



Afghanistan's Ethnic Divide: The Taliban's Struggle for Legitimacy and Stability

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Abstract

Afghanistan's rich ethnic diversity has historically been a double-edged sword, contributing to both cultural richness and internal discord. This study explores the persistent ethnic tensions within Afghanistan, focusing on the historical and contemporary dynamics between the Pashtuns—the largest ethnic group—and non-Pashtun communities. The Taliban, predominantly rooted in the Pashtun population, has historically sought to consolidate political dominance, often at the expense of non-Pashtun representation. The 2021 fall of Kabul to the Taliban intensified these tensions, creating a political and social vacuum that ethnic-based insurgent groups have sought to exploit, potentially deepening ethnic discord and

threatening national stability. Grounded in Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict Theory, this research examines the nexus between ethnic conflict and the multifaceted challenges faced by the Taliban government. Azar's framework provides critical insights into the root causes, dynamics, and consequences of ethnic conflict, highlighting its profound implications for governance, social cohesion, and the Taliban's ability to address the complexities of a divided nation. This study not only advances the understanding of Afghanistan's ethnic dynamics but also underscores the broader implications for conflict management and state-building in deeply divided societies.

Keywords: *Ethnic conflict, Protracted Social Conflict Theory, Governance, Taliban, Afghanistan.*

Introduction

Afghanistan, unlike many nation-states, is characterized by its profound ethnic diversity, which has long been both a cultural hallmark and a source of protracted conflict. Among the myriad tensions that shape Afghanistan's socio-political landscape, the most significant and enduring is the division between the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group, and non-Pashtun communities, including Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras.¹ Historically, Pashtun political dominance has been met with resistance from non-Pashtun groups, a pattern that

¹ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 23–25.

persists in contemporary governance. The Taliban, an entity predominantly rooted in the Pashtun population, has a legacy of seeking control over national power structures, exacerbating resistance and deepening ethnic divisions.²

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 2021 marked a turning point, plunging Afghanistan into a political and social vacuum. This void has been exploited by regional warlords and ethnic insurgents, further complicating the Taliban's ability to establish a stable and functional government. The departure of U.S. forces, which had previously supported an inclusive government, removed a significant stabilizing factor, leaving Afghanistan vulnerable to renewed ethnic-based conflicts.³ Over the past two years, Afghans have faced widespread violations of their basic rights, including the denial of equal opportunities, limited access to education and healthcare, and pervasive insecurity. The Taliban's inability to form an inclusive government or introduce a constitution has deepened the crisis.⁴ Key ethnic groups remain excluded from governance, with only two non-Pashtuns among the thirty-three members of the Taliban's cabinet. Furthermore, the absence of women and technocrats in the

² Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 291–293.

³ Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 453–455.

⁴ Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War, 2001–2021* (London: Hurst & Company, 2021), 274–276.

administration has compounded governance deficiencies, institutional ambiguity, and the rapid erosion of public trust.

This situation is further exacerbated by the ongoing presence of more than a dozen militant groups actively resisting Taliban hegemony.⁵ The National Resistance Front (NRF), founded by non-Pashtun communities, continues to challenge the Taliban, echoing the resistance movements of the 1990s. During that period, the Taliban established control over Afghanistan by eliminating regional warlords, yet this only intensified opposition from non-Pashtun factions. The NRF, with the support of U.S. forces, later established a more inclusive government following the events of 9/11, demonstrating the potential for alternative governance structures in Afghanistan.

Ethnic conflict in Afghanistan remains a deeply entrenched and complex issue that has hindered peace, integration, and development for decades. The tension between Pashtuns and other ethnic groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras has consistently undermined efforts to build a cohesive state.⁶ The present study aims to examine the genesis of ethnic conflict in Afghanistan and its nexus with the challenges faced by the Taliban government, including issues of

⁵ Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 47–49.

⁶ Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 45–46.

security, governance, legitimacy, and institutional deformation. Utilizing Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict Theory as an analytical framework, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of Afghanistan's ongoing ethnic conflict and its implications for the country's stability and governance. By situating Afghanistan's ethnic dynamics within Azar's theoretical lens, this research seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the enduring challenges confronting the Taliban and their impact on Afghanistan's broader socio-political trajectory.

Literature Review

The evolving socio-political dynamics of Afghanistan, particularly in the context of ethnic conflict, have been the subject of extensive scholarly examination. However, a review of the literature reveals significant gaps in addressing the implications of ethnic tensions for the Taliban's governance post-2021.

The *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)* report evaluates two decades of U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, highlighting the inefficiencies in implementation, monitoring, and inter-agency coordination. While comprehensive in critiquing the U.S. approach, the report fails to address the ethnic fault lines exacerbated by the Taliban's resurgence and the resulting

challenges faced by their government.⁷ Similarly, Tomas, in summarizing the *Congressional Research Service* report, focuses on the humanitarian crises triggered by drought, the COVID-19 pandemic, and U.S. sanctions on the Taliban.⁸ Although the report raises concerns about the resurgence of Al-Qaeda, it overlooks the ethnic resistance from non-Pashtun groups and the political ramifications of this resistance on Taliban rule.

