

AFGHANISTAN UNDER TALIBAN RULE, THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE AHEAD

The ensuing events following the quick upsurge of Taliban in recent months leading to the collapse of the internationally recognized government at Kabul are of mixed nature.

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The recent dramatic developments in Afghanistan and the quick rise of Taliban to power in the war-ravaged country once again brought into debate the volatile nature of Afghan politics and the need to carefully examine different aspects of the chronic conflict with special attention to the often neglected realities. The first Taliban-established 'Islamic Emirate' which lasted from 1996 to 2001 was unable to win the hearts and minds of the nation and lacked responsible and effective governance. Systematic ill-treatment of the citizens coupled with strict enforcement of uniquely interpreted orthodox Islam has left an unpleasant legacy very well alive even with the lapse of two long decades. The insurgent group offered safe heaven to international terrorism and thus was largely devoid of international recognition. Despite all its efforts, Taliban was unable to fully subdue the resisting forces and parts of the country continued to defy the Emirate's authority right until it was overthrown following the events of 11 September 2001.

The ensuing events following the quick upsurge of Taliban in recent months leading to the collapse of the internationally recognized government at Kabul are of mixed nature. Notwithstanding the scattered low-level armed resistances of the opposition forces, the country as a whole is in a guarded state of calm and tranquility that

could otherwise offer the group the required justification for much tougher pacification efforts coupled with unspeakable levels of turmoil and bloodshed. So far the group has largely remained committed to its declared undertaking to exercise tolerance towards opposing political and tribal leaders. It appears that apart from some untoward treatment of the people emanating from lack of coordination or loose chain of command, no major concerted ill-conduct blessed with the consent of Taliban leadership has occurred. However the general sense of security in the country is mostly driven either by quick and stern punishment awarded to criminals and outlaws, and also could be attributed to the termination of terror or bombing campaigns spearheaded by Taliban movement itself. In many instances and in a bid to offer a sigh of relief to the inhabitants of some non-Pashtun captured areas, Taliban has appointed senior officials from amongst the natives of the same locality but with proven loyalty to the cause of the Islamic Emirate. Some regular police and security personnel in the service of the Ashraf Ghani administration are gradually reporting back to duty upon calls of assurances of non-retribution by the Taliban. A number of former Afghan warlords, tribal chiefs, and religious and political leaders with no reliable military might at their disposal to resist Taliban rule are increasingly inclined to reconcile with the emerging situation.



With no other option in sight, they choose to engage positively with Taliban in the hope of securing a guaranteed security and safety for their subjects as well as realizing appropriate share of power rather than entering into premature and dead-ended armed conflicts with the new ruling entity.

People especially those living in Kabul and other major cities are still in a state of shock trying to come along with the realities of the day and to try to piece together their shattered livelihood for the very uncertain future ahead. Sections of the Afghan society fearful of the grim prospect for a tolerable political, social and economic condition brought about by Taliban's return to power tend to embark on journeys of refuge to the neighboring countries and beyond. Civil society is the most hard-hit and many of its renowned activists and known personalities are on the run or in hiding as Taliban's orthodox ideology and strict standards run counter to most modern social values and practices. The shaky gender equality on foot until recently is doomed to vanish and women's semi-active role in the conservative Afghan society might be largely undermined. Personal life liberties, social freedoms, political participation, freedom of expression, and independent media and their authorized tolerable ceilings are yet to be defined and enforced.

