



The Return of the Taliban: What Now for the Women of Afghanistan?

By Rasna Warah



There have been a lot of knee-jerk reactions - particularly from liberals - about the United States' hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan. Those who oppose US military intervention in foreign lands say the withdrawal couldn't have come sooner - that invading Afghanistan in 2001 after the 9/11 terror attacks on New York and Washington was a mistake and staying on in ("occupying") the country was an even bigger mistake. They argue that US military intervention in Korea, Vietnam, Somalia and other places has been disastrous, and that these interventions reek of imperialism.

Well and good. But everyone who has something to say about the poorly planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan, including the Taliban and President Joe Biden, has failed to answer these questions: *What would the women of Afghanistan have wanted? Why were they not consulted before the US president made the unilateral decision to pull out troops from Afghanistan? And what gives Biden and the all-male Pashtun-dominated Taliban leadership the right to make decisions on women's behalf?*

I was in Kabul in 2002, some three months after the US invaded the country and ousted the Taliban from the capital city. I spoke with many women there who told me that they were relieved that the Taliban had left because life under the misogynistic movement had become unbearable for women and girls. Girls were not allowed to have an education so girls' schools had to be run secretly from

homes. The Taliban were known for barbaric public executions and for flogging women who did not wear burqas or who were accused of adultery. There was an austere, cruel rule where people were not even allowed to sing, dance, play music or watch movies.

Twenty years of war, beginning with the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent US-backed insurgency of the Mujahideen (*mujahidun* in Arabic—“those engaged in jihad”) in the 1980s (which later transformed into the Taliban movement), not to mention the US invasion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 terror attacks, had left Kabul’s physical infrastructure in ruins. Entire neighbourhoods had been reduced to rubble and no one quite remembered any more whose army had destroyed which building. The only buildings still left standing were the mosques and the Soviet-built apartment blocks housing civil servants. In 2002, Kabul Municipality had estimated that almost 40 per cent of the houses in the city had been destroyed in the previous fifteen years. Solid waste disposal barely met minimum standards, and running water and electricity were luxuries in most homes.

After the Taliban fled the capital and went underground, an estimated 3 million girls went back to school. At that time, the average Afghan child could expect only about 4 years of schooling. By 2019, this figure had risen to 10 years. Today, more than 13 per cent of adult women in Afghanistan have a secondary school education or higher. Women’s participation in the political sphere also increased dramatically; in 2019, nearly a third (27.2 per cent) of parliamentary seats were held by women.

No wonder women around the world were shocked and dismayed to see how easily Afghan women and girls were sacrificed and abandoned by the world’s leading powers. “My heart breaks for the women of Afghanistan. The world has failed them. History will write this,” tweeted the Iranian journalist and activist Masih Alinejad on 13 August 2021.

As Taliban fighters were gaining control of the capital Kabul on Sunday, 15 August 2021, an unnamed woman living in the city wrote the following in the *Guardian*:

As a woman, I feel I am the victim of this political war that men started. I felt like I can no longer laugh out loud, I can no longer listen to my favourite songs, I can no longer meet my friends in our favourite café, I can no longer wear my favourite yellow dress or pink lipstick. And I can no longer go to my job or finish the university degree that I worked for years to achieve.

There have been reports of Taliban fighters abducting and marrying young girls, and ordering women not to report to work. Afghan female journalists fear for their lives; many have gone into hiding. The sale of *burqas* has apparently skyrocketed.

The argument that women in other countries also suffer at the hands of men, and experience gender-based violence does not fly with many Afghan women who have been fighting for the rights of women for the last two decades. For one, there is no law in any country in the world, as far as I know, that denies women an education or bans them from working outside the home. Women in these countries may not yet be truly free, but at least they can rely on the law to protect them. All the gains Afghan women have made over the last two decades will now be lost. I do not for one second believe that the rebranded Taliban emerging in Afghanistan have become feminists overnight, despite their pro-women rhetoric at press conferences. Mahbouba Seraj, an Afghan women’s rights leader, told TRT World that what is happening in Afghanistan is “going to put the country two hundred years back.” “I am going to say to the whole world—shame on you!” she stated.

A series of failures

That is not the first time the US has abandoned Afghanistan. After Russian forces withdrew from

Afghanistan in 1989, the US pulled out as well, leaving the Mujahideen, which it had been funding, to its own devices. Yet, in 1979, when Russian forces entered Afghanistan, the US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski had described the Mujahideen as “soldiers of God”, and told them, “Your cause is right and God is on your side.” The Mujahideen transformed into the Taliban, and imposed its severe rule on Afghans during the latter part of the 1990s. It also became a den for terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda. The US essentially created a monster that launched the 9/11 attacks 22 years later.

Afghanistan has had a long and turbulent history of conquests by foreign rulers, and has often been described as the “graveyard of empires”. But it has not always been anti-women. In 1919, King Amanullah Khan introduced a new constitution and pro-women reforms. The last monarch, Zahir Shah (1933-1973), also ensured that women’s rights were respected through various laws. But when Shah was overthrown in 1978, the Soviet Union installed a puppet leader. This gave rise to the anti-Soviet Mujahideen, who gained control of the country in the 1990s and eroded many of the rights women had been granted.

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There are many parallels with Somalia, which also enjoyed Russian support under President Siad Barre. When the Soviets switched sides and began supporting Ethiopia’s Mengistu Haile Mariam, the US gained more influence, but it could not install democracy in a country that had descended into warlordism after Barre was ousted in 1991. After American soldiers were killed in Mogadishu during the country’s civil war in 1993, the US withdrew from Somalia completely. Conservative forces supported by some Arab countries filled the void. When a coalition of Islamic groups took over the capital in 2006, they were quickly ousted by US-backed Ethiopian forces. Al Shabaab was born. As in Afghanistan, the US had a hand in creating a murderous group that had little respect for women.

