



THE RETURN OF TALIBAN TO KABUL: CAUSES, CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

There was a long time before Kabul's government came down and the Taliban took over. Those who didn't care about the Afghan National Army, Police, and Security forces were from the US and its allies as well as the governments in Kabul. This caused structural problems in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, which led them to fall quickly. The corrupt Kabul administrations and the support the US gave to its puppets in Afghanistan caused a big problem with governance. The Taliban filled that vary gap among others to fulfil its agenda. If this is the case, they will face a lot of problems that will require them to be flexible and have a positive attitude in order to solve them. The international community should help make Afghanistan a better place to live. There are a lot of things the Taliban will need to do to improve their governance, build confidence and trust in their people and around the world, and promote their soft image.



Key Words: ANDSF, Puppets, Flexibility, International Acceptance, NATO, Archive, Fragmented, Fractious, Unitary, Constitution.

Introduction

If the pages of human history are turned over to discover the causes for the failure of nations, it unequivocally comes to the surface that the decline of a nation is undoubtedly caused by a plethora of internal and external factors. An internally divided and politico-economically unstable nation is likely to fall down as the different segments of society preach and promote their own way of life sometimes and most often opposite to their counterparts and the extractive economic institutions where the economic resources are exploited to maintain the status quo and the exclusive political institutions where the powers are exercised by a few elites excluding the rest of the people. This kind of situation is duly responsible for the serious governance crisis where the institutional role is frankly pathetic thereby extending a deplorable picture of services delivery. The role of external players especially the regional powers with their concerned geostrategic intakes which are going to be achieved and protected is of immense importance. These are the reasons which bring a nation to its knees. The return of the Taliban to Kabul was galvanized by a plethora of factors: the unilateral and misconstrued approach of Washington to the ground realities in Afghanistan, the corrupted Afghan administrations, the structurally paralyzed Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, the Taliban resurgence and the role of regional players. Although the Taliban have returned to the power corridors in Kabul, they are going to be mired by a plethora of challenges ranging from socio-politico-economic to the acceptance by the international community. A reformative-cum-positive approach must be adopted by the Taliban internally and externally. The international community is required to be responsible toward Afghanistan to halt any possible humanitarian crisis.

The Afghan Theatre: A Historical Archive

Afghanistan, though ascribed to with a quality of being the graveyard of empires, has been an ideal place for international--cum--regional geopolitics since the 1980s. The U.S.-USSR acerbic intimacy under the banner of the cold war was brought to Afghan soil too. The former USSR moved there with the purpose to have access to the Indian Ocean and have had its mission of territorial expansion accomplished. It was made public when the then US President Jimmy Carter was briefed by his National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. Mr Blood's cable uncovered the motive behind the former Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as an effort to prevent Afghanistan from going into the cradle of the West under Mr Amin's rule. That one decade from 1979 to 1989, was a devastating one in respect of both immediate and long-term harsh repercussions: nearly one million civilian



casualties, 90000 Mujahadain deaths and 18000 Afghan troops life-loss reported by a study published in *the Atlantic*. Similarly, tens of thousands of Afghans crossed their borders and began to live as refugees in other countries. The strict episode of Taliban rule was the result of political turmoil over there incentivized by the years of lasting brutal civil war. The security of the neighbours was jeopardized. The two-decade-long war on Terror aggravated the country's socio-economic, political and security sufferings leaving it behind with poor performance overall developmental indicators, e.g., Afghanistan stands at 169 out of 189 in Human Development Index 2020 which has shown a pathetic picture of education, life expectancy and per capita income. Thus, the socio-politico-economic fabric of Afghanistan has been badly ruptured over the past few decades.

The Return of Taliban to Kabul: An Analytical Perspective

The immediate and instant return of the Taliban to the country's power corridor left many shocked. However, it was not magical as there have been a plethora of driving forces behind this event. Notwithstanding their presence in Kabul, the Taliban are going to find themselves in conditions totally different from their previous experience back in the 1990s.

What Were the Responsible Factors for the Return of the Taliban to Kabul?

a) The Role of the U.S. Leading the Allied Forces

There is an abundance of the treatise which is unveiling the parochial nature of American assignment in Afghanistan. The United States of America backed Mujahadin via its spy agency CIA against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan back in the 1980s. After the withdrawal of the former Soviet Union from Afghanistan, it left Afghanistan on its own, setting the door for the terrible civil war that left Afghanistan in ruins. Al-claimed Qaeda's connection in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center prompted the United States to invade Afghanistan to confront terrorism and cut al-roots. Additionally, the new American mission in Afghanistan aims to establish democracy and safeguard human rights in the country. It had to keep a presence in the region in order to exploit Central Asia's resource-rich bed.

