

Challenges before the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in the post-US Withdrawal Scenario

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Abstract

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan transition government that emerged on the map of the world in September 2021 has been faced with various daunting challenges. Starting with the governance, then the very exclusive composition of cabinet raises question because it embodied hardliner Taliban mostly those Taliban who were part of previous Taliban regime. The Taliban alongside the AL-Qaeda and other allied groups have been under the sanctions list by the United States and the allied powers since the 9/11 scenario. Besides, the non-representative transition government, dissent on proportionate representation, division among Taliban ranks and files and the institutions building are major challenges coupled with new constitution formulation. Further to political challenges are the economic challenges and the issue of recognition which are equally terrible. Without recognition the miserable economic situation will be exacerbated and will trigger humanitarian crisis. The researcher has come up with the conclusion that Afghanistan can move towards improvement provided the different stakeholders agree among themselves and establish cordial relations with the external world. Furthermore, institution building would be a great step towards the normalization of the situation in the country coupled with the 'recognition' issue by the international community.

Key Words: Transition Government, Taliban, Recognition, Security, Institution Building.

Introduction

Former assistant secretary of state Richard Boucher's remark bears repetition "You can't win when you're fighting people for their own villages and their own territory. Those were lessons we thought we learned in Vietnam. And yet, 30 or 40 years later, we end up in Afghanistan repeating the same mistakes." (Sheikh, The New Afghanistan, 2021)

Afghanistan at the moment is passing through a miserable situation. Some of the challenges faced by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in the post-US withdrawal Scenario include political challenges, security challenges, economic

challenges and the issue of 'recognition' by the regional and international community.

1. Political Challenges

1.1. To Create a Representative Government

The formulation of an all-inclusive cabinet emerges as the prime challenge. Because the interim administration shown ethnic imbalance. As fourteen out of thirty three ministers are mostly those worked on key posts in the previous Taliban government of 1996 and who have been under the United Nations sanction list and travel ban. Thirty of these thirty three ministers are ethnically Pashtun who are although the 40-45 percent of entire population. (Bateman, Asfandiyar Mir, Olson, &

Watkins, 2021) Including a few other ethnic factions mostly associated with Taliban was giving it an impression of inclusiveness. (Lodhi, 2021) Then gender issue is also there since no any woman is included in cabinet and only a few minority ethnic groups have been given representation.

However, the absence of even a single woman and including mere the few minorities do not impart the all-inclusive character to the transition dispensation. Because majority of the cabinet composition is by hardline Kandahar factions close to Mullah Omar, the late supreme leader of the Taliban movement. (Hussain, The complexion of the Taliban government indicates restoration of old order, 2021)

Now coming towards the other significant political challenge is the divide among the Taliban own ranks and files into 'Moderates' and the 'Hardliner'. The moderates like Mullah Baradar who has been the deputy leader of Doha group and successfully tied the Doha agreement with the America and the Stanakzai have been pushed to the sidelines as being assigned to a secondary position in the cabinet. There have been some media reports of violent exchanges between the supporters of Mullah Baradar and the Haqqanis who also got a large share in the government. That indicates complete control of the hard-liners, making it more difficult for the international community to recognize the new dispensation.

1.2. Proportionate representation

In the context the question arises whether Taliban would give proportional representation to other faction? It is answered by experts as Rustam Shah Mohmand has opined that Taliban would certainly induct Minister's from other ethnic groups. But may not be in proportion to their population ratio. According to Azam Khan it is difficult unless global pressure is applied. For Aziz Khan Taliban will give some representation to different ethnic groups. It may not be proportional to their share in the population.

Riaz Khan said that they are not averse to coopting members of ethnicities other than Pushtun but those

who become part of the Taliban movement. They no longer talk about an inclusive government with minorities having a share by virtue of being minorities. Nevertheless they would be sensitive to the imperative of including ethnic members even if from within their own ranks.

The worrisome issues are the reappearance of ideological conflicts and division into difference factions which were swept aside during the war against the foreign forces. (Hussain, The complexion of the Taliban government indicates restoration of old order, 2021) These conflicts/differences will be exacerbated with the non-inclusive political dispensation. It is not the same Afghanistan of the 1990's when they could enforce their harsh social order. The new generation of Afghans who are better educated and have greater awareness about their situation will not accept the leap backward. The recent demonstration led by women is a manifestation of the brewing resistance to the attempt to curb their rights. The complexion of the new Afghan government is indicative of the future course of Taliban. But the restoration of retrogressive rule isolated from the international community cannot bring stability to the country.

