

## **The Taliban Identity and Dream of National Cohesion: Establishing a Central Government in Afghanistan**

**Dr Ghulam Shams-ur-Rehman\***

### **Abstract**

The Taliban phenomenon is often studied through the prism of fundamentalism, political Islam, and *jihadism* without analysing the historical authority patterns of Afghan society. The Taliban emerged from within a network of the Islamists who resisted the Soviet occupation. It is also assumed that the Taliban's Islamic ideology is deeply rooted in their Pashtun culture. There may be a certain amount of accuracy in all of these assumptions, but any single supposition is not sufficient in trying to make sense of the 'Taliban'. The Afghan Islamists and Taliban might have taken ideological and logistical support from external actors, but their existence and survival is based on their acceptability by Afghan society. It is argued here that the Islamists and Taliban's desire to rule over Kabul has been the outcome of a historic struggle of the religious class for power. This article contends that suitable grounds for Afghan religious leadership were prepared long before the emergence of the Taliban. Giving an overview of Taliban reforms briefly, it discusses that Taliban's dream, like the earlier Afghan rulers, to establish a centralised Afghan government could not be realised due to their dependency on foreign assistance and because of the existence of strong but inter-conflicting regional units.

**Key words:** Afghan Politics, Afghan Warlords, Taliban, Islamism, *Pashtunwali*, Tribalism, Soviet-Afghan War, Afghan Resistance Movement.

### **Introduction**

**T**he Afghan resistance movement against the Soviet Union was not initially organised on a religious basis. It was a remonstrance against the foreign invasion and enforcement of external values, started initially by various groups having conflicting identities and ideologies ranging from the leftist to the Islamist. As the movement progressed, the

---

\* The author is Associate Professor at the Department of Islamic Studies, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.

rightists became more dominant because of the traditional role of the religious class during this external invasion. However, they, due to ethnic and ideological differences, could not organise themselves under a single resistance movement. Despite this, they motivated people to save and safeguard their socio-cultural and religious norms. Frederick Barth opined that the Afghan Resistance was unique in its form and structure as:

It is not a centrally organised movement, and it is not animated by vision of a new reformed society. Its roots are deep in folk culture, and consist of three major components: 1) a clear and demanding conception of individual honour and self-respect as a necessary basis for personal identity and value; 2) a desire to live by one's own local, highly diverse traditions and standards; and 3) an Islamic conviction.<sup>1</sup>

However, the Islamists who always had the silent support of the traditional authorities during the resistance, lost their silent support after the withdrawal of Soviet forces which in turn reduced their authority and ability to mobilise the masses. Consequently, Najibullah<sup>2</sup> successfully survived three years after the Soviet withdrawal. The reconstruction of Afghanistan was a great challenge for the resistance leadership after the collapse of his regime. The new environment gave rise to religious leadership and warlords on the horizon of Afghan politics. The tribal chiefs had lost their powers considerably and the religious leadership and local commanders usurped the positions of *malik/khan* given the legitimacy they had acquired during the war. However, because of the absence of a common motive and ethno-ideological differences among the leadership of the Islamists, solidarity and peace could not be achieved in the country, and a civil war broke out, particularly around the capital Kabul. In this way, both Islam and culture were abused and this was, in Michael Griffin's words, 'the natural consequence of dynastic disruption.'<sup>3</sup>

The Peshawar Accord was signed, with the assistance of the United Nations, between the *mujahideen* groups on April 26, 1992. According to the Accord, an interim government of the Islamic State of Afghanistan was formed for six months. Sibghatullah Mujadidi<sup>4</sup> and Rabbani<sup>5</sup> were

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Barth, "Cultural Wellspring of Resistance in Afghanistan," in *The Great Game Revisited*, ed. Rosanne Klass (New York: Freedom House, 1987), 187.

