

## **Challenges to Afghanistan, Even After Three Years of US Withdrawal**

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### **Abstract**

Afghanistan has suffered war for almost 40 long years. The political dynamics once changed after 9/11 again changed on 15 August 2021 with the fall of Kabul and the establishment of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan. The world saw a significant shift in U.S. Afghan policy, which also changed South Asia's and Central Asia's regional dynamics. Almost three years have passed since the fall of Kabul, and still, Afghanistan and Afghan people are suffering. This qualitative study, grounded in Social Institutional Theory, investigates Afghanistan's intricate challenges three years post-US withdrawal. The study employs analytical and critical methods to evaluate the enduring impacts of the withdrawal on the country's political, economic, and social spheres. The primary themes analysed include the resurgence of the Taliban, the humanitarian crisis, the decline of human rights, and the consequences for regional stability. The study underscores the complex interplay between local factors and global influences, emphasising the need for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Afghanistan's evolving trajectory. This research aims to clarify persistent challenges to improve informed policymaking and humanitarian efforts that reduce suffering and foster sustainable peace in Afghanistan. Furthermore, based on this research, a few recommendations for the peace process in Afghanistan have also been suggested.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Social Institutional Theory, Human Rights, Women Rights, Challenges, Legitimacy, Humanitarian Crises

### **Introduction**

Afghanistan remained the longest war theatre in the world's history. However, Afghanistan's political dynamics along ground realities changed after 9/11. After Loya Jirga of Afghanistan approved the Afghanistan constitution in 2004 and defined the word 'Afghan' for the first time, which was previously used for the Pashtun ethnic majority of Afghanistan and tried to reduce the ethnic tension across Afghanistan by including all the ethnic minorities of Afghanistan in under the definition of the term 'Afghan' (Rubin, 2004). This gave hope to the people of Afghanistan to see a new start in peace and prosperity. Afghans' dream for peace was traumatised by the resurgence of Taliban guerrilla's comeback, and soon, the Taliban were able to create a parallel system of governance by collecting tax and delivering swift justice through their Qazi (Judge). This helped the Taliban establish their legitimacy across Afghanistan slowly and steadily. Even

the regional players accepted them and started negotiations with them. The Taliban opened their political office in Doha, Qatar, in 2013 and projected it as the embassy of their Government in exile. (Telegraph, 2013). The Government of Afghanistan launched four separate reconciliation processes with the help of the USA and allies of the Afghan Republic. Ashraf Ghani, as the newly elected president of Afghanistan, terminated all reconciliatory processes in 2016, but in 2018, he showed an inclination for direct peace talks between Taliban Clerics, the USA, and the Afghan Government under pressure from the USA. By 2018, the Ghani administration was trying to start reconciliatory efforts. However, Taliban clerics were not ready for it as, according to their point of view, the Afghan democratic Government led by President Ghani was not legitimate. Pakistan, along with all the regional powers, tried to bring peace to Afghanistan, but Pakistan, along with all other regional and international powers, remained unsuccessful in this. The Taliban started direct peace talks with the USA at Doha, Qatar, in 2018, which were piloted by the U.S. Special Afghan representative Zalmay Khalilzad, who assisted as a mediator of the Bonn Agreement and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar from Taliban (Abbas, 2023). On 29 February 2020, a peace deal was signed between the USA and Taliban leadership in Doha, Qatar. The U.S. soldiers and allied troops left Afghanistan and the Afghan Government on 1 September 2021 without any respite or security measures for the Afghan democratic Government or Afghans. The Afghan democratic government was unable to stand against the Taliban forces, and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani escaped from Kabul on a private Helicopter on 15 August 2021. The Taliban forces were waiting at the gates of Kabul. President Ghani's departure provided the Taliban with a pretext to enter the capital under the pretence of establishing order to avoid the escalating level of panic among the masses. (Jamal & Maley, 2023) On 15 August 2021, Afghanistan saw a significant setback in the shape of the fall of the democratic Government and the formation of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan. Taliban announced their victory by announcing the culmination of almost 43 years of continuous war. Afghan people have encountered continuous war for almost four long decades, with approximately 20,000 to 40,000 killings per annum according to Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban, according to Crisis Group Asia Report No 326 (Report No 326, 2022). Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) casualty data for 2023 shows Afghanistan was maintaining its position in the top 15 most lethal conflict zones of the world (ACLED, 2023). Afghanistan was nominated the least peaceful place in the world by the Global Peace Index Report (GPI) of 2023 (Peace Index, 2023). The reports of the UN and other international agencies are very glaring and gloomy about the Taliban Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan's Human rights, especially Women's rights, as women are banned from education after the primary, beauty parlours for women are banned. The media is facing extreme restrictions. Several forced abductions and forced marriages of underage girls have been reported by international media and NGOs. Poverty is at its highest level. Political parties have been banned from all political activities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this research paper, context analysis/examination of the political, military, societal, and historical dimensions is necessary to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by Afghanistan even three years after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghan soil. Considering Afghanistan's situation, "Social Institutional Theory" (SIT) has been adopted as a theoretical framework. It is important to understand the organisational paradigm of the Taliban for achieving peace in Afghanistan. Therefore, SIT has been used to understand and explain the organisational skeleton, working, and outcomes. The theory was introduced by Talcott Parsons in 1956, who explained a "cultural-institutional" in that he explained that, as parts of a bigger social system (society), organisations need to validate "basic acceptance of the more generalised values of the superordinate system." (Parsons, 1956). According to a few researchers, the institutions and

