

Mapping Regression and Retribution: The Taliban and the New Afghanistan

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Summary

Afghanistan became an Islamic Emirate headed by the Taliban on 15 August 2021. Ever since, the country's new rulers have struggled to establish a modicum of governance mechanism in the country. Notwithstanding their incapacity on this front, the Taliban have begun building a regime that not only undermines the achievements and progress made by Afghans in the past two decades but is also essentially a concerted attempt to push the country and its citizens into a regressive trough.

Introduction

A few years before the takeover of Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban had initiated a media campaign seeking to portray themselves as reformed entities, well versed with the ways of the world and also their compatibility with the incremental progress made by the country since 2001 in such fields as education, women empowerment and the right of expression. Although never explicit, the group's spokespersons appeared to assure others that the Taliban, if returned to power, would neither intrude into the private space of citizens nor would it herald a regime that is anti-progress and anti-modernity, as long as both were under the ambit of Islam.¹ The group repeated these assurances immediately after taking power and also periodically during the subsequent weeks. Such pronouncements, however, have been mostly viewed with scepticism and interpreted as a strategy to gain sympathy and manage negative public opinion, especially in light of the group's ignominious past.

A large number of incidents have demonstrated that the Taliban have indeed lived up to such apprehensions. Ever since the establishment of the Islamic Emirate, Afghanistan has not only faced an economic collapse – pushing millions into poverty and starvation – but also an overwhelmingly regressive order, which reimposes the long list of restrictions reminiscent of the 1996-2001 era and encourages persecution of and reprisal attacks on the perceived enemies of new Afghanistan. This insight maps the impact of the onset of the Taliban rule on three groups of people: the security forces and officials of the deposed civilian government, the members of the press as well as women and girls.

¹ Maulvi Qalamuddin, the former deputy minister for the General Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Elimination of Vice (Amr-e-Bil M'arouf wa Nahi Anil Munkar) in Kabul, indicated such thinking in an interview with the author. See Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "A new kind of Taliban: An interview with Maulvi Qalamuddin", *Foreign Policy*, 8 March 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/08/a-new-kind-of-taliban-an-interview-with-maulvi-qalamuddin/>. Also see Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "Taliban: The Rebels Who Aspire to be Rulers", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2016), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2347797015626043>.

Rights of Women and Girls

In the first week of January 2022, the Taliban Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice's (MPVPV) provincial branch for the northern Balkh and Herat provinces banned women from using *hammams* (public bath).² There were apprehensions that the ban could be eventually extended to other provinces. In a country where access to water and sanitation is limited, the order essentially deprived a huge number of women from their only chance for a warm wash during the bitterly cold winters. This diktat, a repetition of the group's order during the 1996-2001 rule, however, is a pale shadow compared to the series of measures the Islamic Emirate has invoked violating the basic rights and dignity of women and restricting them inside the four corners of their homes, essentially to encourage them to get married and raise children.

Since seizing power, girls have been banned from attending secondary schools in several provinces while women have largely been prevented from working in the public sector and excluded from government positions. The new mayor of Kabul has told female municipal employees to stay home unless their jobs could not be filled by a man. Health, where women are employed as doctors and nurses, is probably the only sector which has been left untouched by these diktats – for understandable reasons. The Islamic Emirate feels that until facilities for complete gender-based segregation in educational institutions, including universities, are made, girls and women should stay at home. The same diktat has been applied to the media sector through a religious guideline issued in November 2021,³ which has led to a handful of female hosts to either donning 'Islamic' *hijabs* or quitting their jobs. Television stations have also been asked to stop showing soap operas featuring women. On 26 December 2021, the MPVPV went a step further to enforce a male-led social order, and ruled that women seeking to travel more than 72 kilometres should not be offered road transport unless accompanied by a close male relative. The ministry further called on vehicle owners to refuse rides to women not wearing headscarves.⁴

Lest these measures be interpreted as general orders and suggestions for leading a pious Islamic life, the MPVPV seems to have arranged for strict enforcement through a large number of volunteers. These men have not only harshly suppressed protests by small groups of women against infringement of their rights across cities but have also paid home visits to those whom they perceive as potential violators of these new norms. For instance, such volunteers came calling to the Kabul home of a 19-year-old female Afghan Taekwondoin who dreamed of representing her country in international championships,

² Stefanie Gliniski, "Taliban stop Afghan women from using bathhouses in northern provinces", *The Guardian*, 7 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/07/taliban-stop-afghan-women-using-bathhouses-in-northern-provinces>.