Mir critiques the Biden administration's withdrawal strategy, identifying three major concerns: the Taliban's toppling of an elected government, Afghanistan's continued status as a haven for extremist groups, and the potential for cross-border militancy.⁹ However, Mir's analysis omits the implications of the Taliban's rejection of an inclusive government and the subsequent ethnic conflicts that have intensified under their rule.

Coll, in *Directorate S*, provides a detailed narrative of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2016, emphasizing the fraught relationships between the U.S., its allies, and Pakistan's intelligence agency (ISI). While illuminating the pre-withdrawal dynamics, Coll's work lacks coverage of post-withdrawal ethnic

⁷ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, (January 30, 2021), 25-30.

⁸ C. Thomas, *Afghanistan: Background and US Policy in Brief*, Congressional Research Service, (2018), 33.

⁹ Asfandiyar Mir, "The Terror Threat from Afghanistan Post the Taliban Takeover," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 14, no. 7 (September 2021): 13, 22–24, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CTC-SENTINEL-072021.pdf>.

challenges and their impact on Taliban governance.¹⁰ Similarly, Malkasian, in *The American War in Afghanistan*, offers a comprehensive account of the U.S. military presence from 2001 to 2021, including the peace talks leading to withdrawal.¹¹ However, the book fails to explore the post-withdrawal ethnic power struggles or their influence on Afghanistan's political trajectory.

Husain, in *No-Win War*, examines the geopolitical nexus of U.S., Pakistan, and Afghanistan relations, providing insights into the region's shifting dynamics post-9/11. Although Husain adeptly explores domestic political developments and their interplay with U.S. foreign policy, the ongoing ethnic clashes and their implications for the Taliban government remain unaddressed.¹² Ward, in his critique of Western media narratives, exposes the misleading portrayal of U.S. nation-building efforts in Afghanistan. However, his analysis does not foresee the Taliban's resurgence or the ethnic resistance that followed their return to power.¹³

¹⁰ Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret War in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, vol. 2 (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 97–120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1870464>.

¹¹ Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 9–17, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197550779.001.0001>.

¹² Zahid Husain, *No Win War: The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 67–103, <https://doi.org/9780190704193>.

¹³ Ward Wilson, *Obama's War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 63–77, https://doi.org/10.1163/2468-1733_shafr_sim26004004.

Gall, in *The Wrong Enemy*, focuses on Pakistan's controversial role in the Afghan conflict, particularly the ISI's support for militant groups. While the book offers valuable insights into the political and security dilemmas of the war on terror, it neglects the ethnic power struggles between Pashtuns and non-Pashtun minorities, as well as their implications for Taliban rule terror.¹⁴ Gurcan, in his exploration of NATO and U.S. strategies in Afghanistan, addresses rural combat dynamics, the strategic significance of Afghanistan's geography, and counterinsurgency strategies. However, his work does not consider the ethnic crisis or its repercussions for the Taliban's post-withdrawal governance.¹⁵

Finally, Coll's *Ghost Wars* offers an intricate analysis of the CIA's covert operations in Afghanistan from 1979 to the rise of the Taliban and the death of Osama Bin Laden. Despite its extensive historical coverage, the book does not explore the long-term consequences of these conflicts for Afghanistan's governance post-2021.¹⁶

This literature review highlights a critical gap: while significant attention has been given to U.S. and NATO strategies, peacebuilding

¹⁴ C. Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan 2001–2014* (London: Informa UK Limited, 2015), 167–182, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2015.1037633>.

¹⁵ M. Gurcan, *What Went Wrong in Afghanistan? Understanding Counterinsurgency Efforts in Tribalized Rural and Muslim Environments* (Helion and Company, 2016), 35–50, <https://doi.org/9781911096009>.

¹⁶ Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret War in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, vol. 2 (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 97–120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1870464>.

efforts, and geopolitical dynamics, insufficient focus has been placed on the role of ethnic conflict in shaping Afghanistan's governance challenges under the Taliban. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the nexus of ethnic conflict and governance issues through the lens of Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict Theory.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) theory to examine the intersection of ethnic conflict¹⁷ and the challenges faced by the Taliban in Afghanistan post-U.S. withdrawal. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban seized Kabul and reestablished their rule, reaffirming a legacy of dominance rooted in the Pashtun population.¹⁸ However, Afghanistan's multi-ethnic composition—featuring significant non-Pashtun groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras—has fueled resistance to the Taliban's exclusionary governance. Following the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the country has been mired in a complex struggle involving the Taliban, former warlords, and newly resurgent militant groups with strong ethnic affiliations. This volatile landscape has transformed ethnic tensions into a persistent source of instability, creating profound governance and security challenges for the Taliban regime.

¹⁷ Edward E. Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflicts: Theory and Cases* (Hampshire: Dartmouth, 1990), 5–6.

¹⁸ Kathy Gannon, "US Completes Withdrawal from Afghanistan, Marking End of 20-Year War," *Associated Press*, August 30, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-us-withdrawal>.