<sup>2</sup> Editor's Note: Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai, popularly known as Najibullah or Dr Najib, was the President of Afghanistan from 1987-1992, when the *mujahideen* took over Kabul.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Editor's Note: He served as Acting President after the fall of Najibullah's government in April 1992. He died in February 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Editor's Note: Burhanuddin Rabbani (d. September 20, 2011) was President of

nominated to be the head of state for two and four months respectively. The cabinet was appointed from parties of the *mujahideen*. The Interim Government of Rabbani formed the *Shura-e-ahl-e-hal-wa-aqad* (Council of Resolution and Settlement). The Council elected Rabbani as President of the country which intensified the anger of the opposition. Kabul was witnessing a heavy civil war. Saudi Arabia sponsored a peace accord between the former *mujahideen* in Islamabad on March 7, 1993. The Accord appointed Rabbani as President and Hekmatyar<sup>6</sup> as Prime Minister. King Fahd<sup>7</sup> invited all Afghan leaders to Mecca where they swore in the Holy Ka'aba to stand by their agreement. Even then the restoration of peace could not be achieved and a war broke out between Rabbani and Hekmatyar.

Hekmatyar did not join the interim administration and accused that the government was formed under the influence of ex-communists, and demanded that the northern militia under General Dostum<sup>8</sup> leave Kabul.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the appointment of Ahmad Shah Massoud<sup>10</sup> as Defence Minister complicated the relations of the government with Hekmatyar. At this stage, a clear fragmentation could be observed among the *mujahideen* on ethno-political grounds. Hekmatyar was supported by the Pashtun; even extremist ex-*khalqi* leaders like Aslam Watanjar joined him, while Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud were supported by the Tajiks and other non-Pashtuns, including the ex-*perchamis*. Similarly, the Uzbeks supported General Dostum, and the Hazaras supported the *Hizb-e-Wahdat* (a major Afghan political party). This ethnic division was further aggravated by sectarian conflicts when some Arab volunteers of Sayyaf's party showed aggression towards the Shias and the *Hizb-e-Wahdat*. The *Hizb-e-Wahdat* joined Hekmatyar against the government.

On a wider scale, Afghan political parties can be divided into two rival groups: the *Shura-e-Nasar* (Supervisory Council) and the *Shura-e-Hamahangi* (Coordinated Council). The former was mainly led by Rabbani and Massoud; while the latter consisted of the forces of Hekmatyar,

---

Afghanistan from 1992-1996. He served as interim President in the last two months of 2011, following the fall of the Taliban. He was the leader of Jamiat-e-Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Society of Afghanistan), which has close ties to Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami.

<sup>6</sup> Editor's Note: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is a former Prime Minister of Afghanistan and founder and current leader of the Hizb-e-Islami political party.

<sup>7</sup> Editor's Note: Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud was King of Saudi Arabia from 1982-2005.

<sup>8</sup> Editor's Note: Abdul Rashid Dostum has been serving as Vice President of Afghanistan since 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 113.

<sup>10</sup> Editor's Note: Massoud was a military leader and strategist, during the resistance against the Soviet occupation between 1979 and 1989. He was killed in September 2001.

Dostum, and the *Hizb-e-Wahdat*. Ethnic and personal interests played a major role in the formation of these rival groups. For instance, Hekmatyar, who opposed the participation of ex-communist elements in the Interim Government, and demanded the exclusion of General Dostum and his militia from Kabul, made an alliance with him against the government in 1994, while pro-Soviet Dostum who fought against the resistance, became pro-*mujahideen* in 1992 and assisted them in their struggle to take the control of Kabul. He developed a coalition with Rabbani and Massoud in 1992; and then joined Hekmatyar against the Rabbani forces in 1994. With the rise of the Taliban, he made an agreement with Massoud to establish the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in 1996.