³ Farah Najjar, "Afghan women speak up against new Taliban media guidelines", *Al Jazeera*, 25 November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/25/afghan-women-speak-up-against-new-taliban-media-guidelines>.

⁴ "No long-distance travel for women without male relative: Taliban", *Al Jazeera*, 26 December 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/26/afghanistan-long-distance-travel-women-without-male-escort-taliban>.

forcing her to take a voluntary self-correcting step, that is, replace her Instagram profile photo wearing a black *abaya* and a matching *hijab*.⁵

During the first Taliban regime, women were banished from the public eye. The new Islamic Emirate has indeed fast-tracked the implementation of the same project in Afghanistan. To an extent, it is a rather easy objective to fulfill in remote Afghanistan, which remained mostly untouched by the progress of the last two decades. Isolated dissent in the urban centres too will succumb in due course, in the absence of external assistance.

Regime of Retribution

After capturing Kabul, the Taliban declared a general amnesty for the security forces and officials of the erstwhile civilian government, urging them to return to work. It had made similar promises back in 1996 as well. However, neither then nor now were the promises real.

In a matter of weeks, the local commanders of the Taliban had intensified their hunt for former officials and troopers of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and people who may have worked with United States or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces. According to a confidential document by the RHIPTO Norwegian Center for Global Analyses, which provides intelligence to the United Nations, the Taliban have been conducting door to door searches for ‘collaborators’ and have been threatening their family members.⁶ Written notices asking for surrender have been left in their homes, which threaten interrogation of and punishment to family members unless complied with.

In Farah and Badghis, the Taliban executed senior police officials, including Haji Mullah Achakzai and Ghulam Sakhi Akbari, both security directors of their provinces. Video footage showed Achakzai kneeling and blindfolded, with his hands tied behind his back before he was shot.⁷ The Taliban also stabbed a pregnant policewoman to death in front of her family in Ghor. On 30 August 2021, in Daikundi province, Taliban members executed nine former ANDSF personnel belonging to the Hazara community even after they surrendered.⁸

In November 2021, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) detailed the killing and disappearance of over 100 former Afghan security forces across four provinces — Ghazni, Helmand, Kunduz and Kandahar.⁹ In addition, the HRW said at least 47 members of the Afghan security forces who surrendered to or were captured between 15 August and 31 October 2021 were

⁵ Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, “Afghan women’s losing battle to remain visible under Taliban”, *Al Jazeera*, 6 October 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/10/6/how-one-afghan-woman-became-invisible-under-taliban-rule>.

⁶ “Afghanistan: Taliban carrying out door-to-door manhunt, report says”, *BBC*, 20 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58271797>.

⁷ Yogita Limaye, “Amid violent reprisals, Afghans fear the Taliban’s ‘amnesty’ was empty”, *BBC*, 31 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58395954>.

⁸ Amnesty International, “Afghanistan: 13 Hazara killed by Taliban fighters in Daykundi province – new investigation”, 5 October 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/afghanistan-13-hazara-killed-by-taliban-fighters-in-daykundi-province-new-investigation/>.

⁹ “Dozens of former Afghan forces killed or disappeared by Taliban, rights group says”, *BBC*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59474965>.

executed by the Taliban. Two tactics of identifying and targeting the former security forces have come to light, using either existing databases of the former civilian government (which the Taliban now have access to) or the self-declaration forms signed by these soldiers in response to safety assurances by the Islamic Emirate. While the Taliban denied these incidents, they have not been open to an independent investigation into such killings. Two patterns of responding to such an environment of retribution too have emerged. Firstly, a large number of former government officials and ANDSF members have gone into hiding, with or without their family members. To be safe, they change their location frequently. Secondly, a number of them may have also joined the rival terrorist group, the Islamic State's Khorasan Province, to be safe and also to avenge the atrocities committed on them and their kin. While the first strategy is not full-proof and is fraught with risk, the second has the potential of contributing to the cycle of violence in the country.