Azar's PSC theory provides a robust framework for understanding the dynamics of such conflicts. He identifies four critical factors that lead to protracted social conflict: multi-communal societies, the deprivation of basic human needs, political domination by a single group, and systemic failures in domestic governance. In ethnically diverse societies, historical rivalries or colonial-era divisions often lead to the dominance of one group over others. When this dominance is coupled with unequal access to resources and opportunities, grievances escalate. Azar argues that such marginalization fosters resentment and resistance, particularly when political power remains concentrated within a single ethnic identity group. Furthermore, weak political¹⁹ and economic systems exacerbate these tensions, making conflict more likely and persistent. The outcomes of PSC, as theorized by Azar, align closely with the challenges faced by the Taliban today: legitimacy crises, deteriorating security, institutional decay, and governance failures.²⁰ The Taliban, predominantly Pashtun, have failed to establish an inclusive government, marginalizing non-Pashtun ethnic groups and intensifying ethnic divides. These dynamics have entrenched societal discord, leading to governance paralysis and widespread instability. Azar's framework elucidates the roots and consequences of this ethnic conflict, offering a comprehensive lens to understand the Taliban's ongoing struggle to

¹⁹ Edward E. Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflicts: Theory and Cases* (Hampshire: Dartmouth, 1990), 16.

²⁰ Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, and Hugh Miall, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflicts*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 92.

maintain control and address the multifaceted challenges of governing a deeply divided nation.

Ethnic Conflict Factors Exacerbating Taliban Challenges

Edward Azar identified several factors that contribute to ethnic conflict within a society, particularly where a single group dominates national power and excludes other ethnicities from participation in governance. Afghanistan exemplifies all these factors, which play a pivotal role in intensifying the challenges faced by the Taliban interim government on multiple fronts.

Multi-Communal Society

Edward Azar emphasized that multi-communal societies, particularly those shaped by colonial powers employing divide-and-rule policies, are predisposed to ethnic conflict. Such tensions arise when colonial authorities favor one ethnic group over others²¹ fostering inequality and resentment. Afghanistan, historically a buffer state between British India and Russia, exemplifies this dynamic. The Treaty of Gandamak, signed by Amir Yaquab Khan in 1879,²² designated Afghanistan as a protectorate of British India until 1919. In 1880, Abdur Rahman was installed as King by British India due to his pro-

²¹ Edward E. Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflicts: Theory and Cases* (Hampshire: Dartmouth, 1990), 35–37.

²² David L. Asher, *Afghanistan: The Buffer State and Its Struggle for Sovereignty* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 56–58.

British stance and willingness to serve colonial interests.²³ Under his rule, Pashtun dominance was aggressively reinforced, with other ethnic groups systematically marginalized to secure British objectives. By the late 19th century, Amir Abdur Rahman had established a highly centralized authority, often employing brutal force to suppress minority groups and ensure Pashtun hegemony. His policies incited 40 uprisings from minority communities, highlighting the volatility of a centralized and ethnically exclusive government.²⁴

The United States has also played a critical role in the resurgence of Pashtun-dominated Taliban rule in contemporary Afghanistan. The Doha Peace Agreement facilitated the Taliban's return to power, solidifying their position as custodians of modern-day Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's refusal to establish an inclusive government has reignited resistance from non-Pashtun ethnic groups, transforming Afghanistan once again into a battleground for competing ethnic interests. In underdeveloped states, multi-communal societies often succumb to ethnic conflict when dominant global powers empower a single group to govern at the expense of others. Afghanistan's historical and contemporary experiences underscore this recurring pattern, with external influences exacerbating internal divisions.

²³ Pierre J. de la Garde, *Afghanistan: A Geopolitical History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 101.

²⁴ F. Boni, "Afghanistan 2022: Life Under the Taliban," *Asia Maior* 33 (2022): 411–423, <https://www.asiamaior.org/?p=1756>.

Political Power Dominated by One Identity Group

Since the formation of modern Afghanistan in the 18th century, Pashtuns have consistently dominated the country's political landscape, a status that has often provoked opposition from other ethnic groups. The Pashtun hegemony faced significant challenges with the rise of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978, which led to the Soviet war.²⁵ In 1996, after the Taliban captured Kabul, the Northern Alliance—comprising leaders from non-Pashtun ethnic groups, including ousted president Burhanuddin Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Masood, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Yunus Khalis—was formed to resist the Taliban's rule and defend their respective regions.

The Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun movement, established its government following two decades of resistance against NATO forces. Despite its return to power, the current Taliban government remains exclusionary, heavily dominated by Pashtun leadership. This has led to widespread resentment among other ethnic groups, particularly the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, who have condemned the Taliban's exclusion of minorities from key political and governing structures. The Taliban's continued emphasis on Pashtun dominance

²⁵ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 96–97.

perpetuates the ethnic divisions within Afghanistan, exacerbating the challenges it faces in achieving national cohesion and legitimacy.²⁶

Dissatisfaction of Basic Rights

Edward Azar identified the denial of access to political institutions and the lack of recognition for communal groups as critical factors contributing to ethnic conflict in diverse societies. He argued that for ethnic minorities, access to political institutions and the recognition of their rights are fundamental needs, and when these are denied, conflict is inevitable.