Although it is equivocal and too early to say whether the U.S. has achieved its purposes or not, it undoubtedly contributed to present-day Afghanistan presenting a pathetic picture overall. The various US administrations adopted variant methods in Afghanistan which nailed right at the head of US failure: it used to be that the local warlords were given the power to help them fight the Taliban until 2005 when Obama increased the number of troops and NATO troops left. Afghanistan didn't have an inclusive government formed by the US. Instead, it backed its puppets in Afghanistan. The building and rebuilding of the



country were completely ignored. The country's administrations were a victim of massive corruption, nepotism, and power politics, which led to Afghanistan having a serious governance crisis. This made the common Afghans want to see any kind of change in the power corridors in order to improve their living standards. A former US Special Envoy for Pak-Afghan and a senior research fellow at Brookings Institutions said this was one of the reasons for the Taliban's rise again.

The lack of political will on the part of US-led Afghanistan to the institutional break-up. The country's leading institutions fell down as a result of corruption, nepotism and political interference ranked the country at 169 out of 189 in Human Development Index 2020. The U.S deliberately kept per se in oblivion over the real competency of ANDSF which kept going on with real structural problems: corruption, nepotism, lack of proper military equipment and training, external influence and political interference and ghost soldiers phenomenon as having been indicated by James Dobbin in his write-up *Afghanistan was Lost Long Ago* and Falbab-Brown in her well-known work *Why Taliban Won*. The US also totally misconstrued the ground realities especially the growing and powerful Taliban intake as Falbab-Brown opined that the Taliban gained strength with the temporary seize of Kunduz back in 2015. Similarly, the U.S. misconstrued the regional geopolitics: the interest of the different stakeholders in Afghanistan like the most common security concerns by Pakistan, China and Russia as pointed out by Zahid Husain in his well-known work *No-Win War: The Paradox of Pak-US Relations in Afghan's Shadow*. The sceptics unveil the US ambitions to leave an Afghanistan behind like Vietnam being tattered and thus, totally dependent on foreign aid especially that one hailed from the West via its artificial world monetary regulatory giants like IMF and World Bank. Today's ground realities in Afghanistan are confirming this vary assumption e.g., the emergence of the new version of Taliban in order to be recognized internationally. And last but not the least, why America Failed in Afghanistan is a well-known piece by Henry Kissinger. In it, he blamed the United States of America for failing to achieve its goals in Afghanistan. When Gen Ashfaq Parvaz Kini, the then COAS, talked to U.S. Gen. David Petraeus, who was in charge of Afghanistan, he found that the U.S. and its allies didn't have a clear plan for their job there. This is what Zahid Husain quotes from his book, *No-Win War: The Paradox of Pak-US Relations in the Shadow of Afghanistan*. Last but not least, the hasty withdrawal of foreign troops actually made it more likely that the Taliban would return to Afghanistan.

b) The Role of the Erstwhile Kabul Administrations in the Fall of Kabul

The well-known authors Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson clearly indicate the reasons for the fall of a nation in their widely known and praised work *Why Nations Fail*. They argue that the exclusive political institutions where the powers are concentrated in the hands of few to exercise them for their personal interests especially assuring their



presence in the power corridors breed the extractive economic institutions where the resources, no matter how meagre they are, are exploited for their parochial ambitions especially to back up the status quo. The book clearly names Afghanistan frequently along with other poor and dismal states by virtue of a plethora of serious governance crises caused by the institutional breakdown which in turn galvanized by the exclusive politico-economic system. As the American envoy to Afghanistan from 2014 to 2016, P. Micheal MicKenly said in his widely read piece *We All Lost Afghanistan*, the different Kabul governments were accountable for today's Afghanistan because they chose to remain in power above providing competent governance. Corruption, nepotism and political meddling led to the downfall of important state institutions. The UNDP placed Nigeria at 169th place out of 189 countries in its HDI 2020, indicating that the country was experiencing serious governance problems that were widening gaps between the general public and their elected officials. Because of this, the people had a tremendous longing for the second coming of Christ to bless them with the righteous government.

