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Another Chapter in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is not the exhausted, impoverished, war-weary country the Taliban took over in 1996. Nor are the Taliban the same cohesive force. New aspirations, and pressures from the ground and foreign backers will shape the new regime's governance style.

The suicide bombing at a gate of the Kabul airport on 26 August, which resulted in the deaths of at least 180 people, resurrected the spectre of an Afghanistan living by medieval norms and serving as sanctuary-cum-assault base for religion-crazed savages armed with modern weapons. Five days later, with the country remaining calm even as the United States withdrew its personnel, there seemed reason to hope that the slide-back need not be inevitable or immediate.

Reality could catch up with the direst of projections if the seemingly endless confabulations within Taliban ranks and between the mullah-led combine and other Afghan interests reach a deadlock. There might then arise a situation in which groups start clawing at each other while ignoring or co-opting foreign militants. About 10,000 of them, operating as the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), are already in the country and are not too friendly with the Taliban. These non-Afghan extremists are not likely to forgo chances to intervene in factional feuding or to miss opportunities to emulate Al Qaeda and establish ideological hegemony over the locals. However, the Taliban factions are currently displaying high levels of patience and the possibility cannot be ruled out of Afghan solutions being found for Afghan problems.

So much of the focus is on those jostling for power that little attention is being paid to the capacity of the Afghan people to handle the new circumstances. There may be conditions on the ground that even enable them to exert pressure from the base. Solid assessments can only be made when a new regime (of whatever shape or composition) actually gets down to the process of governing. In the meanwhile, it may be possible to look for signs in the images transmitted from Afghanistan in recent weeks.

A blight upon a newly dynamic society

To a person who visited Kabul thirty years ago and read about the destruction wrought on the city towards the end of the last millennium, the most striking of recent visuals was not that of a Chinook helicopter in flight or the Taliban's white flags flying from vantage points. It was the image of Kabul's new skyline. Soaring buildings, stylishly designed and well-constructed, seemed to have eclipsed the sprawling clusters of mud hovels and the squat monuments to Soviet-style architecture that once dominated the cityscape.

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That was not the only visible change. Whether the images were from cities such as Kandahar or provincial towns like Puli Khumri, in the northern Baghlan province, roads appeared to have been laid according to Western specifications with asphalt and pavements perfectly measured. Russian-made Volga taxis that once monopolised city streets seemed to have completely disappeared. Instead, roads appeared to be filled with vehicles, battered or new, displaying the logos and lines of auto-makers from different parts of the world. ATM kiosks and mobile shops were commonplace in the pictures of crowded markets and business centres.

Statistically speaking, Afghanistan might be situated on the bottom rungs of the development ladder but it certainly seemed to have a quantum of wealth that was not negligible. It was not a hidden mass either. Burqas and overcoats seemed fairly conspicuous in the early days of the takeover but in speech and image, women from Kabul at least exuded the sort of poise and confidence that comes with financial security or professional standing. Complaints by owners of shops selling jeans and other western apparel about sudden drops in sales ironically served to show how high volumes had earlier been.

Scores of radio stations and dozens of TV channels have been entertaining the Afghans with their own and Bollywood music as well as Turkish serials. Reports have mentioned the presence of plush restaurants offering international cuisine and the religion-imposed liquor ban seems to have affected Afghans as lightly as it does tipplers in other parts of Central Asia. Social media networks, as frenzied as they are elsewhere, keep the people abreast of events as well as cultural trends. Courtesy Rashid Khan and other stars of

the Indian Premier League, young people now have global icons they can aspire to follow. Although Malala Yousafzai is not Afghan, the Nobel Laureate is surely a beacon-light for girls in these parts.

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Such surface trimmings are backed up by substance. [School enrolment](#), even for [girls](#), has risen to unbelievable levels; [electricity](#), once a chancy commodity, was reportedly available in 90% of the country; [about 70% of the people have access to mobile services](#); and [a third use the internet](#). All of this may be taken as a reflection of the most basic fact that the GDP per capita has doubled since the ouster of the last Taliban regime.