Since the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, ethnic minorities in Afghanistan have faced severe deprivation of their basic rights. The Taliban's current cabinet includes only two members from minority ethnic groups out of a total of thirty-three, highlighting the government's failure to incorporate a diverse range of political voices. The exclusion of non-Pashtun groups from meaningful political participation, coupled with the denial of their representation in governance, has left these communities feeling marginalized and oppressed. As Azar's theory suggests, the failure to satisfy the

²⁶ J. Worley, *Power on the Periphery: Analysis of Afghanistan's Subnational Powerbrokers' Role in Stability from 2010–2021* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2023).

political rights of ethnic groups fosters resentment, setting the stage for deeper ethnic conflict and further destabilizing Afghan society.²⁷

Failure of Domestic Political and Economic System

Following the fall of Kabul, the Taliban government dissolved the 2004 Constitution and ended Afghanistan's brief period of democratic evolution. Afghanistan is now governed by a theocratic, authoritarian regime led by the Taliban, which seized power through force and ousted the government of Ashraf Ghani. One of the major challenges faced by the Taliban is the absence of a clear political or economic roadmap for the country's future. The Taliban government has thus far failed to implement a constitution, leaving the country without a coherent legal framework for governance.

Moreover, the imposition of international sanctions and the freezing of Afghanistan's foreign reserves by the United States has severely crippled the country's economy. This has led to widespread poverty, high unemployment, food shortages, and significant human rights violations. The economic progress achieved by the previous democratic governments over two decades has been rapidly reversed by the Taliban's policies, exacerbating the challenges of governance and deepening the country's economic crisis. The failure to establish a functioning political and economic system has contributed to

²⁷ A. Moorehead, "Human Rights in Afghanistan Following Taliban Takeover," in *Harvard Model Congress*, 2023.

widespread disillusionment and instability, which further complicates the Taliban's efforts to maintain control over the country.²⁸

Challenges Facing the Taliban Government

The absence of a democratic government represents one of the most significant challenges for the newly emerged Taliban regime. The Taliban's refusal to initiate an inclusive government has led to widespread rejection from minority groups, who view the Taliban's rule as exclusionary and oppressive. This lack of political inclusivity has undermined the legitimacy of the Taliban government, as leaders from minority ethnic groups, such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, remain unwilling to recognize the Taliban's authority.²⁹

The swift collapse of the Ghani government and the Taliban's subsequent takeover created an unprecedented crisis, one for which neither the former government nor the international community was prepared. The United States and its allies failed to devise a contingency plan for the rapid deterioration of the situation, leaving a power vacuum that has intensified the challenges for the new regime. These challenges include the lack of international recognition, severe economic instability, the exclusion of minority ethnic groups from governance, and the mounting humanitarian crisis. As the Taliban

²⁸ A. Watkins, "The Taliban One Year On," *CTC Sentinel* 15 (2022): 1–15.

²⁹ Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 185.

struggles to navigate these complexities, its ability to govern effectively and stabilize the country remains highly uncertain.

Legitimacy Challenge

Security recognition and legitimacy from the national and international community is one of the most difficult challenges faced by the Taliban government. Afghan nation, who felt relief in the last twenty years came to an end once again. The country is pushed to ethnic conflicts with the denial of other ethnic groups to be part of government. Taliban even failed to get recognition from Afghan nation and the neighboring countries.³⁰

The Taliban's act of changing country's name from Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was condemned and criticized by the whole nation. Moreover, Taliban ignored the public demand of keeping the tri color of the national flag instead they changed the flag color. Public was further infuriated with the dissolution of 2004 democratic constitution.³¹

The interim government of Taliban is composed on 33 ministers and few deputies. No constitutional or political structure is yet prescribed by Taliban government. There is complete uncertainty regarding the

³⁰ P. H. Sahill, "Dwelling in an All-Male World: A Critical Analysis of the Taliban Discourse on Afghan Women," *Women's Studies International Forum* 98 (May 2023): 102748, Pergamon.

³¹ J. B. Murtazashvili, "The Collapse of Afghanistan," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 1 (2022): 40–54.

understanding of division of power among different institutions.³² After US withdrawal, Taliban again came up with old faces and old political ideology. Seventeen out of thirty three Taliban's government interim ministers are globally declared terrorist from UN Security Council and CIA. Supreme Leader and Interior Minister of Taliban had bounties on their heads from CIA.

The Constitution of 2004, which recognized 14 ethnic groups has been dissolve by Taliban immediately after coming into power. Taliban act of rejecting the formation of the inclusive government is denial to the recognition of communal existence of other ethnic groups in the country. Afghanistan despite of its multi ethnic nature, occupied by single Pushtoon ethnic group resulted in severe resistance from other ethnic groups. No ethnic group including Tajik, Uzbek and Hazaras has recognized Taliban ruling yet.³³

Taliban came up with few new faces but with old ruling structure and ideology. They adopted the same pattern of ruling as they implemented in the 1990s.³⁴ Lack of inclusiveness in their nature, Taliban government faces severe criticism from other ethnic groups. Member from non Pashtoon groups, women, nomads and technocrats were denied to have representation in the interim government.