The grim division of the "ideologues" and "pragmatists" among Taliban own lines have given birth to the immediate challenge of maintaining unity among Taliban. Whereas, the Moderates are to leave far behind the hawkish legacies of the previous Taliban regime. But the Hardliners are resistant to the very change and reforms and are likely to have the same medieval age Afghanistan. Some authentic reports have suggested the cleavages between the pragmatists such as Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a deputy prime minister and Sher Mohammed Abbas Stanekzai have been distanced. Even there is frustration among hardliners about the power chunk given to the Haqqanis in the government. Tensions between Baradar and hard-line ideologues had apparently boiled over but are now said to have been defused. But the actual division has not been ended hence the friction can appear in future over power sharing and about the mode of political dispensation because the

Prime Minister Mullah Hasan Akhund is assertive figure with decisive authority.(Lodhi, 2021)

1.3. Maintenance of Unity

This is a big question. Because disunity would encourage their enemies to launch attacks they would try to avoid any split.(Rustam Shah Mohmand Interview with Author)

Maintaining unity in their ranks will not be easy. It will require a strong top leadership which is respected by all and a fair distribution of power lower down. Azam Khan does not see the unity to be maintained. There are groups which may fall apart.(Azam Khan) For Riaz Khan it is difficult to predict the unity because already there are fissures. The Doha group identified with Mullah Baradar is apparently pushed on the sidelines.(RiazMohammad Khan)

1.4. Institution Building

Taliban are currently in the process of identifying their immediate and more medium-term priorities. Focus on the economy, food security, resurrection of a viable police force, formation of a more inclusive and broad-based government and dealing with the threat of Daesh are urgent concerns.(Mohmand, Taliban government struggling to determine priorities and governance, 2021)

Taliban will also be required to deal with militants and limit their ability to destabilize the country. Making sound administrative structure and establishing writ all over Afghanistan is an arduous task to be achieved. Besides there is opposition from rivals and the major internal threat is giving them a tough time. In all the context Taliban must have a consistent and focused policy. (Mohmand, The Birth of New Afghanistan, 2021). They also have to learn to accommodate the needs and aspirations of a new, better educated generation including women, or face rising discontent. It would be a mistake for them to think that the popular sentiment against foreign occupation and wariness with more conflict is the same as support for them.(Lodhi, The Taliban Dilemma, 2021)

The institution building is no small challenge. Restoring basic amenities such as health, education, water supply, electricity would engage the government's immediate attention. Given the 3.5 million IDPs, the UN has warned of an impending human catastrophe if the urgent needs of the citizens are not met. Drought has aggravated the sufferings of the people. The Covid-19 pandemic has posed yet another challenge as the country struggles with a poor healthcare system. Undertaking reconstruction and rehabilitation are daunting challenges. Among other tasks, opium cultivation needs to be banned. Poverty needs to be focused on.

While taking the challenge of institutions building like judiciary, police, local bodies' credible accountability system and health system then according to Rustam Shah Mohmand institutions building will take time. Taliban in the institutions building can rely on experience of other countries.(Rustam Shah Mohmand Interviews with Author)

For Azam Khan institution building is great difficulty. They require expert advice. (Azam Khan) Taliban will build various governing institutions under their interpretation of Islam and not the western model. They will take their time. (Aziz) It appears that a hybrid albeit confused system will emerge with some of the last regime institutions and the old Taliban system in particular with regard to judiciary.(Riaz)

Institution building will be critical to the sustainability of the new government. The regime has to rely not only on upgrading existing systems but to design new approaches and create new avenues for ensuring a smooth system of governance that guarantees transparency, justice and helps in the task of reconstruction. (Mohmand, Taliban government struggling to determine priorities and governance, 2021)

1.5. New Constitution

Not now but soon they would introduce a new document that would lay down governance principles for better governance.(Rustam Shah

Mohmand Interview with Author) Doubtful. They are talking about the old monarchy constitution.(Azam Khan)

Taliban are presently talking about the constitution during King Zahir Shah's time. Perhaps the King will be replaced by the AmirulMomineen. (Aziz Khan)

New constitution is a long shot. They have imposed their government which is of hardline Taliban who are wary of concepts like elections or parliament or opposition. They would want to consolidate their control and introduce piecemeal reforms under outside pressure.(Riaz)