The fragile central government of Rabbani was more vulnerable as compared to the earlier regimes. In fact, it resembled the government under Amir Habibullah Khan in 1929, who took control of Kabul, but could not gather much support to fight against the Pashtun resistance in order to break their political hegemony across the country. The Rabbani government also had to face similar financial problems as well. Both Tajik leaders did not have enough financial resources to attract the provisional and regional warlords to win over opponents. Within one year from April 1992 to April 1993, Kabul was severely destroyed: about 30,000 inhabitants were killed and 100,000 were badly injured.<sup>11</sup> By the end of 1993, the central government had established its control over the capital which was under constant assaults by the opposition forces. Beyond the boundaries of Kabul, the central government had little influence. The alliance of Dostum, *Hizb-e-Wahdat* and Ismaili Shias consolidated their authority in the north of Afghanistan, while the east was under the control of a considerably neutral *Nangarhar Shura* led by Haji Qadir. The west was under the control of pro-Rabbani Ismail Khan; while in the south-east Paktia was under the control of Sirajuddin Haqqani and Hekmatyar's loyalists. Thus, most of the country was ruled by independent regional administrations, where the central government could assert little authority.

The internal conflicts and inability of the Islamists to deliver peace and security in the long war-torn country produced an opposition from within the religious class. They were the Taliban. They, in contrast to their predecessor, were enthusiastic about the claim of supra-ethnic, supra-tribal Islamic ideology. Historically, they echoed the Pashtun struggle for authority when Nadir Khan had gathered support of the religious and tribal

---

<sup>11</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *Understanding War in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2011), 36.

rural leaders on both sides of the Durand Line in order to end the central government of the Tajik Amir Habibullh Khan in 1929.<sup>12</sup>

### **Taliban's Identity, Ideology and Struggle for Centralised Government**

It is significant to analyse Taliban's identity in order to understand their position and reception amongst the Afghans. They were predominantly Pashtuns and religiously Islamist, trained in the Deobandi School of Thought. Being a Pashtun, Mullah Omar, a Ghilzai (Khilji) Pashtun, had been successful in gathering the support of the Pashtun tribes. Moreover, the Taliban, coming from the Deobandi tradition, were not considered anti-traditional. Therefore, they were initially perceived among the Pashtun as simple religious students, who attempted to restore law and order and to maintain peace and stability in the midst of internal conflict, without any political or ideological agenda to impose. Mullah Omar was neither from the Durrani lineage nor from the *malik/khan* class. Similarly, he did not initially propagate his Islamism as opposed to the modern Islamists such as the *mujahedeen* leaders of the *Jamaat-e-Islami*. Therefore, he was perceived as a neutral leader who might deliver well in the war-torn country. It is also assumed that Pashtun identity and ethnicity contributed a great deal in the reception given to the Taliban by their Pashtun fellows. The Pashtuns are historically adherents to Sunni Islam and their ideology is deeply embedded in *Pashtunwali* which has given them a unique identity since the early eighteenth century conflict with the Safavid Shias. The Taliban followed the footsteps of Amir Abd al-Rahman in his effort to establish the Sunni identity of the country.<sup>13</sup>

Mullah Omar's first public explanation of the Taliban mission was to restore peace, provide security to the wayfarer, and protect the honour of the women and poor. Sinno argues that the Taliban were perceived as a neutral element of society which made them acceptable to all the sections and Pashtun warlords. Moreover, the method through which they approached the local commanders also leveraged their neutral role of religious leadership in Pashtun norms.<sup>14</sup> Griffin analyses the early period of the Taliban and argues that 'although the implication was there, no explicit

---

<sup>12</sup> Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1980), 452-453.

<sup>13</sup> All Afghan rulers have always been adherents of the Sunni Islam and Hanafi jurisprudence; cf. Harvey H. Smith, *Area Handbook for Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 37-38.

<sup>14</sup> Abdulkader Sinno, "Explaining the Taliban's Ability to Mobilize the Pashtun," in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, eds. Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), 84-85.

mention was made of *jihad* and, indeed, it could not have been until the Taliban had acquired the critical mass needed to present themselves as a popular force for change.<sup>15</sup>

The Taliban's Pashtun ethnicity helped them in mobilising the Pashtuns. As they progressed, most of the former Pashtun *muhajideen* leaders accepted their legitimacy, and the Taliban did not face any significant confrontation in the south and eastern Afghanistan because of the initial perceptions as Pashtun 'heirs'. Nonetheless, with the course of time, many Pashtuns criticised them because of their predominant Kandahari structure. This was a natural response within an egalitarian tribal society. The intra-tribal rivalries of the Durrani and Ghilzais might have a role to play. However, the non-Pashtuns were disappointed with the Pashtun ethnocentric formation and dominance of the Taliban.