The unexpectedly rapid political and military melt-down of the Ashraf Ghani administration that came as a surprise even to Taliban leadership left the group unprepared to readily form the new administration capable of driving the country back to the track of normalcy. Taliban's hasty initiative to set up a governing body did not progress smoothly as was evident from the 8 September 2021 announcement of formation of an interim government composed entirely of hard-line Pashtun old faces and war veterans with no woman included. As expected, and in the absence of a charismatic and dominant leader acceptable to all factions within the group, disagreement on the formation of the caretaker government quickly surfaced. Unconfirmed reports are indicative of hot debates among the ruling circle on allotment of cabinet portfolios along the dividing lines of political and tribal orientations. Meanwhile serious differences on the supremacy issue between the Doha political office high-ups, the Quetta and Peshawar-stationed leaders and the commanding figures conducting insurgency operations inside the country remain high on the agenda. This very open disagreement and the power struggle has left its mark on the overall structure of the interim administration with the lion's share of the ministerial positions allotted to the hardliners, and the less conservative political stalwarts of the movement kept at bay. Despite all restorative expres-

sions of Taliban high-ups with regards to the cohesion of the group's leadership cell and absence of any sort of power struggle at the top, signs of disagreement and clashes of interests have already come into light. Senior members forming the political office in Doha assume credit for their vigorous endeavor to reach out to the world community and to have secured the much-needed recognition at the backdrop of the unpleasant legacy associated with the name 'Taliban.' They also claim glory for their skillful and effective negotiations with the United States that removed the hurdle of NATO presence in Afghanistan and eventually opened the gates of Kabul to the insurgent group. On the other end, the group's fighting forces composed of factions commanded by different leaders are of the strong opinion that the conclusion of Doha Agreement and the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan were the product of their long years of armed struggle and sacrifices that forced the coalition to concede failure and to seek a face-saving departure. The outcome of the first round of tussle over the factional share of the interim setup proved the predominance of the hardliners with the notable figures of the political leadership sidelined. Should there be any real threat to the stability of the establishment as a whole in the foreseeable future, it is most likely to emanate from the factional and tribal division within Taliban itself and the

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involvement of Pakistani military intelligence to favor Pashtun groups closer to its overall policy on Afghanistan.

So far Taliban's endeavor to communicate an encouraging signal of continued commitment to forming a broad based government has not been appealing to the international community. To counter the widespread criticisms of the non-inclusive interim cabinet and questionable appointments of figures with long records of engagement in terrorist activities to sensitive ministerial positions, the group came up with the repeated assurances of a broad - based government to include representing figures from all corners of the country in due course. In response to the global demand of establishing a broad-based and inclusive government in Afghanistan, a spokesperson for Taliban on 6 September 2021 asserted that after the



formation of the government, the constitution of the country will be re-written or amended. Later, another spokesman of Taliban political office in Doha, while replying to a question on the likelihood of holding elections in Afghanistan did not rule out the possibility of the exercise and said the issue would be determined by the future constitution. These encouraging remarks mainly spelled out by the spokespersons affiliated with the political wing of Taliban is in sharp contrast with opinion expressed by some influential hardliners who insist on the irrelevance of the modern day dictates of governance such as constitution, elections, women's rights and freedom of expression.

Though Taliban has little difficulty in further consolidating its grip on power and its authority is less likely to be challenged from within the country or from across the borders in the near future, it remains to be extremely vulnerable to the tough economic challenges and has to quickly and effectively focus on the fast deteriorating economic situation of the state. Afghanistan has been heavily reliant on external financial support and continued flow of aid for the past two decades. Almost 80 per-

cent of the Afghan government's spending, the entire military hardware requirements and the fund to support the Afghan national army have been provided by the United States and its allies. Numerous United Nations Agencies and international non-governmental organizations tasked with implementing different externally funded development projects in the country were also contributing considerably to the national economy. In the absence of the extensive direct foreign assistance and suspension of the activities of non-governmental institutions, the new Islamic Emirate is faced with the reality of the day and the colossal task of managing the worsening economic situation of the country. Sensing the gravity of the state of economic affairs and the urgent need for the continued support from outside, Taliban leadership has repeatedly reiterated the group's desire to maintain normal and friendly relations with the international community. To this end, the movement is struggling to portray and relay an image much different from that of its previous harsh rule of 1996 to 2001. However, the pledges of social leniency and assurances of formation of inclusive government initially spelled out by the spokespersons of the group are gradually altered in order to either expose the pre-decided direction of the Emirate or to accommodate the will and say of the dominant factions fast at rise. In this direction, the infamous Haqqani Network considered the most lethal and sophisticated insurgent group affiliated with Taliban and allegedly favored and supported by the Inter Service Intelligence of

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Pakistan (ISI) quickly gained the upper hand in the newly formed interim administration and bagged the highly sensitive and important security portfolios. These obstructive developments are by no means appealing to the global community and might be seen as prelude to possible reversion of Taliban to extremism and alliance with international terrorism.

