

Who Are the Taliban?

Written by Grant Farr

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GRANT FARR, SEP 6 2021

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban stormed into Kabul after capturing all the key cities in Afghanistan. The Afghan military collapsed, fleeing their posts and giving up their guns and equipment. Many of the Afghan leaders fled, including President Ashraf Ghani. The Taliban's arrival in Kabul was much quicker than most had predicted, leaving thousands of people, including American citizens and Afghans who had assisted the Americans, in danger. Chaos occurred as thousands attempted to flee the Taliban by catching flights out of the Kabul airport as the American and NATO soldiers attempted to bring order to the chaos.

Many questions remain, including what kind of government the Taliban will assemble, whether the new government will include current or past leaders of Afghanistan, how the new Taliban government will be received by other nations in the world, and how they will treat vulnerable groups in Afghanistan including women, and religious and ethnic minorities. The real questions are who are the Taliban of today and how have they changed in the 20 years since they ruled Afghanistan? While the Taliban say that they are not the Taliban of old and are now more tolerant and accepting of women and religious minorities, their actions seem to indicate otherwise. What do we know about the Taliban and how will they rule?

Women and the Taliban

Afghanistan is a traditional Islamic society in which the role of women has always been restricted. However, the treatment of women became more restricted when the Taliban held power in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Under Taliban rule at that time, women were not allowed to work, attend school, or even leave their homes without a male relative accompanying them. Women were required to wear the all-encompassing burka, a veil that covers the entire body with a small, embroidered opening for women to look through. Women who did not follow the Taliban's directives or did not wear the burka were beaten by flogging or even stoning. Many women during that time were killed (Kirby, 2021).

Although the bombing of the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon were the main reasons for American and NATO forces entering Afghanistan in the Fall of 2001, the treatment of women has also been cited as a factor. "The central goal of the terrorists is the brutal oppression of women..." President George Bush said in December 2001 while the United States was gearing up for its invasion of Afghanistan (Kirby, 2021). In November of that year shortly after the United States invaded Afghanistan, Laura Bush said that "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Kirby, 2021). In 2010 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told a group of female Afghan ministers: "We will not abandon you, we will stand with you always" (Kirby, 2021).

Now looking back after 20 years of United States involvement in Afghanistan, it appears that women have greatly benefited from the American and NATO occupation. More girls are in school. There were over 9.5 million students in school in 2020, of which almost 40 percent were girls (Kirby, 2021). There are more women in such jobs as journalists, teachers, and doctors. In the 2004 Afghan constitution 27 percent of the seats in the "House of the People", essentially the lower house of parliament, are set aside for women. As a result, there are more women in the Afghan congress than in the United States House of Representatives (Mohamed, 2018).

But these gains have largely come in Kabul and a few other major cities. In fact, the condition of Afghan women in

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much of Afghanistan has improved very little in the last 20 years. Consider these facts. A 2020 report by Amnesty International found that Afghan women, even those with high political or social status, are harassed, threatened, and even killed. Amnesty International ranks Afghanistan as the world worst place to be a woman (Thompson, 2020). This report documents “attacks on schoolgirls and working women who dare to venture out into the public sphere; high levels of rape and domestic violence, as well as widespread physical and domestic abuse by state forces; forced and child marriage; and honor killings” (Thompson, 2020). In addition, the report cites that despite billions of dollars spend on women’s education, 87 per cent of Afghan women remain illiterate (Thompson, 2020).

The United Nations Development Program’s 2020 annual report ranks Afghanistan as one of the worst nations for women. The UNDP 2020 report shows that many Afghan women die in childbirth, that women are often married at a young age, and although more women are going to school, there are still many women who are not able or are not allowed to go to school (UNDP, 2020).

In fact, some senior United States officials have argued that the role of women in Afghan society had become a “pet rock in our rucksack taking us down,” (Kirby, 2021) indicating that many American officials saw the fight for the role of women in society was a lost cause. In addition, apparently the CIA exchanged Viagra pills for intelligence on the Taliban so that in the words of an Afghan journalist, “old men can rape their wives with American blessing” (Kirby, 2021).

The Taliban view of women

The Taliban’s policy with regards to women has not been clearly laid out. In the face of international condemnation, the Taliban seems to be trying to paint a positive picture to the international community regarding its treatment of women. The Taliban has stated that women would be allowed to work and go to school, “according to Islamic law” (Kirby, 2021).

Regarding women’s education on August 31, 2021, the Taliban Minister of Education, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, reported “The...people of Afghanistan will continue their higher education in light of Sharia law in safety without being in a mixed male female environment” (Crane, 2021). He went to say that the Taliban want to “create a reasonable and Islamic curriculum that is in line with Islamic and historical values and, on the other hand, be able to compete with other countries” (Crane, 2021).