It's evident that the Taliban administration seeks to enforce its ultra-conservative agenda ignoring international concerns over a worsening human rights situation. (Hussain, Divide between 'hard-liner' and 'pragmatist' has widened fault lines in Taliban regime , 2021)

The spectre of the international community withholding recognition is another issue that haunts the leadership of the group. Taliban have made an unambiguous statement about their earnest desire to get aligned with the world and learn from its past experience. But there is skepticism and reluctance to embrace the new realities. Part of such unwillingness to recognize the new unfolding system is attributed to the memory of the 1996-2001 rule by the group in which ideologues dictated the direction of its policies.(Mohmand, Taliban government struggling to determine priorities and governance, 2021)

Afghanistan sits on more than \$1 trillion of proven mineral reserves. But those will take time to exploit and market. In the meantime, the government will seek the UN's collaboration in sectors like health, water, institution building etc. A heavy reliance on the UN's expertise will be a key factor in Afghanistan's formulation of a new vision and a new system of governance that meets the needs of a modern state.

2. Security Challenges

Because of Daesh's persistent attacks, the government has to deal with the menace on a 'crash program' basis. Handling Daesh is a national priority. If not exterminated quickly, other such militant groups like the Turkistan Islamic Movement (TIM) and 'Fidayee Mahaz' will also raise their heads. The government has to convey the impression of zero tolerance for any militant group that operates on their soil. It is undeniable fact that this country has been under the garb of various political and security challenges that has led to the worsened law and order situation in the country though in most of the cases, these challenges have been ascribed with the Pak-Afghan Border (Tariq, 2020).

Security has become a burning issue particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 syndrome despite the long stay of the NATO forces in Afghanistan for a period of twenty years did not produce the efficacious results. Resultantly, the US forces and the allied powers had to embark upon the policy of drawdown from Afghanistan in 2014 (Tariq, 2015). Despite military operations in different parts of the country at different intervals, security situation could only be improved for a while but the non-state actors had to raise their heads as and when they find an opportunity. So, the past history of Afghanistan is testimony to the fact that the Afghanistan is a difficult country to be administered where involvement of the stakeholders in the governmental machinery of the country is *sine qua non* for the survival of the state.

The devastating attack in northern Afghanistan Kunduz raises many questions on the ability of the Taliban government to organize an effort to comprehensively search and destroy all remnants of terrorist networks operating within Afghanistan. Countering and eliminating such networks would depend on whether the Taliban have succeeded in delivering peace to its people and whether the world would then be willing to work with the new dispensation. This is a critical test that would determine whether the Taliban administration would remain sustainable in the long run.(Mohmand, Daesh desperate to destabilise Taliban govt, 2021)

Would Taliban be able to put in place viable local administrative institutions to take care of Daesh and other terrorist outfits?

According to Rustam Shah Mohmand dealing with Daesh is an immediate priority. They would need full public support in terms of reliable intelligence correct assessment of the strength of the group their supporters failure is not an option. The people and the world would judge them by how effectively they deal with this menace.(Rustam shah Mohmand)Daesh is already challenging with bomb blasts. More than administrative, it is a military challenge.(Riaz)

3. Economic Challenges

Afghanistan has been dependent on foreign aid since the Taliban regime toppled by the foreign forces in 2001. The Afghanistan GDP 40 percent is based on international aid but unfortunately the needed aid is now suspended. Hence, Afghanistan is in financial crisis by having no any promising revenue source. Although Taliban have secured some income sources like customs revenue from border crossing but that is only fraction of the required. (<http://www.dawn.com/news/1643710/5-challenges-for-the-taliban-in-afghanistan>)

The Taliban do not have access to Afghan central bank funds held in the United States. The Afghanistan foreign exchange reserves have been frozen by the US. Besides the IMF/World Bank have suspended aid to the Afghanistan whereas people are facing dire food shortage and high prices. This caused economic impasse because most international banks cannot even function in Afghanistan due to which it is difficult to remit money for humanitarian relief even.(Mohmand, Afghanistan and the advent of a new epoch, 2021)

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. While taking poverty then more than 70 per cent falling below the poverty line. Ninety percent of Afghanistan's population lived on less than \$2 a day. Poverty has overwhelmed the country with tens of thousands have become drug addicts. Unemployment is also on terrible rise of seventy percent. There is underdevelopment. Prior to the

current unrest, some 3.5 million people were already forcibly displaced within the country's borders. Recent estimates suggest that another 550,000 have been displaced since the start of 2021, 80pc of them women and children.(Sheikh, The New Afghanistan, 2021)The pandemic has added to woes and sufferings of the people. The health delivery system has collapsed.

