

## From Guns to Governance: Expected Pitfalls For New Taliban Government

Mobeen Jafar Mir



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**MOBEEN JAFAR MIR**

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**Islamabad Policy Institute, Pakistan**

On September 7, the Afghan Taliban announced formation of an interim government in Afghanistan,<sup>1</sup> nearly three weeks after they seized control of the country in a dazzling military conquest as the Afghan National Army and West backed Ghani government melted away. The newly announced caretaker government, however, faces numerous challenges – both internal and external – which could further imperil the present fraught situation.

The socio-political realities of Afghanistan have changed over the past two decades. Moreover, the Taliban have transformed, Afghanistan's neighbourhood has undergone a shift, and two-decade-long involvement of the West with Afghanistan has had a profound impact on the way Western nations viewed Afghanistan. For governing Afghanistan, the Taliban would, therefore, have to be cognizant of the impact of these changes and accordingly chart a way forward for delivering improved governance - better than the previous government.

This paper charts the changes in Afghanistan, the Taliban, surrounding region, and beyond to highlight internal and external challenges facing the Taliban regime. It also proffers some recommendations for the new government of the Taliban as it consolidates its power.

### **Changed Afghanistan:**

In contrast to their previous rule over the country from 1996 to 2001, contemporary Afghanistan has experienced vast social, political, and economic transformation during the past 20 years. Elections for the office of president, national parliament and provincial assemblies took place periodically, leading to participation of a large number of people in the political process. Though each presidential election was marred by inefficiencies and lack of transparency, the electoral process itself was important. Democratic and political awareness among the public has increased manifold as compared to the last Taliban era.

Similarly, a new middle class emerged as the economy grew. Though Afghanistan remained heavily reliant on external economic assistance and foreign aid, the new middle class found an opportunity to contribute to the economic and social development of the country. The international assistance, which has been halted in the wake of the Taliban takeover, has over the past two decades not only helped avert major humanitarian crisis, but also afforded numerous opportunities to the skilled and semi-skilled youth of Afghanistan. The expectations of the Afghan population are, therefore, now quite different than they were twenty years ago. They demand better service delivery and are in a struggling phase to exert their political and economic influence in the nation-building of the country.

Furthermore, Afghan society has also undergone a dramatic change in the last twenty years. In the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, the broad access to digital

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<sup>1</sup> Lyse Doucet, "Afghanistan: A new order begins under the Taliban's governance," *BBC*, September 09, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58495112>

telecommunications enjoyed by the Afghans has transformed the old ethnic and feudal Afghan society into a diverse and democratic one, with more people voicing their concerns on social media. During the first government of the Taliban, Afghans were not so deeply engaged in the sociopolitical discourse of the country as they are now. Access to social media and mobile phones has enabled ordinary citizens to raise their voices while being connected to domestic and international politics.

This is also linked to space for media freedom in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. During the past two decades, Afghan news media has expanded considerably, with private television channels, radio networks and newspapers covering domestic and international issues witnessing mushrooming growth. These media outlets gave voice to the people of Afghanistan. Now that media space is under threat.

To gain the support of the Afghan people, the Taliban need to form an inclusive government. Earlier, the Taliban had assured the international community about formation of a government with representation from all ethnic groups. However, the interim cabinet announced by Taliban on Sept. 7 comprises mostly Pashtuns. Taliban's old guard has made a comeback to the ruling of Afghanistan, while the ethnic diversity of the country has been completely overlooked. If history is any guide, any attempt made at ignoring other ethnicities or formulating a monolithic political system has always failed.

### **New Taliban:**

During the past 20 years, the Taliban themselves have evolved. It has experienced a generational shift. Youthful soldiers and commanders now form the backbone of the group. The Taliban have also modernized their organizational structure, though they are still a long way, to meet the requirements of the present socio-political landscape of the country. Earlier, Taliban members primarily came from the Kandhar region. Now it has a much more broadbased membership, with senior commanders and governors from other ethnic groups including Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Tajiks. Taliban have focused on accommodating other ethnic groups to gain wider acceptability in Afghan society.

Besides, the Taliban also face the challenge of balancing their diplomats, military commanders, religious figures, and traditional elders. For a decade now, the Taliban have been fighting on the battlefield; engaging outside the world, particularly the United States and other regional states; maintaining discipline in the ranks; and strengthening their organization. This led to the emergence of two different categories of people within the Taliban: those who fought on the ground and those who engaged the outside world. Now that the Taliban have won on the battlefield, and are forming a government, they have to give representation to people from both categories. This is a delicate balancing act of accommodating hardliners and moderates. It appears, that, at the moment, Taliban leadership has preferred consolidation and given more representation to those commanders who led Taliban forces on the ground, than those who represented Taliban interests abroad.

**External Environment:**

The regional dynamics and the international situation has changed considerably from the time when the Taliban were swept from power to today. The role of key regional stakeholders such as Pakistan, Iran and China is changing. Similarly, Central Asian neighbours of Afghanistan are closely watching new developments in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the US, which was earlier was a pre-eminent superpower, is now contending with a new international landscape. Similarly, the Gulf and Europe have a changed outlook towards Afghanistan and the region.