Historically, most of the Afghan rulers had to face the conflict between 'centre versus periphery'. The central government desired to assert its authority on the rural tribes, whereas the tribes retaliated against those reforms which could reduce their autonomy. Contrary to the traditional politics of 'centre versus periphery', the Taliban struggle for power is observed as an assertion of 'periphery versus centre' or 'rural versus urban'. The Taliban ideology and reformism was deeply embedded in the Pashtun rural culture. The urban class resented the Taliban reforms seen as a conservative interpretation of Islam, with the mixture of rural *Pashtunwali*. The relationship between the Taliban ideology and *Pashtunwali* norms is multifaceted. They exercised *Pashtunwali* partly to justify their acts and to win tribal support for their agenda. Secondly, in contrast to the *qalang* [urban] version of *Pashtunwali*, the Taliban attached themselves with *nang* (the rural norms).<sup>16</sup> Thus, they faced less confrontation in the rural Pashtun region where *nang Pashtunwali* had a normative position. On the other hand, the urban Pashtun perceived reforms by the Taliban as anti-normative because the *qalang* version of *Pashtunwali* was at variance with the *nang* tradition. The Taliban were criticised among the urban Pashtuns because they attempted to impose rural Pashtun tradition in urban society. Their endeavour to establish a gender segregated society in the urban areas is a reflection of tribal conservatism. They could not properly understand and evaluate the change in the women's sphere in urban areas which took place

---

<sup>15</sup> Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> For the study of heterogeneity of the *Pashtunwali*; cf. Craig Cordell Naumann, *The Pashtunwali's Relevance as a Tool for Solving the 'Afghan Crisis'* report (Boston: American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, 2008), 119; Akbar S. Ahmed, *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans: A Critical Essay in Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), 81; David B. Edwards, "Learning from the Swat Pathans: Political Leadership in Afghanistan: 1978-97," *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 4 (1998): 714.

during the communist regimes who attempted to raise the status of women by giving them commanding positions in different fields of life. Afghan women served as commanders in the Revolutionary Defence Group militias in the 1970s and 1980s. The communist regimes focused on the education and professional training of Afghan urban women. There were only about 10 per cent girls' enrolment rates at the primary and secondary school levels in 1975. The communist regimes initiated the literacy campaign. During the 1980s, considerable development took place in the education sector. There were 233,000 girls studying in school and about 7000 in colleges and universities. This change was not properly assessed by the *mujahideen* government in 1992 and they attempted to roll back many reforms of the communist regime. They banned women from driving and so on, while the Taliban repressed them more harshly. The working class women suffered immensely during the Taliban rule in urban areas.<sup>17</sup> Cole argues that gender segregation in the rural Pashtun society was part of their culture, but imposing the same on urban society caused unrest in areas such as Mazar and Kabul.<sup>18</sup> Thus, they faced real opposition from the well-educated urban population of Kabul and Mazar and other big cities.

The Taliban's arguments, about the role and status of women, were similar to the arguments of their predecessor *mullahs* of the early 1920s when Amir Aman Allah had initiated reforms for women education and emancipation.<sup>19</sup> Mawlavi Shahidkhayl, the Taliban's undersecretary of education in 1998, expounded the policy about girls' education. He stated that a jurisprudential ruling (*fatwa*) was required in order to determine the limitation and boundaries of female education, and as far as their work was concerned, it was evident that they should remain in their houses citing the verse 'Stay in your house' [33:33] from the Holy Quran as an example. Therefore, their education was not banned permanently, but, their personal freedom was limited to their houses and they were not allowed to work in public places nor take part in outdoor activities. The implementation of a strict code of veiling, and women's confinement in the house, prohibition of music, and punishment on shaving or trimming mens' beards, provoked unrest among the urban society. Moreover, the enforcement of Islamic punishments, and their application through aggressive punitive measures, without devising proper regulations and carrying out appropriate judicial procedures, created much resentment among the masses. Taliban reforms

---

<sup>17</sup> Juan R. I. Cole, "The Taliban, Women, and the Hegelian Private Sphere," in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, eds. Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), 143.

