TALIBAN TRIUMPHANT?

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The Afghan tragedy is now being played out in gathering darkness.

The fall of the Afghan capital Kabul to the Taliban militia during the early hours of 27 September 1996 marked a distinct break from the politics of the last two decades. Both the communist regime (1978–1992), and the post-communist Islamic government (1992–1996) were committed to modernity, although they held radically different views on how its fruits were to be exploited. The Taliban, by contrast, are above all else an anti-modernist movement, the only truly ‘fundamentalist’ force to have held power in Afghanistan this century.

In August 1995, Taliban recapturing of Kabul began, and the following month, the Taliban swept into the western city of Herat. Yet even with the fall of the eastern city of Jalalabad to the Taliban on 14 September 1996, few observers anticipated that Kabul would soon follow. Its fall resulted from a potent mixture of internal and external factors.

First, on 26 June 1996, Hamid Karzai resigned the office of Prime Minister, following a May agreement with Taliban. His aim was to broaden the base of the government by bringing in a prominent member of the Taliban ethnic group. It had the opposite effect.

There are dangers in rewarding terror, even if the aim is to produce stability. Since Karzai had been largely responsible for the recent attacks which devastated much of Kabul between 1992 and 1995, his return to the fold condemned rather than legitimized the government, and brought it no forces of any military value.

When the youthful Taliban troops arrived at the edge of Kabul, they confronted government forces some of whom were older, more tired and, with the return of Hamid Karzai, no longer certain exactly what they were being asked to defend. As a result the front line was prone to collapse.

Second, in contrast to its opponents, the Taliban government had never been a recipient of massive external assistance. As Barnett Rubin observed, of all the forces in the aftermath of the communist collapse, ‘Massoud alone lacked a powerful foreign patron’. Furthermore, what the government did receive arguably brought it little benefit.

When the Iranian-backed Hezb-e Islami leader Abdul Ali Mazari was killed by the Taliban in March 1995, Tehran sought to cultivate the Taliban government, since the Taliban did not share the hostility to Shiite Islam which the Taliban had demonstrated. However, the effect of exposing Kabul to immediate invasion from Washington. By August 1996, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Robert Zoellick, was demanding that Iran should stop supplying Kabul.

A hidden hand?

Since the US had used the Foreign Assistance Act to fund most of the humanitarians aid to Afghanistan on the grounds that the Afghan government was not doing enough to prevent opium growing – even though the major opium growing areas of Helmand and Nangarhar were under the control of the Taliban and the Northern Alliance respectively, and the Taliban were deriving income from a 10 per cent tax on the opium crop – it is hardly surprising that many Afghan moderates suspect that Washington was the ultimate mastermind of the Taliban takeover, even if the government was left to others.

But third, and most important, Hamid Karzai’s return to Kabul resolved a policy impasse within Pakistan. While the Pakistan Interior Minister, General Maseehullah Khan, had staunchly backed the Taliban, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate of the Pakistan Armed Forces (ISI) had long opposed Hamid Karzai.

His defection cleared the way for all-out Pakistan backing for the Taliban. This was not difficult to do over.
AFGHANISTAN WILL NOT BE REBUILT THROUGH THE GROWTH OF BEARDS AND THE BASHING OF WOMEN, NOR BY ADDING TO THE ALREADY OBSCENE NUMBERS OF DISABLED AFGHANS.

The Taliban have already shown their innate inclination to share power with other Afghans, and Zahir Shah could well find himself as isolated in Kabul as was Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Phnom Penh during the years of Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia. Zahir Shah, who is now 82 years old, was not valued for devotion during his reign, although ironically he was responsible for the unveiling of women from 1959. It would be a sad irony if after all his time as a puppet of foreign powers opposed to the best of his legacy, and be remembered not as a de Gaulle but as a puppet.

No way from the pit?

What makes recent developments so truly tragic is that they largely stall out the hopes of a vast number of Afghans that their country could claw its way back from the pit into which it was dropped by the massive damage during a decade of devastating Soviet occupation.

While US Embassy staff in Pakistan, unduly influenced by Pakistani sources, lined up with US neo-conservatives in denouncing the Taliban government as ‘fundamentally’, it is clear that in comparison with the Taliban it was amenable to liberal solutions. The Taliban in their frightening lack of education are to a considerable extent victims of two decades of war, but this does not lend their ideas any more credence.

Some Afghans look hopefully to the former king, Zahir Shah, to return as a moderating force. The king may indeed return to Afghanistan, but it would be naive for his supporters to romanticize his likely power.

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