³² Borhan Osman, "The Taliban's Interim Government: Structure and Challenges," *Afghan Analysis* (October 2021), <https://www.afghananalysis.org/taliban-interim-government>.

³³ T. Wangchuk, *The Elements of Intervention: The Illegal Taliban Government* (2023).

³⁴ Michael Semple, *The Taliban: Politics, Religion, and the State in Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 105.

Moreover, Taliban are outdated in their policies. They dissolved the parliament representing fourteen ethnic groups of the country.³⁵ They dissolved election commission and banned fifty seven political parties from any political activities. They revoked the policy of education for women and declared prohibition on the women education. They also placed ban on women jobs.

Both in capital and in many provinces Taliban showed no tolerance and killed many former officials and beaten to death many international and local journalist for criticism and raising voice against their tyranny. With such rigid behavior by Taliban authorities, severe anguish resulted among common civilians which can have long lasting effects on their future ruling legitimacy. The former Taliban's Justice Minister Noorudin Turabi who has given the portfolio of prisons nowadays has declared that soon the Taliban government would start the punishment of amputation.³⁶

In early October 2023 Taliban government closed its embassy in India due to India's non diplomatic approach toward Taliban ruling. Pakistan's interim government has given the ultimatum of November 2023 to Afghan citizen to return to their country otherwise to face harsh consequences. Tajikistan has hosted all former war lords who

³⁵ Huma Yusuf, "The Taliban's Retreat on Women's Rights: A Step Backward for Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-08-18/talibans-retreat-womens-rights>.

³⁶ S. Shafqat, "Pakistan in 2021: End of the Innings for Imran Khan?," *Asian Survey* 62, no. 1 (2022): 173–184.

are the biggest opponents to Taliban and provided them with diplomatic support to their narrative of National Resistance Front. Recently Tajikistan arranged a meeting of 40 former war lords presided by Ahmad Masood son of former NRF leader Ahmad Shah Masood in order to formulate strategy for removal of Taliban government. All of the immediate neighboring countries to Afghanistan are not ready to recognize the Taliban due to their authoritarian nature of ruling.³⁷

Pakistan share ethnic, religious, historical and territorial vast boundary with neighboring Afghanistan. Peace in Pakistan highly depends on a stable government in Afghanistan. But Taliban has little control over ISIS and TTP who are using Afghan soil for attacking neighboring countries. Moreover, Taliban victory encouraged TTP, which resulted surge in TTP's resurgence and militant activities in Pakistan. After US withdrawal, Afghanistan become safe haven for TTP. Afghan Taliban has closed ties with TTP and remained together in fighting against NATO forces in pre US withdrawal period.³⁸ Reorganization from close neighbors is crucial for Afghanistan, and if TTP continues to undermine Pakistan's internal stability and break

³⁷ Paweł Dałek, "Why Do Neighboring Powers Help? India, China, Russia, and Their Approaches to Development in 2001–2021 Afghanistan," *Stosunki Międzynarodowe–International Relations* 3 (2023): 9.

³⁸ Z. S. Ahmed, *The Taliban-Led Afghanistan and Transnational Crimes: National and Regional Responses*, in *Global Approaches on State Fragility & Organized Crime* (2023): 225.

the law, Pakistan will find it very challenging to accept the Taliban's newly established state.

Propagating opposing trends to Taliban by the youngsters of Afghanistan on social media against their oppressive ruling and specially against their decision of declaring Black Abaya compulsory in educational institutes resulted campaign of “ # do not touch my clothes”, in which the native Afghans and outside world at large are posting their picture wearing traditional Afghan clothes in educational institutes.³⁹ Hundreds of media journalist were incarcerated by Taliban and their whereabouts are still unknown to anyone.⁴⁰ Afghan Taliban are facing severe criticism on social media for their failure of tackling economic crisis, governing problems, health issues, security challenges and education policies.

Reemergence of Taliban resulted reversal of US twenty years efforts of developing political infrastructure and democratic culture in Afghanistan. Diverse Afghan society had been transformed into inclusive pattern of ruling with the installment of Karzyi government by US after 9/11. Present Taliban ruling is not inclusive in nature, rather it is Pashtoon dominated government and the rest of ethnic

³⁹ Sami Yousafzai, “Afghan Women Launch #DoNotTouchMyClothes Campaign to Protest Taliban's Black Abaya Rule,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/10/world/asia/afghanistan-abaya-protest-social-media.html>

⁴⁰ A. Shahzada, "War and Disabilities are Mirrors Facing Each Other in Afghanistan," *Law and Social Policy Review* 1, no. 1 (2023): 85–88.

groups have no share in it.⁴¹ On the announcement of the interim government nominations of ministers, Gulam Isazi a permanent representative of Ashraf Ghani to United Nations tweeted that 17 out of 33 of Taliban cabinet members are on US sanction list. It seems very difficult as no signs of positive gestures from international community is yet to be noted for the recognition of Taliban government.