These changes are neither fortuitous nor attributable wholly to the trillion-dollar-plus foreign funds that have poured in over the last 20 years. Flashbacks to those old images of ‘Kabuliwallahs’ selling their wares in all corners of the subcontinent should serve as reminders of the Afghan zest for commerce. Whenever the highways have been clear enough for traffic, this country springs back to life as the main avenue for travel and trade for five neighbouring countries, three of which are landlocked. It should also be remembered that the Afghans have a fairly expansive interpretation of the term "clear for traffic" and will take on natural and man-made hazards that others would stay well away from.

In short, the Taliban have not come to impose their rule over an exhausted, impoverished, war-weary country as they did in 1996. Instead, they now present themselves as a blight over a vibrant, dynamic society. Over two decades, the Afghan people have rediscovered the comforting placidity of normal existence; relived the joys of reconnecting with wide networks of families and friends; celebrated births and marriages free from the baleful glower of moral policemen; buried their dead without needing to listen to political lectures; and, even got up to mischief without fear of losing head or limb. This is the normality that the Taliban now threatens.

Dealing with the Taliban

Several Afghans have responded to this threatening plague by seeking ways to flee the country. Tens of thousands who had served with the US, NATO forces, or the deposed regime, obtained special visas and seats on the planes that carried out the withdrawal. Many others have rushed to the borders in the attempt to use the five neighbouring countries as transit routes to Turkey or further west. More may follow in the weeks and months to come.

There may be many among them who represent the best and brightest. Still, a pause to reconsider would be in order before jumping to the conclusion that an [irreversible brain drain](#) is underway.. Quite a few would also have looked for alternatives in the form of safe ways to stay on. They could have tried to find patrons or clients who can provide reasonable measures of protection.

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Over the first week after they captured Kabul, the Taliban, by stating that they would not clamp down, signalled a desire to avoid a build-up of pressure. They talked of allowing women to work, girls to get educated, and the populace to live generally unmolested. . [These assurances have not carried sufficient convection](#) since most ordinary Afghans were apparently staying well clear of pockets where the peasant warriors the mullahs brought along tended to congregate. Reports of hit squads going after personnel of the fallen regime have raised fears that the reprisal net could steadily widen to finally include all those who do not think or behave as the barbarians from the madrasas would like them to.

Is a regression to the savagery unleashed between 1996 and 2001 inevitable or are the Taliban likely to fail if they make such an attempt? It is better not to venture into a prognosis of what are bound to be complex, multifaceted developments. Instead, it would be more sensible to consider the strengths that the Taliban can bring to bear and the possible limits.

Before considering other aspects it is necessary to emphasise one fact that could be of paramount importance. Around 60% of Afghanistan's population is believed to be less than 20 years of age. That is, they were born after the Taliban were driven out of power and hence know about the repression mainly by hearsay, not experience. They are unaccustomed to the restrictions imposed by even the conservative traditions that pre-dated the Taliban. Even in rural areas, they have probably disregarded injunctions about not listening to music or viewing images. This lot are likely to get restless if unreasonable curbs are imposed.

Staff at government hospitals, electric supply agencies, and municipal and other public service departments are reportedly staying away from work because they fear retribution for serving the previous regime. For how long can the Taliban afford to have them stay away? If nothing else, their own families need these services to be restored. Businessmen need their managers and staff to return and banks have to restart functioning. The Taliban probably need to show in a hurry that normalcy has returned if they are to unlock IMF funding, unfreeze amounts held in the US Federal Reserve, and get financial help from other international sources. Food stocks are low and need to be replenished before winter sets in.

Moderate leaders would not have risked the hazards of direct engagement with the Taliban without assurance of solid backing: probably from foreigners, business interests in the country, or even rejuvenated tribal elites.