According to the UN the continuing humanitarian crisis can cause havoc if the needed assistance is not available to the people. According to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, one in three Afghans don't know about their next meal and half of population is in dire need of humanitarian assistance.(Lodhi, Taliban's tough challenges, 2021)The UN has alerts about humanitarian catastrophe if the food storage dwindled more due to chaos and severe drought as due to later wheat production in this last year is down by 40 per cent.

Taliban government must show responsibility to handle the situation prudently and be flexible towards the international expectations in order to secure the international funds for the functioning of its financial system.(Lodhi, The Taliban Dilemma, 2021)

And the most immediate be solving the banking crisis because it is exacerbating the already worst economic and humanitarian situation. In this regard the most focus will be pressuring the US to release \$9 billion of Afghanistan's money now held in American banks. Taliban have started negotiation with Washington and ensuring them about their credibility that they could be in a long-term partnership with the US. Many in the US Congress see this as an important opportunity. If there is progress toward a consensus on building up a mutually beneficial relationship, that will pave the way for the UN system to release funding in such critical areas as food security, education, health and finances for running the country.(Mohmand, Taliban government struggling to determine priorities and governance, 2021)

Now taking the question of Would Taliban overcome the severe financial crunch? The Afghan affairs expert Rustam Shah Mohmand was hopeful

about Taliban overcoming financial hurdles if the US would agree to release the Afghan funds.

They will heavily depend on outside assistance. There are limited sources of revenue. Outside help will be just for sustenance and subsistence. Outside investment for mineral resources etc will depend on stability. (Riaz Muhammad Khan)

The US has promised to consider the release of more than \$9 billion of Afghan money stacked in American banks. (Mohmand, In the recognition game, the ball is now in the Taliban's court, 2021) Taliban clearly understand the critical role the US can play in the huge task of reconstruction and rehabilitation. Other than releasing the funds now held up, Washington could also play a role in such institutions as the World Bank and IMF responding to Kabul's request for financial and technical assistance. The G20 countries also held a virtual meeting that was chaired by the Italian Prime Minister. The meeting agreed to contribute more than \$1 billion as emergency aid to Afghanistan. It was also agreed that the funds would not be directly transferred to the Taliban government but would instead be released to UN departments and such organizations and NGOs that are operating in Afghanistan.

4. Recognition

International recognition is extremely important for the Taliban government in order to deal with multiple problems as Afghanistan is on the verge of humanitarian crisis. According to a recent UN refugee agency report, over 90 percent of Afghans are believed to be living below the poverty level. (Hussain, 2021)

There is new emerging order in Afghanistan. There is Government that has its writ all over the country, has roots in the masses and has delivered peace for the first time in decades. Why then withhold recognition?

The world is waiting and watching. Whether the Taliban would institute systems that would provide opportunities for both men and women to seek educations, jobs, whether minorities would be adequately protected and whether Taliban would be able to deal with the militant groups operating in their country.

Taliban have pledged to do all this and more. Their survival lies in guaranteeing peace to its war weary citizens and introduce systems that reflect the aspirations of the masses. (Mohmand, Afghanistan and the advent of a new epoch, 2021)

The US obviously is concerned because it believes the new emerging order would result in China becoming the dominant economic and political power. Washington is anxious because after its exit the grand Chinese 'one belt, one road' project will be carried out to its completion that would give ingress to Beijing in countries of south and west Asia and Eurasia. But this had to happen.

The Washington's concerns should not detract the Taliban from relentlessly pursuing their goal of establishing a system that ensures peace and prosperity. Taliban are seeking good relations with the US. If they can warm up to Moscow, they can also build the bridges with the US. Europeans would soon realize there is no point delaying recognition. There are hopes that the Americans would be willing to release the \$ 9 billion of Afghanistan currently lying in their banks. Taliban in the meantime would be well advised to focus on seeking assistance from the UN – technical, financial and critical manpower. (Mohmand, Afghanistan and the advent of a new epoch, 2021) The world must not forget that Taliban would be able to deal with the menace of 'Daesh' only if they can overcome their financial difficulties. They can confront other militant groups like Turkistan Islamic movement, 'Fidayeemahaz' if they succeed in consolidating their control of the country. Not only this but the Afghan army has disintegrated; the Police have lost thousands of their personnel. As new Police force has to be resurrected but that will happen only when they are able to focus on critical nation-building issues rather than seeking recognition.