organisations received emotional energy from involving their actions in the logic of self and ethical social standards, which are epitomised by the movement (Hiatt, Sine, and Tolbert, 2009).

### **Research Methodology**

This research is a qualitative study. Therefore, both analytical and critical approaches have been employed. As a result, secondary sources have been used to study and evaluate facts, concepts, and historical references.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the reasons behind the resurgence of the Taliban?
2. What challenges is the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan facing?

### **The resurgence of the Taliban:**

The events of 9/11 were a pivotal moment in Afghanistan's history. The United States initiated "Operation Enduring Freedom," resulting in the dissolution of the Taliban government, following the overthrow of the Taliban regime after Operation Enduring Freedom, an international conference convened under the auspices of the United Nations in Bonn, Germany, where the global world formalised an agreement with the Afghan warlords from Northern Afghanistan and different factions across Afghanistan less Taliban. These warlords serve as ground forces in reaction to the aerial assaults conducted by the USA and NATO (Rubin, 2013). Brig Rtd Bangash asserts that the Bonn deal cornered the Taliban, leaving them with little alternative except to retaliate and engage in combat (Abbas. A, 2021). Upon assuming the presidency, Karzai extended a peace agreement to the Taliban, contingent upon their severance of relations with the Al Qaeda network, cessation of all forms of violence, and acceptance of a political role in accordance with the Afghan constitution. The Taliban leadership rejected it and thereafter escalated armed assaults and violence (Najibullah, 2017). The Taliban established its political office in Doha, Qatar. However, it was shut down within 24 hours in June 2013 owing to significant backlash from the Afghan Government. This was the first Political move from Taliban leadership since their Government was toppled after Operation Enduring Freedom. The Taliban never stopped fighting and were able to establish their shadow rebel Government on the soil of Afghanistan. Throughout the war, the Taliban capitalised on mistakes by the Western coalition and its Afghan partners to recruit fighters. They harnessed widespread anger at human rights abuses, civilian deaths and corruption to turn Afghans against the central Government and its foreign backers. As the insurgents extended their territorial dominion, they established clandestine administrations in the provinces that resolved local conflicts, imposed taxes, delivered public services, and created a foundation for recruiting. By the onset of the Taliban's final onslaught, the morale of security officers and local officials had eroded to such an extent that the rebels were able to subdue them individually and seize the country's largest cities, frequently without any resistance (Wall Street Journal, 2021). According to an Afghan Journalist, X, who spoke to the researcher during his interview for the researcher's PhD thesis.