The Tragic Downfall of the Afghan Army

The above-mentioned reasons are a big part of why the Afghan military failed so spectacularly. MacKinlay says that the coldness shown by the Kabul administrations and the US and its allies to the improvement of the organisational and administrative set-up of the Afghan Army caused it to give up quickly and without even a single act of resistance. This is what happened. Each of the three separate Progress Reports on Afghanistan's Security and Prosperity came out at a different time in 2012, 2013, and 2017, and they found that the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces were both able and willing to deal with any threat they faced. In 2021, US intelligence told Biden that the ANDSF against the Taliban was likely to fall. The ANDSF had a lot of structural problems that made it demoralise itself. The institution was a victim of corruption, bribery, nepotism, and political interference, so it was shut down. As reported by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the forces were paid the minimum wage and had less military equipment than they should have had. The troops were not properly trained, so they had to rely on the help of foreign troops to get by. Soon after foreign troops started to leave Afghanistan and the Taliban started to show up in many places across Afghanistan, the ANDSF was doomed to defeat in just a few short hours. The decline of the Afghan Army, as per the SIGAR's view, caused by the indifferent attitude of Kabul administrations and the foreign occupiers toward it contributed immensely to the fall of Kabul.

The Resurgence of Taliban



The widening governance deficit pushing the masses toward parting way with their rulers and the unpredicted and unexpected breakdown of ANDSF, inter alia, strengthened the Taliban cause. It was thought that the lack of structure in the ANDSF and the bad government made it easier for the Taliban to get into Kabul, by Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior research fellow at the Brookings Institution. Why the Taliban? V.B. Brown says even more in her well-known piece, "Why the Taliban?" Was able to show that the Taliban resurgence began in 2015 when the group took over the city of Kunduz from the government. Furthermore, the Taliban tried to make up for its disputed history by caring about international-cum-communal values and roles. The group changed its structure by making it more inclusive to all the different parts and factions of Afghanistan. Amnesty was given to everyone. Women were seen protesting in the streets, and human rights have been promised. They were helped by the regional stakeholders of the new great game to pursue their own geostrategic interests. Finally, the Taliban took advantage of the weak ANDSF, a serious governance crisis, and the US and its allies' failure to help Afghanistan rebuild and build a new country to get into Kabul. First, Zahid Husain blamed the US for not bringing the Taliban to the Bonn Conference. The US turned down the offer by Musharraf to invite the Taliban to the conference in Bonn, and that's why the US didn't take the Taliban on board. He has also uncovered the then rift between the CIA and military over the Taliban cause.

Afghanistan: A Fractious Society

The ongoing political upheaval in Afghanistan is somehow the replica of the 1990s episode in Afghanistan where the politically chaotic Afghanistan was in the dire need of sincere leadership and administration. The wrestling for occupation over Kabul barely exposed the ethnically divided Afghan society where a bloody civil war erupted among the different sections of Afghan society. People from different ethnic groups in Afghanistan haven't been able to agree on a common goal for the country. This includes Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Pashtuns. The group led by Ahmad Shah Masood wanted most of the power to make decisions, and they didn't want to give it up. Afghanistan is also home to a few minor or major militant groups, like the Islamic State of Khurasan Province and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. These groups could also change the peaceful fabric of Afghanistan in the future if they are reached out to. The different ideologies and perceptions have easily been manipulated by the peace spoilers--both internal and external players to satisfy their personal interests. In the Ghani-Abdullah Abdullah episode for making government in Kabul, a show of power wrangling was seen. There was a stalemate in the intra-Afghan talks about power-sharing. This is what Henry Kissinger said in his book, *Why America Failed in Afghanistan*: "The most important thing is that the US and the Afghan governments haven't paid much attention to the schisms in Afghanistan."



The Role of the Regional Players

It has been a long time since China and Russia have been the main rivals of the United States in the modern world order. The American foreign policy toward Asia is usually referred to as pivot Asia aiming at containing China in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, China wants to retaliate. As part of the BRI, China hopes for a stable area, notably in Afghanistan, where it is investing, which may not be achievable without a secure country. As the former Cold War foe of the United States, Russia has emerged as the present-day danger to U.S. interests outside its borders. As a previous Northern Alliance backer and staunch defender of the Shia population, Iran helped the Taliban against the United States both politically and diplomatically. Despite the fact that it has been accused repeatedly of supporting the Taliban, Pakistan has unquestionably invested in Afghanistan and is thus helping to a peaceful Afghanistan in the future. While it is clear that the above-mentioned nations are concerned about the security of Afghanistan, it is also clear that the Troika plus one platform, ministerial-level meetings, and meetings of intelligence agency chiefs among others have all played a role in their efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan.