Driving the Taliban into isolation would be counterproductive. That will be a historic folly. When the negotiations in Doha were in progress in the year 2020 and when the draft agreement was ready, President Trump decided to invite the Taliban leaders to the white house for the signing ceremony. The ceremony did not take place for some other reasons and the agreement was signed in Doha. If the Taliban representatives are invited to the White house for meeting the President of the US, then how can recognition be held up of that very Government?

What needed by Taliban is keeping themselves attached with the international community and seek support for the reconstruction of the country and its institutions. They have to present the image of a government that seeks cooperation, collaboration on the basis of their commitment to promote the cause of peace and progress. The world must acknowledge that Taliban are not a transnational entity; its sole aim is to operate inside Afghanistan and establish a truly Islamic system that meets the requirements of justice and equality. With this in mind the hurdles in the way of trust building could soon be overcome.

While the Taliban have been urging the world to recognize their government, they have not shown the responsiveness hoped for by the international community, beyond reassuring words. So far, no country has recognized the government although most countries are engaging with the Taliban and a handful have their embassies functioning in Kabul, including Pakistan. Perhaps content with such engagement and construing this as a prelude to recognition, Taliban leaders feel little need to respond to international demands. For its part the international community is in a wait-and-see mode and is willing to give the new government time to deliver. (Lodhi, 2021)

Joe Biden's statement that recognition of the Taliban is "a long way off" obviously strengthens the hardliners in Taliban ranks who are presumably making the case that their opponents are not showing any willingness to recognize the new reality in Afghanistan. What this could mean is that the new reality in Afghanistan will also change or at

least this is how one interprets reports of the divisions within Taliban ranks. (Sheikh, 2021)

Regional countries are concerned about Afghanistan transition government recognition as in case of Pakistan the Prime Minister Imran Khan stance is that Pakistan would only recognize the new government in coordination with Afghanistan's neighbors, referring to an agreement reached at the September 17 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Dushanbe in which Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan agreed on three criteria for recognition: 1) establishment of an inclusive government, 2) assurance of human rights and 3) adherence to the principle that Afghan territory not be used for terrorism against others. (Bateman, Asfandiyar Mir, Olson, & Watkins, 2021)

Now that the world has begun to recognize the need for extending urgent assistance to prevent a humanitarian disaster, the Taliban should seriously consider how to create an environment conducive to their government being recognized. They have stated in clear terms that girls will be free to go to schools, colleges and seek jobs. It is time they implement this decision. They must also take practical steps to ensure the protection of minorities. The Americans have reiterated that the Taliban government will be judged by their actions. The European Union has made similar statements. They must make good on their promises and then confront the world to reciprocate. They will also be well advised to give proportionate representation to all ethnic groups in the country. (Mohmand, 2021)

When the question that would Taliban get recognition? Then according to Rustam Shah Mohmand if they convince the world by their actions on girls education and women taking up job an environment would be created for the world to recognize the new government within the next 2 or 3 months.

According to Riaz Mohammad Khan it is not likely. Most of the international community will watch for Taliban sensitivity on human rights and gender issues, political reconciliation and stabilization of the country.

Recommendations

1. First and foremost, they have to put together an effective government with a semblance of the promised inclusiveness and reconciliation. Even when they succeed, they will need space to settle down. Outsiders must show patience.
2. The Afghan leadership, in particular the Taliban leaders, have the primary responsibility of averting a civil war. Their neighbors and the world community must do everything they can to help achieve that objective. The world community must be generous with humanitarian assistance to prevent further aggravation of the suffering of the Afghan people. (Riaz Muhammad Khan, Return of the Taliban)
3. The United States, its allies and regional countries should postpone, for the time being, the more controversial policy deliberations over whether or not to recognize or formally engage with the Taliban and its caretaker government. International efforts should focus on the resumption — and intensification — of humanitarian aid to the country. The next priority should be determining feasible means of resuming critical development funding for non-political civil servants (especially teachers, health workers and other essential sectors such as public infrastructure). Concerns in U.S. Congress and European parliaments about providing funding and assistance that may benefit the Taliban are valid, but there are essential services and salaries that have been entirely funded by Western states for most of the last twenty years.(Witkin, USIP challenges)
4. Humanitarian and development assistance should be swiftly resumed to the greatest extent possible, as neutrally and independently as possible.

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