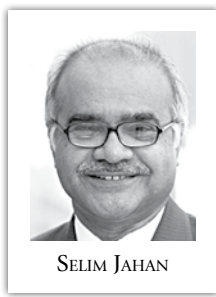


Afghanistan under the Taliban: What should we expect?



SELIM JAHAN

AFGHANISTAN is now under the reins of the Taliban. No, they have not come to power through the ballot box, rather they have accomplished it by implementing the famous saying of Mao Zedong: "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Afghanistan is now a Shariah-based Islamic state.

While lots of people have been struck by what has happened in Afghanistan in recent days, and others have been screaming that "everything is lost", there is no reason to be surprised. For a long time, operating under the radar, the Taliban has been consolidating its power and position all over Afghanistan, and then recently, it dealt the final blow. Today, it's the victor. The resumption of power by the Taliban after 20 years has a context, a history, and a set of correlated factors. Over the past years, a number of reasons have paved the way for another Taliban takeover.

First, the Afghan government, from the beginning, has been weak, vulnerable, and inefficient. The past two presidents—Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani—were, in a sense, outsiders and were in fact implanted by the United States. As a result, they were two American loyalists. Before becoming the President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai was an employee of Halliburton, where former US Vice-President Dick Cheney was the CEO from 1995 to 2000. I used to know Ashraf Ghani personally. While I was heading the United Nations Poverty Reduction Division, he used to head the Social Development Division of the World Bank. Both of them were elites, educated abroad, and were

attuned to the western standard of living. The complex realities of Afghanistan on the ground were beyond their comprehension and they did not have any real connection with either the Afghan life or its common people. As a result, during their tenures, they could not build an effective administrative system in Afghanistan. Thus, during the past two decades, the regions of the country were delinked from each other and the regional administrations were run by regional warlords. The central government was non-operational and ineffective at the regional level.

Second, because of the ineffectiveness of the central government, over the past years, Afghanistan failed to build a capable, effective, and strong armed force. So, the moment the western armed forces had left Afghanistan, the resistance broke down and the Taliban took over nearly every inch of the country. About a 180,000-strong Afghan army had to surrender to 80,000 Taliban fighters. While they were on the Afghan soil, the western army was supposed to train Afghan soldiers, which obviously did not happen to the extent necessary. The results were thus as expected.

Third, as the Afghan government was absent at the rural level of the country, the Taliban had carried out an effective propaganda war in its favour. During the past 20 years, the Taliban has skillfully made the rural Afghans believe that the country had gone under the grip of the westerners, who are enemies of Islam. So, the war they were engaged in was, in fact, a *Jihad*. The message resonated with rural Afghans, the Taliban got popular support, and it consolidated its base.

Fourth, over the years, the west has pursued a dual policy in Afghanistan. On the one hand, it has assured and promised to help the Karzai or the Ghani government, but on the other hand, it has been secretly negotiating



A beauty salon in Afghanistan with images of women defaced.

PHOTO: AFP

with the Taliban. Last year, without informing the Afghan government, the Trump administration held secret meetings with the Taliban. This act, on the one hand, had weakened the Afghan government, but on the other, had strengthened the Taliban position.

Fifth, the Americans have left Afghanistan at a very short notice, leaving their Afghan allies vulnerable to the Taliban. About 50 years ago, they did the same in Vietnam. The photos of thousands of desperate Afghans at Kabul Airport trying to flee the country remind one of hundreds of helpless desperate Vietnamese outside of the American Embassy in Saigon. In Afghanistan, Americans easily forgot their Afghan allies who helped them as interpreters, translators, or in other capacities.

It again proved the famous saying of John Foster Dulles, the US Secretary of States in the 1950s, as true: "we don't have permanent friends, we don't have permanent foes, but we have permanent interests."

At this juncture of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, three observations are critical. One, the Taliban has a very radical belief system. Thus, the country would be ruled by Shariah law. It means that the Taliban would resist any kind of liberal ideas or liberal people, scientific outlooks and modern thoughts. As a result, right after taking over, they killed the famous Afghan poet, researcher and historian Abdullah Atifi. The comedian, Fazal Mohammad, was beaten to death.

Two, the Taliban is a cunning and

treacherous group. So, they do not have any problem telling lies, deceiving, or betraying others. In the past, it has done so with the utmost ease. Therefore, whatever assurance it is providing now to protect the rights of women. Women would likely be the most oppressed group in the coming days. Islamic extremists from various countries are said to have been invited to come to Afghanistan to join the Taliban in exchange for Afghani women as presents to them. There have been allegations of Afghan girls and women being trafficked to neighbouring countries as sex slaves. In order to ensure their safety, a number of parents are giving their daughters in marriage to Taliban soldiers.