What next for Afghanistan: Challenges and the Way Forward

a) The Taliban Would Find it Difficult to Give an Acceptable Constitutional Set-Up to the Country

Notwithstanding the fall of Kabul into the hands of the Taliban and the announcement of the Taliban cabinet for the interim regime, the upcoming days seem to be challenging. It would be a daunting task for the Taliban to give an acceptable constitutional set-up to the country whether the country would retain its unitary nature as it had in the erstwhile Afghan constitution under its Article 1 or not. The Taliban's Islamic Emirate concept seems to be contradictory to the prevailing democratic order which demands inclusiveness like mainstreaming of women and minority which are the most controversial of all the subjects. The Taliban are persistently assuring the international community of awarding fundamental rights under the banner of Islamic values and Afghan norms. But the sceptics perceive it to be a shallow utterance since it has been proved, to the sceptics, by the recently unveiled male-oriented cabinet of Taliban.

b) The Ethnically Divided Afghan Society: A Question of National Integration

Similarly, the Taliban would find it hard to crack the absence of national integration while keeping the fragmented contours of Afghan society and Article 4 of the Afghanistan constitution, which stands for an inclusive government, in view as the well-known author and writer Zahid Hussain writes in his opinion *The Taliban Challenge*. As has been mentioned earlier, the Afghan society is a multi-ethnic society whose inclusion in the



decision making power is very much necessary. The recently concluded Panjshir episode has confirmed the need for an inclusive government because the resistance might be resurged. Thereby, it seems to be a herculean task for the newcomers to the power corridors of Kabul to form an inclusive government.

c) Cracking Down the Governance Crisis

The Afghans have been facing a handful of serious governance crises for decades. The country's institutional history is unequivocally deplorable. The political archive of Afghanistan uncovers the various Kabul administrations' poor performance over the various developmental indicators. All Afghan reconstruction funds and other aids have been directed to the fulfilment of the parochial interests of the ruling elites. The extractive political-cum-economic institutional nature of Afghanistan has been clearly pointed out in a well-known book *Why Nations Fail*. The book uncovers the lack of politically centralized authority in Afghanistan the reason for the pathetic picture of Afghanistan which is caused and galvanized by the extractive economic and exclusive political institutions. There is no doubt that the Afghans are going to welcome any kind of alteration in the administration to improve the governance, the Taliban is facing a downtrodden economic milieu as the country's foreign accounts have already been frozen. Therefore, it would not be easier for them to pay the hardly convinced technocrats and bureaucrats to serve the country amid personal and financial insecurity.

d) The Taliban are Going to Struggle with the Downtrodden Economy of Afghanistan

The war-raged Afghanistan is in the dire need of economic assistance. A plethora of foreign accounts of Afghanistan has been stagnated. The US has frozen \$9.5bn Afghan central bank's assets in the wake of the Taliban return to Kabul. Similarly, the IMF suspended its program in Afghanistan according to an opinion published in al-Jazeera. The process of suspension may be followed by other western donors which will put the Taliban regime into a puzzled economic crisis which in turn may cause a serious humanitarian crisis. Only China and Pakistan and now UAE have issued financial--cum-- humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. The Taliban are persistently appealing to the world community for humanitarian assistance and it seems to be a difficult task for them to be assisted financially without any condition.

e) It Seems to be A Daunting Task for the Taliban to be Recognized Internationally

The most important point to be considered is the acceptance of the Taliban regime. The western world is vigilantly following the new developments in Afghanistan under the Taliban. The most important, inter alia, is the formation of the government as of which type it would be. The international community is demanding the Taliban to include the maximum sections of Afghan society in government. The recently announced Taliban



cabinet for the interim government has raised objections among the sceptics as it has totally sidelined other sections of Afghan society, e.g., women. Moreover, the selection of some of the cabinet members has detested the west and the US. Thus, it would be a daunting task for the Taliban to stand in the middle between the Islamic Emirates and democracy because if they lose a balance, they might be mired into a quagmire of issues.

f) It Would Not Be Easier for the Taliban to Make the Afghan's Soil Clear Off All the Militant-Cum-Terrorist Organizations at Once

Likewise, the Taliban would find it struggling to abide by one of the crucial points of the Doha Accord to prevent the Afghan soil from launching terrorist attacks against the US and its allies. The group would find it struggling to extinguish the alleged militant terrorist groups like, inter alia, al-Qaeda, ISKP and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, from Afghan soil which may endanger their ties with their neighbours.

