worse. ■