Three, a number of people seem to hope that the Taliban will take lessons from the past. Surely, it will take lessons, no doubt, but those will neither be positive nor constructive. About two decades ago, it had committed a blunder by giving refuge to Al-Qaeda, and it has learnt its lesson. Undoubtedly, it is not going to make the same mistake this time. The Taliban will keep quiet until the foreigners completely leave Afghanistan, after which it will show its true face. It is not going to make the same mistake this time—carrying out atrocities in the presence of foreigners in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, in my view, will not limit its activities to only within Afghanistan. Soon it will aspire to expand its sphere of influence to other countries. Pakistan may be its next target. The Pakistani prime minister has already uttered supportive words to the Taliban. So the door is open. At one point in time, it may turn its attention to Bangladesh as well. And that may be an alarming moment for us.

Selim Jahan is former Director, Human Development Report Office and Poverty Division, UNDP.

Looking back: How prioritising profits reversed health progress

ANIS CHOWDHURY and JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM

INSTEAD of a health system striving to provide universal healthcare, a fragmented, profit-driven market "non-system" has emerged in recent decades. The 1980s' neoliberal counter-revolution against the historic 1978 Alma-Ata Declaration is responsible for this.

Alma-Ata a big step forward
Neoliberal health reforms over the last four decades have reversed progress at the World Health Organization (WHO) Assembly in the capital of the then Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan, now known as Almaty.

Then, 134 WHO Member States reached a historic consensus reaffirming health as a human right. It recognised that health is determined by environmental, socio-economic and political conditions, not only medical factors as narrowly understood. The Declaration stated, "Governments have a responsibility for the health of their people which can be fulfilled only by the provision of adequate health and social measures". Also, "The people have the right and duty to participate individually and collectively in the planning and implementation of their health care".

Countries committed to the fundamental right of every human being to enjoy the highest attainable standard of healthcare without discrimination. They agreed that primary healthcare (PHC) is key to addressing crucial determinants of health.

Alma-Ata eschewed overly "hospital-centric" and "medicalised" systems, instead favouring a more "social approach" to medicine. In the Cold War divided world, the Declaration was a triumph for humanity, promising progress for global health.

It recognised the crucial contributions of multilateral cooperation, peace, social health determinants, health equity norms, community participation in planning, implementation and regulation, and involving other "sectors" to promote health.

Primary healthcare



With more money than WHO's paltry budget, corporate philanthropy has been remaking policies the world over.

Some developing countries—e.g., China, Costa Rica, Cuba and Sri Lanka—had already achieved impressive health outcomes at relatively low cost, raising life expectancy by 15 to 20 years in under two decades.

Instead of just curative medicine and clinical care, prevention and public health were given more emphasis. Basic health services, improved diets, safe water, better sanitation, health education and disease prevention became central to such initiatives.

Mainly rural community health workers (CHWs) were trained to help communities address common health problems. Differences in national government approaches, contexts and needs have also shaped PHC outcomes, reach and efficacy, e.g., in delivering healthcare to the poor. But despite reversals elsewhere, some efforts have continued, even expanded. Even in the 21st century, large-scale PHC efforts have made remarkable health gains, e.g., Brazil's Programa Saude da Familia and Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme.

Lalonde Report turning point

Thus, PHC, including CHW, programmes did

Alma-Ata inverted health policy priorities, as 90 percent of health problems were recognised as being caused by lifestyles, environments and human biology, with only 10 percent due to the "healthcare system", as noted by Canada's 1974 Lalonde Report.

The Lalonde Report reaffirmed WHO's basic approach. Its 1946 constitution had affirmed, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

The Report's multidimensional approach to human health marked a turning point, reshaping policy approaches. Similar health assessments, with more holistic understandings, were also influential.

Reports from the UK, USA, Sweden and elsewhere also challenged the dominant medicalised approach to healthcare promoted by big pharmaceutical and other health-related businesses.

Neoliberal ascendance

Developments since the 1980s have set back and reversed the Alma-Ata commitments. Latin American and other debt crises paved

the way for the neoliberal "Washington Consensus" counter-revolution.

"Rescue packages" from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, especially structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), demanded public spending cuts. These reduced social spending, cutting funding for health.

Thus, many PHC, including CHW programmes did not last. Citing cost recovery, SAPs pressed to impose user fees and privatise health services. The outcomes betrayed Alma-Ata's promise of greater health equity, and "Health for All" by 2000, undermining prospects for universal health coverage.