"The Doha agreement was a turning point for the Afghan Government, Afghan people and Afghan forces. This agreement degraded the Afghan Government in the eyes of afghans as the Government was not part of the negotiations nor the treaty. Not only this but brought the Taliban status equal to the Government which demoralised the Afghan forces to an extent that they were not able to give a single fight to the Taliban commanders on road to Kabul".

### **Afghan Taliban, Through The Practice of Social Institutional Theory (SIT)**

The SIT offers a framework to comprehend the Taliban's rise, doggedness, and operation as a political and religious ideological faction rooted in Afghan society. According to Berger &

Luckmann's SIT, hostilities, methodical needs, and social gaps have given rise to institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The civil war, governance vacuum, absence of a central Government along with social cohesion, and competing warlords gave birth to the Taliban Movement in the early 90s. The Taliban institutionalised a harsh version of Sharia law as a uniting social norm, presenting themselves as a steadying force in a war-torn society (Rashid, 2010). They used Deobandi Islamic teachings as their ideological foundation as a legitimising skeleton to shape a shared identity and moral order. This reverberates with the notion of institutional isomorphism, wherein social movements embrace and solidify organisations that resound with the communal beliefs of their environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Taliban's hierarchical organisation and operational framework is based on the traditional Afghan tribal and Islamic norms. The Taliban leadership head is called Amir al-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful), followed by a council (Shura) comprising military, judicial, and political experts from the leadership. This resonates with the Pashtun tribal system, where authority and consensus are mediated through tribal elders (mashran) and religious scholars (ulama), further implanting the faction within native institutional logic (Barfield, 2010). SIT highlights the significance of customs and ethics in nourishing institutions over time. The Taliban institutionalised themselves by conveying justice, deciding disputes, and providing rudimentary services in neglected areas by the Afghan Government or international forces (Giustozzi, 2009). The group's institutional framework functions locally and globally. At local levels, it assimilates into Afghan socio-political customs, counting on tribal loyalties and Islamic Sharia Law. Globally, it appeals to international Islamic movements and dogmas, aligning itself with broader narratives of Muslim confrontation with alleged Western domination (Dorransoro, 2012). Taliban faces different challenges in institutionalising governance after its return to Government in 2021. The evolution from an insurrection to a governing institution does require shifts in its ideological and functioning skeleton. The SIT proposes that such alterations are vital for institutional existence but may also lead to inner conflicts as traditional customs are modified to meet new challenges (North, 1990).

### **Challenges to Afghanistan**

The Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan has faced many challenges since its return to power in 2021, as it has already been discussed that shifts in ideological and operational frameworks for any organization are necessary to meet the new challenges posed.

#### **1. Legitimacy and Recognition:**

The biggest challenge faced by Taliban leadership is the challenge of legitimacy and recognition by the world. Although the Taliban came into power after the peace deal with the U.S. but still after three years of U.S. withdrawal and the collapse of the Afghan Democratic Government, the U.S. and the world are reluctant to recognise the Taliban Government. This isolation hinders its ability to engage in international cooperation, secure economic aid, and access global financial systems (Giustozzi, 2023). Although many countries have accepted their diplomats and diplomatic missions, still International and regional communities are not ready to recognise the Taliban due to the following reasons;

- a) It is not a legitimate Government to be in power through force without the support of the people, as in democracy.
- b) Taliban are also not considered legitimate due to rigid attitudes towards other sects and religions.
- c) One more hurdle is the backing of Al Qaeda Leadership. Al Qaeda leader AL Zawahiri's presence (killed in a U.S. drone attack) in Kabul is a question mark on the US-Taliban peace deal.

- d) IEA is also not following the International Women's Rights Code, which denies women the right to education, jobs, special laws, and even the right to speak in public and travel.
- e) Not following the international code of conduct as per UN-passed rules and regulations.