First, China of 2021 is not the same country that it was in the 1990s. Now China is proactive in regional affairs and has concerns about the presence of militants belonging to its ethnic minority - the Uyghurs of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Afghanistan. Beijing, moreover, brings considerable political influence and economic support to the table for advancing its interests. It has also expressed its desire to play a primary role in the country's post-US rehabilitation and development. Of late, Chinese leaders are actively coordinating with Pakistan and other regional countries for peace and stability.

Second, Russia and Central Asian states fear the spillover of militancy in the region. In the past, a few Central Asian states extended support to the erstwhile Northern Alliance against the Taliban government. This time around, with the last holdout of anti-Taliban resistance, Panjshir Valley, being easily captured by the Taliban, more states are willing to engage with the Taliban government. Uzbekistan has welcomed the announcement of an interim government, while Tajikistan has called for the inclusion of other ethnicities in the new government. Taliban cannot ignore the concerns of Central Asian neighbours, as they are also a key source of trade and economic cooperation for Afghanistan.

Third, two other neighbours, Pakistan and Iran are vying for influence in Afghanistan. As the Taliban consolidate power, Pakistan has gained renewed strategic confidence as relations with the previous government had plummeted to an all-time low. Pakistan is engaged in coordination with regional countries to support the new government. Pakistan's goal is to pursue regional recognition of the Taliban government. Meanwhile, for Iran, the Taliban rule is also a strategic boost as the US military footprint in Afghanistan has ended. Tehran, however, seeks the advancement of its interests in the form of safety and security of Shia and Hazaras population and their representation in a new government. Moreover, Iran also seeks resolution of tensions related to the Herat river.

Fourth, the role of Western nations will also change concerning Afghanistan. The US and European countries have made considerable investments in the social development of Afghanistan. For two decades, European nations provided development assistance across Afghanistan for a variety of projects in infrastructure, health, education, and social services. Now with the return of the Taliban, European nations seek to preserve their gains and find ways to support social development in Afghanistan. However, European governments are monitoring progress on human rights, particularly women's rights before they resume development and humanitarian assistance

to Afghanistan. They are also seeking assurances for the security of humanitarian organizations working within Afghanistan. The European Union has made it clear that it will engage with Taliban for the attainment of the above cited goals. It has further clarified that engagement with Taliban should not be taken as recognition of the new government.

Fifth, the United States, despite leaving Afghanistan after losing on the battlefield, remains a key stakeholder for peace and stability. The nature of US-Taliban relations in near-to-medium term is key to international acceptance of the Taliban government, which is then linked to resumption of foreign assistance. Taliban currently do not have resources to run public services and also lack capacity to do so. They cannot continue like that for long and it is feared that the state structures in Afghanistan could collapse soon if the international assistance is not to resume soon. This could lead to a bigger catastrophe than being apprehended now with consequences for the outside world – especially the immediate six neighbours of the war ravaged country.

For now, the US has signaled engagement with the Taliban to fight the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), a common enemy of both sides. Besides, the Taliban require considerable support of Washington for exiting from the United Nations sanctions blacklist, which would enable its leaders to travel freely outside Afghanistan. The US has already voiced concerns about the “affiliations and track records”<sup>2</sup> of some individuals named to the new government.

### **Way Forward for the Taliban**

The Taliban takeover of the country is not the end of the war. For the new Taliban government, challenges are enormous, and chances to return to violence persist. The complex nature of challenges will be an overriding concern for the Taliban administration for establishing a working political setup in the war-torn country.

To address the concerns of the people of Afghanistan, the region, and the international community, the Taliban would have to take the following steps:

1. The Taliban government should focus on service delivery and ensure swift resumption of government activities.
2. The Taliban must outline a diplomatic plan to secure the resumption of humanitarian aid and develop cooperation with regional and global countries for economic assistance.
3. A blueprint should be formed to engage regional and international stakeholders, particularly China and Russia, for the removal of names of their group members from the UN sanctions list.

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<sup>2</sup> Anwar Iqbal, “US can work with a Taliban govt that fulfils its promises: Blinken,” *Dawn*, September 09, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1645300>

4. The Taliban should ensure media freedom in Afghanistan. They must create a peaceful environment that can pave the way for more engagement with international media. It will be a prerequisite to improve the Taliban's international standing and help the group secure diplomatic recognition.
5. Fourth, the threat of ISKP demands regional cooperation. The Taliban government must establish a regional framework to counter the threat of ISKP. Even the US is signalling at cooperating with the Taliban on the issue. The Taliban must cooperate with the US because it is a key to secure global recognition.
6. The Taliban should be aware of the fact that all regional and international stakeholders are closely watching if the Taliban will uphold their assurances of peace and security because any future support for the Taliban government will be contingent on the Taliban honouring their assurances.
7. Europeans have engaged with Afghanistan for almost two decades and want to maintain diplomatic linkages with the Taliban. If the Taliban want to engage with European states, they must show progress on human rights and women's rights issues. For this, an inclusive government with the representation of all ethnic groups and women is the starting point.

*\*Mubeen Jafar Mir is a researcher at Islamabad Policy Institute.*