Alongside the power sharing argument, the most pressing issue before Taliban leadership is the fast failing economy with no prospect for a quick remedy in sight. Afghanistan under Taliban could not expect to benefit fully from the foreign financial and development assistance that for the past couple of decades have helped the country, at least to some extent, to modernize and to rebuild infrastructures. With the suspended outside help and support, and non-existence of substitute local resources, the new establishment is left with the limited option of turning to the international community and to try to lure-in aid and support either by winning sympathy or through employing coercive tactics. Known to Taliban is the sensitivity of the world with regards to the possibility of return of Al-Qaeda and ISIS to Afghanistan, substantiated by recent reports of deadly clashes of their operatives with Taliban in south-eastern Afghanistan.

The chain of events subsequent to abandoning Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet forces in the 1990's and the strong possibility of recurrence of similar eventualities in the absence of sufficient global attention to Afghanistan might necessitate some sort of international engagement with the Islamic Emirate regardless of its domestic conducts. Considering the likelihood of association and covert dealings of terrorist groups with the extremist factions of Taliban such as the Haqqani network, possible collective and calculated initiative of drawing the attention of the global community to the gravity of situation in the hope of inducing revised external approaches beneficial to Taliban, including a degree of diplomatic recognition, restoration of economical support and provision of military assistance in line with counter-terrorism dictates and efforts may not be ruled out.

Taliban is hopeful that for the near future no major political opposition, civil unrest or rights-seeking movement is strong enough to challenge its central authority. Impartiality and restraint exercised by most neighboring countries vis-à-vis the internal developments of Afghanistan and also Taliban's effective control over all border areas that blocks possible support and supply routes for potential armed resistances offer a relative sense of relief for the Islamic Emirate. However the fact remains that the highly politicized and multi-ethnic Afghan society has in many ways resisted moves to subdue it. Having in mind the long history of failed attempts of monopolized rule by a certain ethnic group in Afghanistan,

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to keep the non-Pashtun section of the population neglected and denied of their share of power may not prove to be a viable venture in the long term. It is well proven that insurgency even in its limited proportions is capable of imposing serious challenges on regular security forces and very able to cause great deal of instability and unrest. Now that the Taliban has to abandon its insurgent nature in favor of assuming the responsibilities of an official ruling authority, and in the situation where the opposition is left with no alternative but to resort to armed struggle, Taliban soon could find itself in the same defensive situation as the previous administration of Kabul, but with grim prospects of benefiting from outside support and sympathy.

Afghanistan has suffered many decades of intense instability, internal strife, foreign intervention, poor governance and poverty. The country has largely exhausted its riches and human resources, and the nation's hope for a better future is at its lowest. Non-compliance of Taliban with the most fundamental principles of good governance and its continued ignorance of human values shall further alienate a large section of population and could send the country into yet another phase of turmoil and instability with far-reaching regional and international consequences. The new prevailing authority in Kabul, under any name or banner it chooses to be, has to give the entire Afghan society confidence through respecting the fundamental rights of citizens and formation of an all-inclusive and broad based national government, should it wishes to open a new chapter of goodwill and benevolence in its otherwise dark history of existence. Also the international community in general and the neighboring countries in particular have to adopt a unified stance and policy of calculated engagement with the Taliban administration aimed at persuading the group to act as a normal and responsible member of the global community detached from any affiliation with terrorist groups and committed essentially to the well-being and prosperity of its citizens.