## **2. Woman Rights:**

Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, human rights violations against women and girls have mounted despite initial promises that women would be allowed to exercise their rights within Sharia law—including the right to work and to study. The Taliban has systematically excluded women and girls from public life. Women hold no cabinet positions in the de facto administration. The Ministry of Women's Affairs had also been abolished, effectively eliminating women's right to political participation. Girls are banned from attending school past the sixth grade. This affects over 1.1 million girls in Afghanistan. Women are completely barred from working outside the home even to park if they cannot travel without male guardians (Amnesty International-2023). According to UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous, decades of progress on gender equality and women's rights have been wiped out in mere months (Asiapacific-2023). Taliban Courts had stopped taking cases that relate to divorce, separation or domestic violence. The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights condition in Afghanistan has considered the state as an "unprecedented deterioration of women's rights," with many observers labeling it "gender apartheid" (Barr, 2024).

## **3. Ethno-linguistic and Sectarian issues:**

Afghanistan is home to a diverse population that includes Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, Nuristani, Aymaq, Kyrgyz, Qizilbash, Gujar, and many more ethnic groups (Rubin-2004). In near past the violence has been fanned by the frustrations of non-Pashtun residents of northern Afghanistan (Shahrani, 2018). While the Afghan Government points the finger at outside forces, the fact remains that the country's ethno-linguistic divide is a major contributor to the violence (Sadar, 2019). Thousands of Hazaras were massacred by the Taliban in the city of Mazr e Sharif in August 1998 during the first regime of the Emirates of Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch - 1998). According to the Hazara, during the Taliban conquest of central and northern Afghanistan, the Taliban beheaded fifteen thousand Hazara people (Carroll-2002). On the other side, mass graves of Taliban were recovered, which can hold 1000 bodies at Dasht e Leili desert killed by General Rasheed Dostam Militia after the U.S. attack (Jalalzai-2003). From 2016 till date, hundreds of Hazaras have been targeted at different times and places, and ISIS-K has claimed responsibility. After the fall of Kabul in 2021, the Taliban has confronted substantial challenges in dealing with these dissections, as their religious ideology and governance model predominantly replicate the Pashtun-dominated Sunni perception. After recapturing the power, the Taliban claimed that they would form an all-encompassing government. However, their interim government ranks remain dominated by Pashtun leaders, sidelining another ethnic group, especially the Hazara ethnic faction. This rise in ethnic grievances against the Taliban government and resistance movements such as the National Resistance Front (NRF) have appeared, challenging Taliban power (Giustozzi, 2022).

## **4. Security Challenge to the Taliban**

The Taliban government in Afghanistan faces a multitude of security challenges that threaten its stability and ability to govern effectively. These challenges can be categorised as both internal and external.

**a. Internal Challenges:**

Internal divisions and power struggles within the Taliban threaten its cohesion and long-term control (UNICRI, 2023). The Taliban is not a monolithic entity. Factions and internal power struggles can undermine stability and hinder effective governance (Giustozzi, 2023). This fragmentation could lead to instability and hinder the Government's ability to address other security threats and governance. Various armed opposition groups, including the National Resistance Front (NRF), continue to challenge the Taliban's authority (Crisis Group, 2022). These groups conduct attacks and aim to undermine the Taliban's control, particularly in certain regions.

**b. External Challenges:**

Afghanistan remains a haven for regional and global terrorist organisations, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) (UNICRI, 2023). These groups pose a threat not only to Afghanistan but also to regional stability and international security. The ISKP poses a significant security threat, launching attacks against both the Taliban and civilians (Jones & Jalali, 2023). The Taliban's historical links to and current tolerance of international terrorist groups raise concerns among neighbouring countries and the international community (UNICRI, 2023). This undermines the Taliban's efforts to gain international recognition and support.