The World Bank's 1993 World Development Report, "Investing in Health", also undermined Alma-Ata. Justifying state healthcare provisioning cuts, it promoted for-profit health financing and other private solutions.

Healthcare financing key

In neoliberal dialect, strengthening health systems meant "enhancing public-private partnerships" among other such interventions. The Bank provided substantial financial support to fund its recommendations.

Despite Alma-Ata, the WHO's 2000 World Health Report (WHR 2000) criticised developing countries for "focusing on the public sector and often disregarding the—frequently much larger—private provision of care". It argued, "Health policy and strategies need to cover the private provision of services and private financing".

Addressing health progress became more "siloed" with the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) indicators' focus on curing and preventing particular diseases. Neither WHR 2000 nor the MDGs reiterated Alma-Ata's emphasis on social justice, equity and community participation.

Instead, that era saw more healthcare privatisation, public-private partnerships and contracting out of services. After this neoliberal eclipse, WHO's attempted U-turn, starting over a decade ago, has emphasised universal health care (UHC) and socio-

economic determinants, but the Alma-Ata betrays prevail.

Thus, the Bank's International Finance Corporation has been promoting private investments in healthcare services and infrastructure. Deploying billions, it buys public policy influence in Africa, India and beyond.

Philanthropy rules

Unsurprisingly, cash-strapped governments have welcomed financial support from supposed "do-gooder" philanthropists. Many states have to cope with fragile, even crumbling health systems, often overwhelmed by old killers and new epidemics.

Such MDGs-inspired support has typically been via "vertical funds" targeting specific diseases—contrary to Alma-Ata. With more money than WHO's paltry budget, corporate philanthropy has been remaking policies the world over.

Thus, the policy and ideological prejudices of the Gates Foundation, Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation and Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria have obscured Alma-Ata, also reshaping national health priorities.

Covid-19 has unveiled some more effects of various profit-driven healthcare inequities, chronic under-investment in PHC, and over-investment in profit-driven healthcare. They have not only hastened the retreat from "health for all" and UHC, but also made the world more vulnerable to epidemics.

Worse, the interests and priorities of corporate philanthropy have not only raised the costs of, and thus delayed containing the pandemic, but also reversed much of the modest and uneven progress of recent decades, besides worsening inequalities.

Anis Chowdhury is adjunct professor at Western Sydney University and the University of New South Wales, Australia. Senior United Nations positions in New York. Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, and received the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought in 2007.

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QUOTABLE Quote

BENEDICT ANDERSON
(1936–2015)
Anglo-Irish political scientist

No one can be a true nationalist who is incapable of feeling ashamed if his or her state or government commits crimes including those against their fellow citizens.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Witty remark
- 5 Whole range
- 9 Bohemian dance
- 10 British prime minister Johnson
- 12 Be of use
- 13 Steal
- 14 Muscular-looking, in slang
- 16 Make a choice
- 17 Church service
- 18 Hunters' guns
- 21 Saloon order
- 22 Straightened up
- 23 Pollster Elmo
- 24 Soldiers
- 26 Hailed vehicle
- 29 Prone
- 30 Long story

DOWN

- 1 Merry
- 2 Go by
- 3 Passes over
- 4 Story
- 5 Crunch targets
- 6 Road rescue
- 7 Baltimore player
- 8 Moved quickly
- 9 City of northern Italy

31 Fitting

32 Declined a bit

34 Eye-related

37 Gin drink

38 King march site

39 Espresso order

40 Office div.

41 Greek vowels

11 Hardens

15 Needed fixing, as a faucet

19 Midmonth day

20 Fragrant tree

22 Hammer or hacksaw

23 Hold up

24 Rewarded for good service

25 Baby's toy

26 Per—income

27 FBI employees

28 Scout's reward

29 Vietnam neighbor

30 Paintball sound

33 Land in the sea

35 Rascal

36 Purrr producer

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BEETLE BAILEY

NOBODY LIKES ANYTHING I MAKE!

HOW ABOUT PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY SANDWICHES?

YOU CAN'T SCREW THOSE UP

BABY BLUES

WOW! THESE CHAIRS SPIN AROUND! WATCH!

WOOSH!

BARF! UH-OH AND WE'RE NOT EVEN OUT OF THE DRIVEWAY YET!

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P A S T S W A T S
S L E E P T A R O T
A L T E R E X T R A
L A T A M P H I T
M Y O P I A H U E S
S P A R K L E R S
T I E I N
F I R E W O R K S
M I N I A N Y O N E
A N T D Y E S A X
C A I R O S P O K E
E L M E R S A V E R
S E E D Y L O S T

BY MORT WALKER

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT