

IN DIRE STRAITS

A year on, gloom belies hope in Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

OPINION

MAJ GEN G.G. DWIVEDI (RETD)



It was on 15 August 2021 that the Taliban's lightning offensive culminated into the fall of Kabul, marking the return of the medieval theocratic regime two decades after its disastrous rout at the hands of the American forces. A fortnight later, on the night of 30 August, the viral image of Major General Chris Donahue, Commanding Officer 82nd Airborne Division, boarding the C17 Globemaster signalled the unceremonious exit of the United States from Afghanistan, ending its longest overseas military mission. Incidentally, the US became the third great power after Britain and Soviet Union to suffer an ignominious defeat in the region.

In October 2001, President George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Afghanistan

as part of the "Global War against Terrorism". The US-led NATO forces vanquished Al Qaeda and Taliban in less than a year, but these groups soon found safe haven in Pakistan. Leaving the Afghanistan cauldron simmering, the US went on to invade Iraq, missing out on the opportunity to build the Afghan army. This digression enabled the Talib and jihadi elements to regroup. Subsequently, the US' half-hearted nation building ventures and efforts to exit resulted in its military getting sucked into a "no go situation".

The die was cast for the return of the jihadi outfit to rule Kabul when the Trump administration signed the Doha Agreement with the Taliban in 2020, without the Afghan government on the table. The myth that Taliban 2.0 would be a moderate outfit was soon shattered with the announcement of its interim cabinet, comprising 33 all-male old guard; with half of them being designated as terrorists, including Prime Minister Mohammad Akhund, Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani (son of Haqqani

founder Jalaluddin Haqqani) and Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob (eldest son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar). With the Haqqanis and the Kandahar Taliban faction making up two-third of the interim cabinet, Pakistan's stamp on the new regime was obvious.

A YEAR LATER

The Taliban celebrated the first anniversary of the withdrawal of the US-led troops from Afghanistan, declaring 31 August as a national holiday and colourfully lighting up the capital. Afghanistan's new rulers have imposed a harsh version of Islamic laws on the impoverished citizens, thus seriously impinging on individual religious freedom; women have been practically squeezed out of public life.

Interestingly, the Taliban leadership has drawn pertinent lessons from their first stint, by according high priority to the maintenance of internal stability and gaining international legitimacy. To this end, the warlords were wiped out and the residual resistance in Panjshir was put down with a heavy hand, albeit with covert assistance from the Pakistani Army. To shape the external environment, the Taliban brought in a bunch of educated persons as the front faces, evident from the composition of the "Doha Team", media spokespersons and representatives handling politico-diplomatic issues.

Despite the UN refusal to recognise the new regime, the world at large is gradual-

ly coming forward to engage with the Taliban government unofficially, reconciling with the ground realities. In fact, Russia and China never exited Kabul, while the US maintains its grip through various NGOs. Apart from Pakistan and Iran, Central Asian and EU countries too have their diplomatic missions functional in Kabul. Even India maintains a small diplomatic component in the form of a "technical mission" to alleviate the prevailing humanitarian crisis.

Afghanistan was sustaining on foreign aid for the last two decades, making up almost half of its \$2 billion GDP; with narcotics trade contributing to a third of it. With the nation's assets valued at \$9-10 billion frozen and funding from the donors suspended, the Taliban regime finds itself in dire straits. Taking advantage of the situation, Islamabad has made quick moves to control Kabul's economy. China too is exploiting the situation and is seeking to extend the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) to further its strategic interests in the region.

The Taliban's oppressive and regressive policies, especially with respect to human and women rights, have drawn world-wide condemnation. Women not only have been denied the right to work but have been prohibited to move around without male escort. As per Martin Griffith, the UN Under Secretary General, there is an

alarming rollback with girls' schools closed for almost a year. This has resulted in millions of girls being prevented access to secondary education.

Unlawful revenge killings and abductions of persons suspected to have colluded with the US-Afghan forces, are rampant. Most of the Taliban cadre are Pashtun, moulded in madrasas and have little bonding with the ideologues of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". Armed groups linked to the Islamic State (IS) have been targeting Shia, Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek communities; indulging in looting and killing, creating a fear psychosis amongst the minorities.

The recent killing of Ayman al Zawahiri in Kabul by US drone strike confirms the Taliban nexus with global terrorist groups; including the Pak based Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT). The Taliban are renting out space for high value terrorists. Afghanistan's frozen monetary assets, if released, are likely to be utilised to fund terrorists. The situation in Afghanistan today is highly chaotic, marked by political, social and economic turmoil. As per the United Nations Development Program, 97% of the population could slip into the poverty threshold. Mass exodus from Afghanistan continues, with close to a million having already fled the country and almost quarter of a million in the wake of

seeking asylum. The media is under state control and journalists are being detained and eliminated. Even the peaceful protests are dealt with a heavy hand. Recently, a group of women demonstrating against oppressive rule were dispersed by the security personnel resorting to live overhead fire.

India has been extending humanitarian aid to alleviate starvation and malnutrition via the World Food Program, even after the Taliban takeover. The Taliban administration is keen that India finishes its old projects and starts new ones. Delhi is moving cautiously to unfreeze relations; a move which has been welcomed by Afghan society.

Due to a bunch of global crises looming large, the Afghanistan issue is out of focus in the international arena. Regional players have divergent vested interests to make meaningful contribution to the Afghan imbroglio. The Taliban are firmly in saddle and face no serious challenge that needs them to mend their ways. The people of Afghanistan have been pushed over the precipice; well aware that the circumstances are set to turn worse before it gets better. Given the fait accompli situation that Afghanistan is in, even for the most optimists gloom belies hope.

Maj Gen (Dr) G.G. Dwivedi (Retd) is a war veteran, former Assistant Chief and currently Professor Strategic IR.