Freedom of Press

During the 20 years of civilian government, private media had thrived in Afghanistan in the form of newspapers, websites, radio and television channels, which employed a large number of female and male journalists. Foreign funding, revenue from advertisements and a growing economy made journalism an attractive career option for many. All that has changed. In November 2021, Nai-Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan (SOMA), said that in 100 days under the Islamic Emirate rule, over 257 media outlets have ceased operating in the country due to financial challenges as well as restrictions. Over 70 per cent of media workers have become jobless or left the country.¹⁰ On December 2021, a survey conducted by Reporters Without Borders and the Afghan Independent Journalists Association showed that 40 per cent of media outlets were closed since the fall of the former government. An estimated 6,400 journalists have lost their job. Female journalists have been hit hardest, with 80 per cent of them now in hiding after quitting or being asked to resign.

While foreign funding and revenue from advertisements have dried up and are among the reasons for such a state of affairs, the Islamic Emirate's attempt to minimise negative publicity on their actions worldwide has significantly affected press freedom in the country. It started with the Taliban issuing a set of nine guidelines for the television and print media in November 2021.¹¹ Primarily aimed at ensuring a compliant media, the Taliban sought to ban any media that violated Islamic or Afghan values. The instructions included the banning of films considered against the principles of *Shariah* (Islamic Law) and Afghan values, footage of men exposing intimate parts of the body, comedy and entertainment shows that insult religion or may be considered offensive to Afghans and foreign media promoting foreign cultural values. In the 1990s, the Taliban had sought to regulate the sources of entertainment for the Afghans by breaking television sets and declaring them as un-Islamic. This time around, only the mode to achieve the same objective has changed.

¹⁰ "257 Media Outlets Closed in 100 Days Since Takeover", *Tolo News*, 23 November 2021, <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan/attack-mediajournalists-175586>.

¹¹ "Taliban release media guidelines, ban shows with female actors", *Reuters*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/taliban-release-media-guidelines-ban-shows-with-female-actors-2021-11-23/>.

Print journalists have been asked to refrain from writing on topics in conflict with Islam or that are insulting to national personalities. They were directed to consult the MPVPV on a regular basis on their writings and seek guidelines. This, in effect, allows the Taliban to censure anything perceived to paint them negatively. Non-compliance has resulted in journalists being killed, abducted or roughed up, instances of which have been reported from several provinces. The Nai-SOMA documented that in the first 100 days of the Taliban rule, six reporters have lost their lives in various incidents, including attacks by unknown armed men, explosions, committing suicide and traffic incidents. Another five incidents of violence were reported in December 2021, including the multiple stabbing of a reporter of the Kabul-based *Ufuq News*.¹² Although direct involvement of the Taliban is difficult to prove in these incidents, there have been instances of journalists being detained by intelligence forces of the Islamic Emirate.

This has effectively led to a choking of information on the Taliban. A handful of female journalists, who still work in some of the media outlets or write independently, complain of not being allowed to the press conferences of the Taliban. On the other hand, their male counterparts who attend do not have the right to ask questions.

Outlook

With the victory of the Taliban, the fragile progress made in the last two decades stands reversed. The Taliban are clearly using their notoriety and regressive outlook as a point of leverage for international recognition and have demonstrated no inclination for a drastic change in its worldview and ideology. However, that is hardly a surprise. What is more astounding are the circumstances that led to such a state of affairs in the first place, and also, how the current global concern for the Afghans can gloss over the need to hold the Islamic Emirate responsible for its actions in the realm of human rights. What is required, therefore, is, firstly, a global consensus on the red lines on engagement with the Taliban and the conditionalities that the latter must fulfill; and, secondly, the establishment of an inclusive government that provides adequate gender and ethnicity-based representation and includes some members of the deposed civilian government.

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¹² "Journalist Stabbed in Kabul, Increased Attacks on Media Reported", *Tolo News*, 20 December 2021, <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan/attack-mediajournalists-175967>.