<sup>18</sup> Cole, "The Taliban," 140.

<sup>19</sup> cf. Mahmud Tarzi, ed., *Seraj al-Akhar-e-Afghaniyah* [The Lamp of the News of Afghanistan] 3, no. 10 (1913), Dalw, 8, 1292/.

were considered anti-modern based on the traditional and crude interpretation of the *Shari'a*.

The Taliban radically proclaimed the return of 'tradition' in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> They were shaped by a distinctive political milieu of the Pashtun belt extending across the Afghan-Pakistan border. In their traditionalist religious ideology and social composition, they diverged markedly from Islamist movements in Egypt, Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, and even Pakistan, which have been led by engineers, professors, doctors, and educationists, who attempted to theorise the process of Islamisation of Muslim societies on the principle of Islamic law and *Shari'a* incorporated with modern knowledge or presenting it through the lens of traditional understanding in a viable manner.

Taliban's strict interpretation of the *Shari'a*, and inability to understand the wider context, created a negative image among the leading scholars of the Muslim world, and in some cases, damaged their international relations. For instance, on the issue of Bamiyan Buddhas, they refused to consider the requests of Buddhist Japan who had been spending millions of dollars on humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, they did not value the opinion of Islamic experts on the issue either. A delegation of scholars from the well-known Al-Azhar University, Cairo visited Afghanistan and met with the Taliban leadership, in order to pursue them not to destroy the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001. They were astonished to hear their arguments on the issue and commented that they did not have comprehensive knowledge of the Islamic legal system and jurisprudence; and because they were not well-versed in Arabic language, linguistics, and literature, they had mixed many cultural issues with theological discourse and Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, the Taliban always claimed their Islamic ideology and supra-ethnic identity. Their reforms, like many other Muslim revival movements, were focused on the restoration of the socio-cultural life of Afghan society on the basis of puritanical Islam. They presented themselves as Islamic reformers to purify the religion and ethics from heresies and reprehensible innovations, and attempted to restore Islamic teachings along traditional patterns.

As discussed earlier, in some cases, their anti-*Pashtunwali* reforms put them at odds with the Pashtuns, particularly in the eastern provinces of

---

<sup>20</sup> Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi, introduction to *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, eds. Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), 35.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 266.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.



Paktya and Paktika. The Pashtun tribes resisted their reforms which were at variance with their customary legal system of *Pashtunwali* which gave them autonomy and a sustainable system of tribal life without being in conflict with the Islamic legal system. They considered the *Pashtunwali* as an alternative system which was harmonious and compatible with Islamic law, at least in their particular context. On January 23, 2000, an uprising began in Khost in Paktia Province against the appointment of Kandahari administration. They also reacted on the rule which supplanted their local customary law (*Pashtunwali*) with *Shari'a* law. This kind of conflict had already appeared in January 1999 when Taliban banned a local game of egg fighting and declared it un-Islamic.<sup>23</sup>

Taliban, however, enforced some positive reforms to eliminate the evil and the harmful norms of the Pashtun society. Mullah Omar prohibited the tribal customary law of *Swara*, according to which women were given to settle blood feuds which was called *had pa had ke*.<sup>24</sup> Mullah Omar issued a decree and declared it a violation of Islamic teaching and against female dignity. Similarly, according to Pashtun tradition, a widow had to marry another member of his husband's tribe. Mullah Omar prohibited this tradition as well, and restored the liberty of women to choose her husband according to her own desires as conferred by Islam.<sup>25</sup> The prohibition of these social evils was not new in Afghan society; and the Taliban were not the first who promulgated them. Amir Aman Allah had also enforced them, but he had to face harsh criticism from the tribal chiefs, while the religious leadership of the time had rejected them altogether.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the socialist regimes also implemented them to improve the social status of women in tribal society.<sup>27</sup>