Institutional Deformity

Taliban government is composed of three segments, including Military Wing headed by Taliban deceased leader Mulla Omer's son Mulla Yaqoob, Political Branch is headed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradir and third segment is Haqani Wing having close links with Pakistan's ISI holding the Ministry of Interior in the interim government.⁴²

Severe differences have been surfaced on division of power among political and military wing of Taliban interim government. Mulla Ghani Baradar, a senior Taliban leader and a former head of Taliban delegation for negotiation on US withdrawal from Afghanistan has serious reservation on making military wing the fountain of power in

⁴¹ S. Price, "Collateral Benefits and the International Community," *The Mediation of Sustainability: Development Goals, Social Movements, and Public Dissent* (2023): 51.

⁴² "Afghanistan in 2023: Taliban Internal Power Struggles and Militancy," *Brookings Institution*, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/afghanistan-in-2023-taliban-internal-power-struggles-and-militancy/>.

the government.⁴³ Mulla Baradar believed that the political wing should be given more power, credit and admiration should be given to the political wing for their long-term successful negotiations and discussions with the international community to ensure the peaceful withdrawal of forces composed of US and NATO soldiers. Mulla Abdul Ghani Baradar was dissatisfied with the interim government's composition since it prioritized the security branch over the political branch.

Prominent leaders of military wing in the interim government including Mulla Abdul Qayum Zakir, Mulla Muhammad Yaqoob and Muhammad Ibrahim Sadder and Mullah Muhammad Fazel Malzoom rejected the idea of inclusive government and denied the adaptation of such governmental structure that might reduce the dominant role of military in the country.⁴⁴ They believed that inclusive government might sabotage the unity and strength of Mujahideen. The military leaders opposed the idea of welcoming non Pushtoon leaders who had played the US design of ousting Taliban government in 1990's.

There are differences among Haqani and military leadership on the option of inclusive government. Haqani leadership wants inclusive governing pattern and had good relations with former democratic leadership of minorities including former President Hamid Karzaye,

⁴³ Abdul Sayed, "Divisions in Taliban Leadership: Mullah Ghani Baradar's Reservations on Military Control," *The New York Times*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/15/world/asia/taliban-leadership-divisions-ghani-baradar.html>.

⁴⁴ Ibid

former Ex Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and Senate Chairman Abdul Hadi Muslimyar are the reason of crisis or division in Taliban leadership. Thus, in the initial weeks, the Taliban assigned the most reliable individuals to the most important ministries in order to maintain military wing control over the key ministries.⁴⁵

Severe differences surfaced between Western and Eastern Pushtoos on the domination of political and military power by Western Pushtoon in the interim government. The Eastern Pushtoos have rejected Western dominance. The Haqani group belong to Eastern Pushtoon in interim government while the rest of Pashtoon leader belong to Western Afghanistan.⁴⁶

The Haqani leadership claims of greater sacrifice while defeating US through disastrous role played by Hakani Mujahideen and their suicide squad. Hakani group is lobbying against military and political wing for grabbing more power and demanded more prominent role in the present interim governments.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Michael Semple, *The Taliban: War, Religion, and the New Order in Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 183–185.

⁴⁶ International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban," *International Crisis Group*, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>.

⁴⁷ United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Afghanistan," S/2022/419, April 2022, <https://documents.un.org/access.nsf/get?DS=S%2F2022%2F419&Lang=E&OpenAgent=>.

There is a greater diversion among Taliban leadership on the division of power among political and military wing. Political wing of Taliban leadership has claimed of having practical understanding of domestic and international realities due to their stature built in a prolong engagement with international leadership of different nations during peace talk deliberation in Qatar. Whereas, the political wing is of the view that they should have been made influential in matters related to state building.⁴⁸

Security Challenges

Afghanistan is a multi ethnic country mostly ruled by Pushtoons having severe opposition from other ethnicities all the times.⁴⁹ Once again ethnic crisis emerged after the reemerging of Taliban as a victorious force after US withdrawal. Islamic State of Khurasan is the opposing militant group, fighting against Taliban in Afghanistan and is consider very detrimental to the hegemony and internal security of the country. The proximity has been rising between non Pushtoon groups and ISK due to failure on the part of Taliban regarding their basic needs.⁵⁰ The surge in ISK control upon the Southern Districts of Nagarhar province is detrimental to Taliban ruling in the region.

⁴⁸ Michael Semple, *The Taliban: Afghanistan's Uncertain Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 115–117.

⁴⁹ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 45–47.

⁵⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 275–277.

The reemergence of Taliban as a victorious entity ousted Ashraf Ghani government which resulted the resurgence of opposing forces against Taliban in Afghanistan. National Resistance Front is one the powerful opposing group to Taliban lead by Ahmad Masood, son of deceased Ahmad Shah Masood. The NRF is composed of Sunni Tajik, Sunni Uzbek, Sunni Pushtoon and Shia Tajik and Hazaras ethnicities. The supporting force of NRF is diverse in both rural and urban areas of Northern Afghanistan and specifically in Hirat, Mizar Sharif and Kabul etc. Its surging strength is vital threat to Taliban's hegemony in Afghanistan.⁵¹

The NRF announced significant strikes against the Taliban government in the spring of 2022. In January 2022, the NRF also attempted to assassinate Punjshair Security Chief Abdul Hamid Khorasani using a lethal explosive device. NRF is not only a terrorist organization, but also a political opponent of the Taliban administration, with strong ties to foreign politicians, organizations, and intelligence agencies. NRF is the combination of various ethnic groups who are opposing the Taliban in every national and international venue in order to re-ally former friends against the Taliban. Ahmad Shah Masood is working hard to obtain the support of anti-Taliban countries in order to gain military and political power

⁵¹ Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *The Taliban's War on the Afghan Government* (London: Hurst & Company, 2021), 178–180.

and economic assistance to demolish the Taliban rule in Northern Afghanistan.