Pakistan, the sole sponsor of the Taliban, probably does not have an extra paisa to spare after assisting in the take-over. The Peoples Republic of China, which could have bankrolled the enterprise and is now [anxious for payback in terms of mineral concessions](#), will soon start insisting that the Taliban get down to business. Central Asian governments, hungry for access to warm water ports in Iran and Pakistan, are likely to press for a return to normalcy.

Many observers seem to think that the puritans of the Taliban will resist these pressures. If they do, the countries waiting to benefit will surely find pragmatists to back. That such considerations are already in operation is brought out by the fact that the insurgents are in serious discussion with former president Hamid Karzai and former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah. These avowed moderate leaders would not have risked the hazards of direct engagement with the Taliban without assurance of solid backing: probably from foreigners, business interests in the country, or even rejuvenated tribal elites.

The factions within

Sceptics would go so far as to say that their triumph will lead the Taliban to believe in and proclaim the revival of jihadism. The Taliban in the future might claim to have demonstrated that religious fervour will ultimately prevail since they have defeated both superpowers.

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It is no doubt a proud slogan, but its effectiveness is doubtful. The heyday of jihadi terrorism is over. Those who led it in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq are now seen as hunted desperadoes, not any sort of folk heroes. In West Asia, once the source of finances for these groups, the two Sheikh Mohammed's — bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi and bin Salman of Saudi Arabia — have forcefully set their societies on a diametrically opposite course.

There is also reason to believe that the [internal cohesion of the Taliban is not resilient enough](#) to withstand multiple pressures. There were known to be differences between the Kandahar based core leadership and the Haqqanis from the eastern Nangarhar province; between the negotiators in Doha and their principals in Quetta; between the old guard with limited education and the electronic-media-savvy younger generation; between Pakistan's quislings and those wary of Punjabi dominance; and, all of these exacerbated by tribal hostility and personal differences. These fissures could widen and not only because there is no dominant figure such as Mullah Mohammad Omar, the founder of the Taliban, to hold the various factions together.

There could still be a few tens of thousands of armed and trained men who have reason to consolidate against the Taliban. A fairly formidable opposition force could emerge if these men can get to the Panjshir Valley.

Even in terms of fighting strength, the Taliban might not be as strong as they seem. According to reports in the US media, their intelligence agencies estimate that the Taliban had command of 60,000 fighters when they started this summer's campaign. During their progress — from the capture of provinces in the north, then east, then south and finally Kabul — they bribed or otherwise persuaded militiamen with other previous loyalties and soldiers of the old regime to cross over. Those who did not join either handed over equipment or left it behind when they fled. By the end of the campaign, the Taliban were said to possess fighter jets, attack helicopters and armoured personnel carriers — US and Soviet origin material they had earlier only dreamt of owning. However, large sections of the army are known to have retained their equipment when they melted away.

At the best of times, the toppled regime's security forces may not have amounted to more than a fifth of the strength on the muster rolls. After discounting for those who defected or surrendered, there could still be a few tens of thousands of armed and trained men who have reason to consolidate against the Taliban. A fairly formidable opposition force could emerge if these men can get to the Panjshir Valley, [where some remnants of Afghanistan's deposed government have established a resistance](#), or otherwise link up with elements from the Northern Alliance that had fought the Taliban between 1996 and 2001.

East of the Durand Line

The pattern of the Taliban's advance, whereby they massed forces in one province and carried it before moving on to the next, revealed a capacity for staff-work no one could have credited them with. More than anything else, the meticulous planning this would have required seems [to reveal the hand of the Pakistani army's General Headquarters](#) in Rawalpindi. Pakistan's involvement could prove the final weakness not a source of strength. One trait that Rawalpindi can be counted upon to display sooner or later is the penchant for over-reach.

With the Islamic State Khorasan announcing its continuing presence on Afghan soil, the country could serve as a magnet for jihadi terrorists from elsewhere, especially from the land to the east of the Durand Line. Any surge in the strength of non-Afghan jihadis could upset all current calculations. This particular chapter in Afghanistan's history appears far from over.