The Taliban's understanding of Islam, as noted above, was deeply rooted in their rural Pashtun culture, but that does not mean they supported the rural tribal authorities or their existing system. They strictly followed the footsteps of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (Afghan Communist Party) in eliminating the tribal autonomy. They killed many tribal elders who had already lost their authority over the last two decades of war; while their successors were more vulnerable because of the lack of

---

<sup>23</sup> Robert D. Crews, "Moderate Taliban?" in Rober D. Crews and Amin Tarzi, eds., *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), 265.

<sup>24</sup> Naumann, *The Pashtunwali's Relevance*, 53.

<sup>25</sup> Cole, "The Taliban," 143.

<sup>26</sup> Abd al-Rahman Pazhwak, *Taamulat-Huquqiyya wa Jaziya-i-Milli* [National Legal Transaction], Salnama-Kabul [Kabul Almanac], 1318 Sh.H/1939, 250.

<sup>27</sup> Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 56.

authority.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the *jirga* system lost its traditional utility in conflict resolution mechanisms.

In many Pashtun tribes, the *jirga* had been replaced by the *Shura*. The *Shura* formation is more hierarchical in structure in contrast to the traditional *jirga* which was egalitarian in its essence where all members enjoyed equal status on a secular basis. This was a principle change in the formation of the institution of *jirga*. On the other hand, the *mullahs* gradually strengthened their authority since the foundation of the national state of Afghanistan in 1880. Out of traditional respect as custodians of religion, they were appointed on official positions and were given control over religious endowments (*waqf*) and education. They were perceived as state bureaucrats among the masses. They emerged as a political opposition in the resistance against the socialist regimes. With the fall of Najibullah's regime, they gained unprecedented authority in national politics. The *mujahideen* regime was a manifestation of the power of religious leaders of the Islamic parties and warlords, while the Taliban delegated authority to the village *mullahs* and local commanders by establishing a hierarchical structure of central government. The village *mullahs* were appointed as tax collectors. Thus, their public image rose as a part of the administration in addition to their traditional authority.<sup>29</sup>

### **Taliban's Relations with International Powers and Establishment of Central Government**

The Taliban, like the early Afghan rulers, also attempted to establish a centralised government in Kabul which ended up facing the same organisational problems. Insufficient financial resources always remained an obstacle in consolidating the authority of the central government of Kabul over the provinces and peripheral regions. The Taliban, in contrast to their predecessors, remained successful in collecting taxes from the rural areas because of their comparatively strong hold on the rural tribes. Moreover, they successfully channelised opium money in large amounts before 2000. It was paradoxically against their ideology, but they justified it under special circumstances. The country was run on the revenue collected by taxing production. The opium cultivation increased between 1995 and 1999 and the area under cultivation increased from 54,000 hectares to

---

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Ruttig, *How Tribal Are the Taliban?: Afghanistan's Largest Insurgent Movement between its Tribal Roots and Islamist Ideology*, AAN Thematic Report 4 (Kabul: Afghanistan Analyst Network: 2010), <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100624TR-HowTribalAretheTaleban-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-12.