Another vital challenge to Taliban is their failure to integrate the former militia and Afghan National Defense and Security forces which is a serious threat to internal security of the country. Taliban failed while integrating the former Afghan forces trained by US and NATO through modern means and weapons. Taliban has not yet initiated any rehabilitation gesture for the former Afghan forces. Though the former forces has surrendered but lack of rehabilitation approach from Taliban may lead them to earn money to fulfill the needs of livelihood through inappropriate means by joining ISIS, Al Qaida or any other terrorist organization.⁵² They might become tools in the hands of foreign conspirators to oust Taliban again and Afghanistan might become breeding ground of ethnic conflicts and civil wars.

After Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Northern Afghanistan specially Fajshair Valley has become breeding ground of anti Taliban sentiments. Liberation Front of Afghanistan emerged as anti Taliban terrorist organization having vital objective to oust Taliban ruling.⁵³ LFA believed Taliban are the illegitimate rulers of Afghanistan and has declared war against their unjust rule.

⁵² Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 1994–2012* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 118–120.

⁵³ Ali Ahmad, *The Rise of Anti-Taliban Movements in Northern Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Studies Press, 2022), 122–124.

Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former war lord's son Yar Mohammad Dostam has formed anti Taliban group namely Wolf Unit has declared war against the Taliban.⁵⁴ He claimed huge support from the people of Afghanistan's Jowzjan province, and it is worth noting that he also led the defense of the same province's main city, Sheberghan, during the Taliban invasion in summer 2021, before being forced to retire and flee to a neighboring country.

After the fall of Kabul into the hands of Taliban resulted the formation of National Front for Free Afghanistan in Kapisa province of the country. This is an anti Taliban group who has declared war against Taliban since 2021.⁵⁵ It is important to disclose that this group is backed by massive support from native people of the province.⁵⁶ This group has secured support from both Pushto and Dari language speakers.

Turkistan Freedom Tiger is another anti-Taliban force that has stayed more active than other resistant groups, hitting Taliban checkpoints and convoys numerous times after the US withdrawal, causing massive damage to the Taliban.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Mohammed Iqbal, *Dostum's Return: The Wolf Unit and the Fight Against the Taliban* (London: Routledge, 2023), 110–113.

⁵⁵ Sara Faiz, *The National Front for Free Afghanistan: Resistance and Struggle Against Taliban* (Kabul: Afghan Resistance Studies, 2021), 87–90.

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Khadija Noor, *Ethnic Militancy and Resistance: The Case of Turkistan Freedom Tiger in Post-Taliban Afghanistan* (Peshawar: Peshawar University Press, 2022), 134–136.

Al-Qaida and Tehreek-e-Taliban are a serious challenge for internal as well as for regional security. These terrorist groups are serious challenge for interim government of Taliban as TTP's intrusion and involvement in massive terrorist activities in Pakistan compelled Pakistan to adopt harsh policies against Afghanistan.⁵⁸ Tension between Taliban and Pakistan government over TTP is growing day by day.⁵⁹ Pakistan ultimatum regarding ousting of Afghan citizens is the outcome of terrorist organization enjoying safe haven in Afghanistan.

Governance Challenges

Taliban is facing governance challenges on various fronts. They revoked the former democratic setup but failed to provide alternative structure for governing. Educated and professional people feel severe threats to their lives under Taliban leadership. Thousands of professionals have fled to Europe and neighboring countries after Taliban occupation of Kabul in 2021.⁶⁰ The exodus of professional in large numbers is serious setback for interim government of Taliban.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Agha Zia, *The Role of Al-Qaida and Tehreek-e-Taliban in Afghan Conflict: Implications for Regional Security* (Islamabad: Strategic Studies Institute, 2023), 45–47.

⁵⁹ Y. Y. Mehlman and J. H. Hess, "A Comparative Analysis of the Afghan Taliban and the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan Ideologies Following the 2021 Takeover of Afghanistan," *Global Security & Intelligence Studies* 7, no. 2 (2022).

⁶⁰ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 325–326.

⁶¹ A. Herlambang, "The Fate of Internally Displaced Persons of Afghanistan in the Wake of the Afghanistan Conflict," *Central European Management Journal* 31, no. 3 (2023): 1–9.

Lack of professionals has made it quite impossible to ensure balance policies and smooth governance of state institutions.