Is there any way forward to these challenges?

a) Formation of an Inclusive Government

The Taliban regime needs international recognition to run the country's socio-economic-cum- political tiers smoothly. They are trying their level best to ensure the formation of an inclusive government. In this case, they must consider the opinion of the moderates among their rank. They must not repeat their objected 1990s episode. They must sow flexibility. Though it might be contradictory in some ways to the principles of their Emirates Islami to establish an inclusive government, especially the controversial question of Women inclusion, they should mull over finding out the middle way. Women and other sections of Afghan society must have their say in policy and decision making power without which the regime would run on a bumpy pitch of grievances by the marginalized sections posing serious challenges to the governance of the nascent regime.

b) Progressing Economy for Ensuring Good Governance

The acceptance by the international community is indispensable for unfreezing the stagnated Afghanistan's foreign accounts and assets and the rescheduling of the suspended programs by IMF and other Western donors to feed the people of the war-torn country where seventy-five per cent of public spending comes from grants. Similarly, the new administration in Kabul will have to ensure good governance which requires institutional building. It will need the service of various technocrats and bureaucrats at the expense of mounting salaries and allowances. Though Afghanistan has an abundance of inland resources, they have been remained mostly untapped due to the political and security instability. Therefore, the new Kabul administration will have to tap the country's untapped resources and curb the malpractices in governance in long term and acquire financial



assistance from abroad and convince the bureaucratic personnel of staying and serving the country in short term.

c) Building and Promoting A Soft Image Inside and Beyond the Boundaries

The sceptics are doubting the good intentions of the Taliban return to the power corridor of Kabul. They are being seen having little belief in what the Taliban assures the international community of granting human rights to all while keeping their previous episode in Kabul in mind which observed the imposition of a strict version of Shariah. On the one hand, the Taliban will build trust among the common Afghans that their rights are secured and, thus, they should contribute to the progress and prosperity of Afghanistan and on the other hand they will have to ensure good governance via curbing corruption, nepotism and injustices and political interference. Rather they must appreciate a good job.

Similarly, the Taliban will have to ensure full-proof security of the Afghan soil against its possible use for any belligerent and terrorist activities threatening and targeting not only the interests of the US and its allies but also the regional peace and the interests of the neighbours of Afghanistan in future. Though China has aided the Taliban financially, it is still reluctant to tent out in the support of the Taliban regime since it has serious concerns over the activities of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement in Western China. Similarly, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is threatening the interests of Russia. Islamabad has grave concerns over the existence and activities of Tehrik -e- Taliban Pakistan. All these groups may use the Afghan soil for their future terrorist activities, therefore, the Taliban must ensure the safety of Afghan soil to thwart the spoilers from spoiling the regional peace and cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours and regional allies.

d) International Community is Expected of Playing A Constructive and Responsible Role

International Community should play a constructive role on a humanitarian basis. The Secretary-General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres is quoted to have said that all the necessary goods must be supplied to Afghanistan to avoid any kind of humanitarian crisis notwithstanding the concerns the UN has over the recent Taliban cabinet. Pakistan's permanent representative to UN Munir Akram stressed the provision and extension of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan while addressing the UNSC meeting a few days ago. The world community should give a chance to peace in Afghanistan because the war raged country will not withstand any type of internal or external blow. Internally the country will be pushed toward serious humanitarian crisis and anarchy which would have fatal repercussions for regional and global peace. The Western donors, the IMF and the US must assist Afghanistan on a humanitarian basis.



Conclusion

The Taliban's return to Kabul is not an accident; rather, it is the culmination of a protracted process. The United States government misunderstood the situation on the ground. There was an overestimate of the Taliban's might and disregard for the geopolitics of the region. Afghanistan's reconstruction funds and other aid were used to bolster the grip of its puppets on Kabul. As a result, the disastrous collapse of the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces was completely disregarded, e.g., because of its organisational structure. Similarly, Kabul's tainted regimes have had a positive impact on Afghanistan's current situation. They just wanted to hold to power at any cost thereby paving way for power politics, corruption, nepotism, political interference and serious governance crisis among others which is why Afghanistan has been performing very much poor over the various developmental indicators. The *Why Nations Fail* accurately puts it in the backward and failed states by dint of its exclusive and parochial politics and pathetic economic conditions. These were the reasons which paved the way and boosted the Taliban resurgence. The group reinforced per se and brought unity in its rank and finally succeeded in its long-desired wish to return to Kabul. There are going to be a lot of problems for the Taliban when they come back: economic, political, social, and so on. They must be positive and show that they are willing to change in order to be accepted by the international community and trusted by their Afghan friends. In order for there to be peace in the region and the world, the international community should give a peaceful Afghan Dawn a chance to rise. This would be in the best interest of both the region and the world.



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