91,000 hectares.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the early government, they could not extensively win financial support from international players; however, they gathered some financial and diplomatic assistance from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE, but that assistance was too little to initiate any state-building project. These countries also recognised their government in 1997 when they had captured more than 90 per cent territory of the country.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, conscription had always been a major issue for all Afghan governments. Historically, this had remained a source of contention and conflict between the central government and rural tribal areas.<sup>32</sup> The Taliban regime did not face this problem. They initially gathered strength from the *madrasah* networks mainly linked to the *Harkat-e-Inqilab-e-Islami* and *Hizb-e-Islami (Khalis)*. As their movement progressed, all significant networks of the Pashtun *mujahideen* of the south-eastern or eastern region either joined the Taliban, or extended silent consent to them. Historically, the central government had to establish a strong army to control south-eastern Afghanistan; whereas the Taliban's main strength belonged to that region. This was a great strategic leverage for the movement. However, while the PDPA relied on the Soviet forces, the Taliban were not in extreme need of assistance from Osama bin Laden or other global *jihadists*. They had enough armed men from their Afghan and Pashtun fellows living and studying in the *madrasahs* across the Durand Line.

Their relations with the international powers became hostile because of their inability to understand the dynamics of international affairs. The U.S. made some positive statements about the Taliban in the beginning because an American company UNOCAL was the leading investor in the consortium that intended to establish a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and beyond. Even Bill Richardson, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, visited Kabul in early 1998 to pursue/encourage the Taliban to attend peace talks in Islamabad.<sup>33</sup> However, the Taliban treatment of women, and violation of human rights made the relation complicated. Later, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia asked them to expel Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan because of its alleged involvement in the attacks on the U.S. embassies in East African countries, Tanzania and Kenya on August 7, 1998. The Taliban refused the demands which made

---

<sup>30</sup> Atiq Sarwari and Robert D. Crews, "Epilogue: Afghanistan and the Pax Americana," in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, eds. Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), 333; Crews and Tarzi, introduction, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), 194.

<sup>32</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 112, 157, 183-184; Senzil K. Nawid, *Religious Response to Social Change in Afghanistan 1919-29: King Aman-Allah and the Afghan Ulama* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1999), 81.

<sup>33</sup> Magnus and Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*, 202-203.

their relations with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia hostile. Regional actors were worried about the ongoing situation: Iran was unhappy because of their sectarian conflict with the Shia community of Afghanistan; India was fearful about its security, particularly after the hijacking of an Air India flight into Kandahar. Russia perceived them as a threat since they had the potential to expend terrorism to its north-eastern borders. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia recognised their government, even then they refused Saudi extradition of Osama bin Laden; while they did not accept Pakistan's proposal on the Durand Line. Their diplomatic and foreign affairs understanding was not deep. They could not assess the anger of the international actors when they blew up the Sixth Century statues of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001. They neglected the requests of Japan who had been providing generous finances for the humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup>

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia unrelentingly demanded from the Taliban to extradite the leader of Al-Qaeda Osama bin Laden from Afghanistan. Mullah Omar refused to accept the demand and argued that bin Laden was their guest, and according to *Pashtunwali's* tradition of *melmastia* (obligation of hospitality), it was their responsibility to protect their guest even at the risk of their own life. However, Mullah Omar assured the international powers that bin Laden would not engage in any harmful activities which could harm international peace and security, and he also informed bin Laden, that the code of *melmastia* also made the guest responsible not to act in a way which could harm or defame the host. After September 11, 2001, the U.S. warned the Taliban to immediately extradite Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. Mullah Omar refused to do so and he called a *loya jirga* to discuss the issue. Three hundred *mullahs* gathered across the country, and they told Mullah Omar that it was indeed against the values of *Pashtunwali* to expel a guest from their region, but under problematic circumstances where a host might have to face difficulties, it was the obligation of the guest to leave the land of the host voluntarily.

The discussion above highlights that the Taliban established a strong hierarchy in their *shura* system where Mullah Omar as *amir-al-momineen* had authority to veto the recommendation of the *shura*. This reflects the supra-tribal formation of the Taliban. On the other hand, the *shura* and Mullah Omar did not make any reference from the *Shari'a* which shows that they were instrumental in the use of Islam and the *Pashtunwali*.<sup>35</sup> The Taliban remained more stable as compared to their early Pashtun rulers even without significant external financial support. However, they could not manage both human and financial resources for establishing a centralised

---

<sup>34</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 266.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 268-269.

government in Afghanistan. Further, their weak diplomacy could not serve them and they lost the support of their close allies.