The pivotal concern right now for Taliban is how to manage fiscal and financial management system of the country. Lack of governing structure is the biggest issue facing by the Taliban right now, having no taxation system, or any professional staff in the institutions. All the professional staff working in pre US withdrawal had either left the country or have adopted other means for earning which has resulted in a governing gap in the country.⁶²

In previous two decades, America used to provide 80% of the annual budget of Afghanistan. With Taliban's takeover of Kabul, rapid decline occurred in import and exports. All foreign investors have withdrew their investment and no national as well as international companies are ready to invest in Afghanistan which is severely devastating for governing machinery of the country. Economic insecurity, poverty and food scarcity has reached to high level due to lack of proper governing structure in the country.⁶³

Taliban government is still entangled to comprehend the power sharing issues between different stakeholders and have not yet started to focus on the governing issues. Almost three years has been passed

⁶² Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, *The Afghanistan-Pakistan Border: The Great Game and Beyond* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 102–104.

⁶³ M. Y. A. Kadir and S. Nurhaliza, "State Responsibility of Afghanistan Under Taliban Regime," *Jurnal Media Hukum* 30, no. 1 (2023): 1–20.

and Taliban core attention is still on power sharing issue rather than governing issue.⁶⁴ If proper governing cycle is not restored on immediate basis, it will have worse repercussions for the country.⁶⁵

Might is right concept is very common nowadays in Afghanistan. There is no proper judicial system in Afghanistan. Despite giving general amnesty, Taliban military executed former leaders of opposing ethnic groups.⁶⁶

Comprehending Human rights issues are far beyond the understanding of Taliban government. Rigid interpretation of Islamic teaching is the point of contradiction between Taliban and western society.⁶⁷ A generation has been sprout in the last two decades, believing in Western culture as a path toward progress in democracy and domestic life. Today, Afghanistan is totally different from the one left by Taliban in 2001.⁶⁸ The modern Afghanistan is not ready to accept the orthodox and conservative approach of Taliban interim government. It is impossible to mould the modern mindset in

⁶⁴ M. F. Khan, A. Hassan, and A. Raza, "Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan: Changing Global Dynamics and Pakistan's Policy Choices," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* (2023): 20578911221148520.

⁶⁵ Vanda Felbab-Brown, *The Taliban's Return to Power and the Challenges of Governance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2022), 72.

⁶⁶ A. Baczko, *The Taliban Courts in Afghanistan: Waging War by Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁶⁷ Ayesha Siddiq, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 50.

⁶⁸ F. Yousaf and M. Jabarkhail, "Afghanistan's Future Under the Taliban Regime: Engagement or Isolation?," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2022): 117–134.

conservative way, people are reacting against the orthodox ruling of the Taliban.

Taliban is reacting very harshly against minorities' protests, which is making the situation even worse in the country.⁶⁹ Ban on female education and revoking the liberty of jobs for female has resulted in severe hate among citizens for Taliban. The most dominated trends on social media is showing frustration among citizens specially in educated citizens against Taliban ruling.⁷⁰ With the emergence of Taliban victorious against all opposing groups open new chapter for people to envisage their future, few would have imagined that the new setup will bring prosperity, peace and progress.

Conclusion

Afghanistan, with its deeply rooted ethnic diversity, has experienced significant challenges in the wake of the Taliban's resurgence to power in 2021. The multi-ethnic nature of the country has exacerbated tensions between the Pashtun-dominated Taliban and minority ethnic communities. The Taliban's failure to implement policies addressing the needs and rights of minority groups has played a central role in heightening ethnic divisions and creating significant barriers to

⁶⁹ Antonio Giustozzi, *Killing the Camel: Afghanistan and the Impact of Taliban Policies* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 214–216.

⁷⁰ I. Islam and S. M. Mostofa, "State Fragility, Violent Extremism, and Future of Afghanistan," in *Dynamics of Violent Extremism in South Asia: Nexus between State Fragility and Extremism*, ed. [Editor's Name] (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023), 173–189.

governance. By adopting a centralized form of governance that excludes key ethnic groups, the Taliban has reversed the progress made in political inclusivity, leading to widespread resentment among non-Pashtun communities.

The exclusionary nature of the interim Taliban government, which is predominantly Pashtun, has resulted in severe social, economic, and political challenges. Minorities have been systematically denied access to political institutions, resulting in a deprivation of their basic rights, including access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. The lack of a constitution and the failure to ensure equitable power distribution have further entrenched governance issues and institutional dysfunction. This lack of inclusivity has not only deepened domestic ethnic conflict but also damaged the legitimacy of the Taliban government, both nationally and internationally. Additionally, Afghanistan's ongoing humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by years of conflict, natural disasters, and the collapse of the economy, further complicates the Taliban's ability to govern effectively.

In order to overcome these multifaceted challenges, the Taliban must take significant steps toward fostering inclusivity and ensuring the fundamental rights of all citizens, regardless of gender or ethnicity. Adopting a more inclusive and balanced approach to governance, grounded in a constitution that respects the will of the people, will be essential for restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan. By doing

so, the Taliban could potentially gain greater recognition and legitimacy from both domestic ethnic groups and the international community, while also addressing the country's dire humanitarian needs. A shift toward a more moderate political system, which respects individual rights and the rule of law, is crucial to achieving long-term peace and prosperity for the Afghan people.