However, it is not clear what Islamic law, or Sharia law, means in this context and what it says about the treatment of women. In fact, the treatment of women varies widely across the Islamic world from very restrictive to relatively open. In Iran, for instance, an Islamic theocracy, there are more women in schools and universities than men and there are many women professionals, including doctors and professors. In Turkey, another Islamic country, women attend school with men. Even in relatively conservative Islamic countries such as Pakistan, which has had a woman prime minister, women play important roles, attend schools, and universities. The phrase “Islamic Law” means very little.

In addition, although the Taliban’s view of women may seem particularly draconian, it is not inconsistent with that of many traditional Afghans. Despite the rapid urbanization in Afghanistan in the last few decades over 70 percent of Afghans continue to live in rural areas, where traditional views of gender roles are not inconsistent with the those of the Taliban. This is especially the case in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, the area from which the Taliban emerged and where the Taliban ideology is more closely aligned with local traditions and customs. In traditional Afghan society the situation of women is hard, difficult, and dangerous. In the rural areas of Afghanistan women are expected to marry young, to produce many male children, and to work in the fields at a young age. In addition, in traditional Afghan society, men can have up to four wives.

What the Taliban really mean when they say that women will be subjected to “Islamic law”, is that the role of women will be subject to Pashtu tribal law. At its core, the Taliban is a Pashtu tribal movement and many of its objectives and actions are consistent with the tribal codes of behaviors, sometimes referred to as “Pashtunwali”. These tribal codes specify obligations of honor, hospitality, revenge, and the treatment of women. Such strong tribal structures and codes of behavior are not found among non-Pashtun groups in Afghanistan. For instance, among the Hazara or Tajik

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ethnic groups the role of women is much more progressive.

While the Taliban have been in power in Kabul for only a few days, we already have an idea of how women will be treated. A female TV anchor in Kabul was not allowed to work. The Taliban told her "You are not allowed to work, go home" (Kirby, 2021). At the Herat women's university, female students and faculty were sent home. There are reports of Taliban going door to door looking for unmarried women between the ages of 14 to 45 to marry off to Taliban soldiers. Time will tell how women will do under Taliban rule. But the early signs are not good.

Religious and Ethnic Minorities

The Taliban treatment of religious minorities in Afghanistan, especially Shi'a Moslems, is problematic, despite claims to the contrary. In the months before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the Taliban produced a propaganda video on *al-Emarah*, the Taliban news agency, featuring the Shi'a religious leader, Mawlawi Mahdi Mujahid and one of the few Hazara Taliban members. The video urged the Shi'a to join the Taliban's effort to drive out the American invaders (Kazmin, 2021). The message was meant to reassure Afghan Shia, as well as Iran, that they had no reason to fear the return of the Taliban.

Shi'ism is a branch of Islam that follows the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, whom they consider sacred. Shi'a are found throughout the Islamic world. Shi'ism is the state religious of Iran. Shi'a are also found in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Yemen. The Shi'a in Afghanistan, who are mostly of the Hazara ethnic group, have much to fear from the Taliban. They constitute about 15 to 20 percent of the Afghan population. The Hazara are thought to descend from 13th Century warriors of Genghis Khan. They converted to Islam in the late 13th Century when this area was controlled by Iran. Historically, they have been persecuted in Afghanistan since the time of Abdur-Rahman Khan in the late 1800. Historically the heartland of the Hazara is in the high mountains of Central Afghanistan, however in the last several decades many have moved to Kabul where they live in an area called Dasht-e Barchi (Farr, 2007).

More recently, they have been persecuted by the Taliban who consider Shi'a not to be true Muslims. During the previous rule of the Taliban between 1996 and 2001, there were at least three large scale massacres of Hazara civilians, including the massacre of hundreds of Hazara men in Mazar-i Sharif in 1998. Several Iranian diplomats were killed in that event as well. Even after the Taliban had been driven out of Afghanistan in 2001 attacks on Hazara continued. Buses traveling between Kabul and the Hazarajat, as the Hazara area of Afghanistan is called, were often stopped and Hazara, who can be identified by their Central Asian features, were pulled from buses, and killed.

With the current return of the Taliban the Hazara are again facing persecution. Between July 4-6 2021, six Hazara men were killed by Taliban fighters in the village of Mundarakht, in the Malistan district of Ghazni Province. Six of the men were shot to death, and three others were tortured to death, including one man who was strangled with his own scarf and had his arm muscles sliced off (Callamard, 2021). On August 30, 2021 the Taliban shot 14 Hazara men, including 12 surrendered soldiers and two civilians in the Khadir district of Daykundi Province.

Conclusion

As of the writing of this article, the Taliban have been in power for a short number of weeks. We still do not know what the Taliban will do, how they will form a government, or how they will rule Afghanistan. They have to date, given mixed signals, at one time appearing moderate and at other times appearing violent and intolerant. The Taliban soldiers that appear on the streets seem to be operating independently from the leadership. However, there are many Afghans who have much to fear. These include, among others, women and the Shi'a. So far the future does not look promising.

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Grant Farr is a Profesor Emeritus at Portland State University. He has lived and worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and has published several articles and books on those countries. He is currently working on a major research project on Afghan refugees.