## **Conclusion**

The Pashtuns' rule over Afghanistan was not merely because of their ethnic majority rather it was based on their ability to mobilise the Pashtun masses for their power struggle. The early Pashtun monarchs successfully consolidated their power with the army of south-eastern Pashtun tribes. They always conferred upon them special dispensations, privileges and tax exemptions to win their support, while their rebellion against the rule caused often horrific consequences as observed in the episodes of Amir Aman Allah and Habib Allah Khan. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar perhaps knew this point but he could not mobilise the Pashtuns as the Taliban did. However, the Taliban could not sustain their rule because of their inability to understand modern politics, urban society and its socio-economic needs, and the complexities of international politics. They could not follow the growing ethnic consciousness of the marginalised ethnic minorities and its impact on Afghan politics. Consequently, they were criticised and faced strong opposition from four directions: urban population, non-Pashtuns, Shia Hazaras, and regional and international actors. However, the opposition groups were fragmented and any single group was not in a position to stand against the Taliban rule.

An analysis of the Taliban, since their emergence on the political horizon of the country shows that they utilised both the internal and external elements of religious ideologies and traditional Pashtun norms to strengthen their authority and ascendancy. They initiated their movement for the restoration of peace without making any *jihad* declaration or political agenda, but when they took control of Kabul, they started to implement their puritanical idiosyncratic socio-religious reforms. They were so determined in their reform programme that they did not accept any dictation or suggestion even from the Muslim scholars. Their all-exclusive ethnic and religious approach was a major hindrance in the integration of social and ethno-religious sections of Afghan society. Their alleged struggle for the restoration of peace and stability ended up in the establishment of internal Pashtun clerical imperialism upon other ethnic and religious factions of the country. The composition of the *jirga* or *shura* was changed and *mullahs* replaced the tribal chiefs on all village, district and provincial levels. The *mullahs* also replaced the traditional authorities in the *loya jirga*. Apart from the composition, the nature of traditional egalitarian *jirga* was also transformed. The Taliban's *shura* was more hierarchical rather than egalitarian, where Kandahari *mullahs* were perceived as more powerful and

the veto authority rested in the hands of the *amir al-mumineen* who could declare the recommendations of the *shura* null and void.

The Taliban significantly lacked the scholarship and diplomatic expertise through which they could introduce their reforms in a systematic way and strengthen their rule by developing harmonious relations with the international community. Apart from some verdicts regarding the ongoing social issues and their implementation through punitive measures, they did not have any political set of reforms or any serious understanding of economics or international affairs through which they could take the country out of its crisis. In fact, the Taliban was comprised of a group of enthusiastic students. They lacked the guidance of senior and well-versed scholars who could lead them in a nation-building programme for a war-torn country. The Taliban may have the ability to carry out guerrilla war in the tedious terrain of rugged mountains, but designing viable reforms for the restoration of an economy and political system needs all-embracing intellectual and diplomatic abilities.

The Taliban could not survive after 9/11. Their structure and authority patterns now resemble their predecessor's socialist regimes. They failed to harmonise their religious ideology with the Afghan culture just as the Socialists could not make their reforms compatible with the indigenous tradition of a tribal egalitarian society. Both are also similar in the way that they attempted to impose their reforms on Afghan society without understanding the contextual realities. The use of violence and aggression is a common semblance in both regimes. The Socialists attempted to modernise Afghanistan by force by undermining the existing structure and authorities. The Taliban endeavoured to Islamise Afghans by using similar techniques. The long cherished mission of peace and security was attempted through punitive measures which in the long run resulted in the creation of severe opposition. The Taliban strived to impose their rural tribal culture on the urban population, whereas the Socialists did vice versa. In this context, the latter remained strong in the cities, while the Taliban in the periphery. Similarly, both of them had to rely substantially on their external allies for their existence and wanted to establish a strong central government in Kabul, but could not achieve their goal. ■