**5. Continued Violence, Extrajudicial Killings and Human Rights:**

Despite a reduction in large-scale fighting, Afghanistan continues to experience violence and attacks, particularly in urban areas (Cfr, 2024). These attacks, often perpetrated by ISKP, target civilians, government officials, and foreign interests, highlighting the ongoing security threats. Reports indicate that Taliban elements have carried out extrajudicial killings and human rights abuses, further complicating the security situation and raising concerns about the Taliban's commitment to upholding human rights (USIP) and further complicating international engagement. The Taliban have imposed strict controls on media and freedom of expression, limiting access to information and silencing critical voices. Since 15 August 2021, at least 141 journalists have been arrested or detained (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

**6. Humanitarian and Economic Crises:**

Afghanistan's economy is in a state of crisis. Sanctions, the freezing of foreign assets, and the withdrawal of international aid have led to a severe economic downturn, widespread poverty, and food insecurity (World Bank, 2023). Millions of Afghans face acute humanitarian needs, including food shortages, displacement, and lack of access to essential services. (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2023). Afghanistan is vulnerable to natural disasters, including droughts and earthquakes, which exacerbate existing challenges and further strain resources.

**7. Governance and Institutional Challenges:**

The Taliban government is dominated by Pashtuns, with limited representation from other ethnic groups. This lack of inclusivity may fuel resentment and instability. On the other hand, because of this issue, Afghanistan's institutions remain fragile and lack capacity. Corruption and a lack of accountability further undermine effective governance. (Transparency International, 2023). Due

to this, many Afghans lack access to essential services, including healthcare, education, and clean water. This poses significant challenges to human development and well-being.

### **Recommendations**

- a) Regional and international players must cease their proxy involvement since a destabilised Afghanistan is detrimental to all players.
- b) International and regional powers should endeavour to persuade the Taliban leadership to initiate peace negotiations with other Afghan factions within their sphere of influence to enhance the efficacy of peace efforts.
- c) Afghan civil society, at all levels, must collaborate to reconcile the divide between the Taliban and Afghans, therefore fortifying the national fabric and fostering enduring peace.
- d) The challenges faced by contemporary Afghan society encompass the unequal allocation of national resources influenced by sectarian, ethnic, and linguistic prejudices, alongside issues of corruption and nepotism. The Taliban government must develop strategies to address and eliminate these societal issues.
- e) The Taliban regime must devise methods to ensure Afghan women receive their fundamental right to education and access to legal resources.
- f) International and regional community to should help Taliban government to overcome the economic and humanitarian crises.
- g) Keeping in view Afghanistan's multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-sectarian society a power-sharing formula that is acceptable to all must be workout to give representation in governance to all ethnic factions.
- h) Keeping in view Afghanistan's multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-sectarian society, there is a need to review the form of Government that can support democracy under Islamic law as working in many Islamic countries.
- i) Mullahs, without any formal law education, may be replaced or educated about formal law along with sharia Law specialists to provide speedy and less expansive justice as Afghan people have lost their confidence owing to both sectors.
- j) The IEA government should work to enhance bilateral connections with neighbouring countries and international powers. Afghanistan must retain an impartial stance towards any superpower or developing superpower among its regional neighbours.
- k) UNO and the International Community must help Afghan people encounter poverty, natural climate, recent floods and this winter season.

### **Conclusion**

The 2021 withdrawal of U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan signified a pivotal moment in the Nation's history, heralding a new epoch of uncertainty and difficulties. This qualitative study, based on Social Institutional Theory, has explored the many ramifications of this departure, assessing its effects on the political, economic, and social structure of Afghanistan. The rise of the Taliban has resulted in significant repercussions, causing a profound deterioration of human rights, especially for women and girls. The humanitarian situation has intensified, with millions confronting food insecurity and relocation. The nation's economy is precarious and impeded by corruption, insufficient investment, and persistent conflict. Furthermore, the withdrawal has destabilised the region, affecting neighbouring countries and beyond. To tackle these difficulties, a thorough and varied approach is necessary. International involvement is essential, although it must be adjusted to prevent intensifying violence or worsening the humanitarian disaster. An emphasis on human rights, especially women's rights, is vital. Economic development programs must focus on employment generation and poverty alleviation. Moreover, regional collaboration is essential for promoting stability and security. Despite the uncertainty surrounding Afghanistan's future, it is

essential to acknowledge the tenacity of the Afghan populace and their persistent aspiration for peace and prosperity. By comprehending the intricacies of the present circumstances, governments and humanitarian organisations can strive to establish a more stable and equitable Afghanistan.

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