After the US invasion in 2001, instead of focusing on stabilising and rebuilding Afghanistan, President George Bush set his eyes on invading Iraq on the false pretext that the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had links to Al Qaeda and was harbouring weapons of mass destruction. That war in 2003 cost the US government its reputation in many parts of the Muslim world, and turned the world’s attention away from Afghanistan. Bush will also be remembered for illegally renditing and detaining Afghans and other nationals suspected of being terrorists at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay. This ill-advised move, which will forever remain a blot on his legacy, has been used as a radicalisation propaganda tool by groups such as the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS).

The international community is now sitting back and doing nothing, even as it is becoming increasingly evident that the world is witnessing a humanitarian catastrophe that will have severe political repercussions within the region and globally. The international community of nations, including the UN Security Council, cannot do anything except plead with the Taliban to not discontinue essential services, which is a tall order given that three-quarters of Afghanistan’s budget was funded by foreign (mostly Western) aid. The Taliban was allowed to take over the country without a fight. And all the UN Secretary-General could do was issue statements urging neighbouring countries to keep their borders open to the thousands of Afghans fleeing the country.

The mass exodus of Afghans, as witnessed at Kabul’s international airport, is a public relations disaster for the Taliban. It shows that not all Afghans welcome the Taliban’s return. As the poet Warsan Shire wrote about her homeland Somalia, “no one leaves home unless/home is the mouth of

a shark". Afghanistan has once again become a failed state.

The longest war

The impact of the Taliban's capture of the country is already being felt. The exodus of Afghans is creating a refugee crisis like the one witnessed in 2015 during the civil war in Syria. The US and its NATO allies have essentially created a refugee crisis of their own making. This will likely generate anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiments in the US and Europe, and embolden racist right-wing groups. It is also possible that Afghanistan will become the site of a new type of Cold War, with Russia and China forming cynical alliances with the Taliban in order to destabilise the West and to exploit Afghanistan's vast natural resources, which remain largely untapped. Girls' education will be curtailed. No amount of reminding the Taliban that Prophet Mohammed's wife Khadija was a successful businesswoman, and that his third wife Aisha played a major role in the Prophet's political life will change their minds about women. Women and girls are looking at a bleak future as the Taliban impose punitive restrictions on them that even the expansionist Muslim Ottoman Empire did not dare enforce in its heyday. Afghanistan will become a medieval society where women remain voiceless and invisible.

The worst-case scenario - one that is just too horrific to contemplate - is that terrorist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda will find a foothold in Afghanistan, and unleash a global terror campaign from there, as did Osama bin Laden more than two decades ago.

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The irony the US having invaded the country two decades before, ostensibly to get rid of Islamic terrorists, Biden has essentially handed over the country to the very group that had harboured terrorists like Osama bin Laden, the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. "President Joe Biden will go down in history, fairly or unfairly, as the president who presided over a humiliating final act in the American experiment in Afghanistan," wrote David E. Sanger in the *New York Times*. (To be fair, it was not Biden who first opened the doors to the Taliban; President Donald Trump invited the Taliban to negotiations in Doha in 2018, which lent some legitimacy to a group that had previously been labelled as a terrorist organisation.)

Dubbed "America's longest war", the US military mission in Afghanistan has cost US taxpayers about US\$2 trillion, one quarter of which has gone towards reconstruction and development, though critics have pointed out that the bulk of this money was used to train the Afghan military and police, and was not used for development projects. The military mission in Afghanistan has also come at a huge human cost; 3,500 soldiers and other personnel from 31 NATO troop-producing countries and 4,400 international contractors, humanitarian workers and journalists were killed in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2020. Thousands of Afghan lives have also been lost. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan estimates that at least 100,000 Afghans have been killed or wounded since 2009.

Was the US and NATO intervention in Afghanistan worth it? Should the US and NATO have stayed a bit longer until the country had well-functioning and well-resourced institutions and until they were sure that the Taliban had been completely routed out? I think so, because I believe that ousting the Taliban was as ethically correct as eliminating ISIS and defeating the German Nazis. **The problem in Afghanistan is that the Taliban were never defeated; they simply went underground.**

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There is no doubt that the “liberation” or “occupation” of Afghanistan by the US-dominated NATO mission in Afghanistan brought about some tangible benefits, including rebuilt and new infrastructure, the growth of a vibrant civil society and more opportunities for women. But the US’s support of Western-backed Afghan governments that are generally viewed as corrupt by the majority of Afghans may have handed the Taliban the legitimacy and support they seem to be enjoying among the country’s largely poor rural population, just as installing highly corrupt Western-backed governments in Somalia in the last fifteen years gave Al Shabaab more ammunition to carry out its violent campaign. The Taliban is also recognised by some neighbouring countries, notably Pakistan, which is believed to be one of its funders, and which receives considerable military and other support from the US. This raises questions about why the US is aiding a country that is working against its interests in another. This Taliban-Pakistan alliance will no doubt be watched closely by Pakistan’s rival India.

Afghanistan, unfortunately, is a sad reminder of why no amount of investment in infrastructure and other “development” projects can fix something that has been fundamentally broken in a country. Like Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion, it may fragment along tribal or sectarian lines and revert to a civil war situation. Under the Taliban “government”, Afghanistan may become a joyless place where people are not allowed to listen to music, dance or watch movies - where enforcement of a distorted interpretation of Islam casts a dark shadow on the rest of the Muslim world. And Afghan women and girls will once again pay the heaviest price.

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