Taliban

The circumstances which led to the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan, and to their reemergence after they had been driven out from power by the United States were very similar. Both events were unexpected and unprecedented.

The Islamic Republic which had been set up in Kabul in 1992 after the retreat of the Soviet army in 1989 was exclusive to the clerics and mujahideen (Islamic warriors) of the seven the Islamic Organizations which had fought the Soviet invading forces. Inexperienced in state affairs, they were well experienced in fighting. They soon fought among themselves, discarding the Peshawar Accords of 1992 in which they had pledged to govern the country in partnership. Besides, they now acted more as ethnic Afghans than as Afghans or even Muslim Afghans. The result was much like “the war of all against all.” Local rouge governments mushroomed throughout the country; even the country’s capital Kabul was divided among the warring groups some of which worked as proxies either of Pakistan or Iran. In this atmosphere neither life, nor property, nor the honor of women were safe. Insecurity prevailed, and the common Afghans became united in longing for a savior. In 1994, the Taliban appeared on the scene.

The Taliban Movement was composed of functioning mullahs (leaders in prayers) and their students (taliban) of rural Afghanistan, some of whom had been educated in religious seminaries (madrasas) in Pakistan. Their one-eyed and barely literate leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar had fought the Soviet invading army as an assistant commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Organization of Afghanistan. In 1994 when a local commander, Mohammad Saleh, took possession of two female passengers of a bus destined to Kandahar from Herat Mullah Omar thought the time had come to wage jihad against such rogue commanders also. After he persuaded the talibs and mullahs of the villages around Sangsar west of Kandahar to join him in this new jihad, he did away with the rouge commander and freed the captured women. The success which he thought was the outcome of his “reliance on Allah” strengthened him further in his resolve. He then embarked on suppressing other rouge commanders known as warlords.

In a brief fighting in October 1994 Mullah Omar’s band defeated the warriors of the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Speen Boldak, east of Kandahar close to the border with Pakistan. They also freed a Pakistani caravan of traders destined to Turkmenistan which had been detained for entering Afghanistan without permission. The victory made the Taliban famous as a liberating force. It also gained for them the good will of Pakistan, as a result of which they obtained weapons and cash. Their next target was the provincial capital of Kandahar which the Taliban occupied in early November without much fighting largely because, the army commander of the city surrendered with 2,500 of his men, and a large quantity of light and heavy weapons. By December the Taliban found additional recruits from Kandahar and madrasas in Pakistan, numbering, more than 12,000. The capture of Kandahar served as a turning point in the sense that the Taliban began to rule over a province which had produced rulers for modern Afghanistan.

For Mulla Omar the next target was the suppression of warlords and the overthrow of the Islamic Republic in Kabul, headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, chairman of the Islamic Association. With this view in mind later the ulama (religious scholars) bestowed on Mullah Omar the title of Amir al-Muminin (commander of the faithful) which initially the founder of the Mohammadzay dynasty Amir Dost Mohammad had
assumed in 1834 in Kabul. What helped the Taliban most was their program of disarmament, prohibition of poppy cultivation, and the establishment of peace and security.

During the ensuing two years the Taliban drove away the governors of provinces before they occupied Kabul on September 27, 1996. The Japanese pick ups which Pakistan was said to have provided them helped them much in their speedy advance. Also, the huge amount of cash which President Rabbani granted them, hoping that the Taliban would drive away his arch enemy Gulbuddin Hekmatyar helped them much. Above all it was the dogged determination of the fighting Taliban which enabled them to score victory after victory. With the capture of Kabul, Afghanistan south of the Hindu Kush became their fiefdom. But it also marked the beginning of their unpopularity. Immediately afterward Mullah Omar began setting up such a rigid theocracy which the Afghans had not experienced in their long history.

Music and dance were banned, women were prohibited from going out without the company of a male relative, while men were forced to grow beard, and pray regularly in mosques. All these and much more were part of their program of cleansing those aspects of society which they regarded un-Islamic. A band of moral police were commissioned with vast power to punish transgressors including women. It is an irony of history that the century had begun for Afghans with the introduction of a comprehensive program of modernization by King Amanullah, and ended with a rigid theocracy initiated by Mullah Omar of the Wahhabi type of Saudi Arabia.

Early next year the Taliban occupied Mazar, an important city in the north, but lost it soon with heavy casualties due to the betrayal of a local ally. Meanwhile Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Islamic Emirate. No other country did so. More serious, next August the United States hit training camps of the resistance period near Khost by Tomahak missiles launched from the Arabian Sea to kill bin Laden, leader of al-Qaeda, in response to the bombing by his followers of two American embassies in east Africa. Bin Laden was not killed, but the United States as well as the Security Council imposed sanctions on the Emirate. The sanctions failed to persuade Mullah Omar to expel bin Laden, whereas before that he had shown willingness to do so. Afghanistan was isolated as never before. This was compensated to a degree when a large number of extremists from the Muslim world joined the Emirate including a brigade of .55 of al-Qaeda warriors to fight for it. This was the time when the Emirate could hardly find recruits inside Afghanistan even in its birth place, Kandahar. With their support the Taliban were, by September 2001, able to extend control over all Afghanistan except a district in Takhar in north eastern Afghanistan where Commander Ahmad Shah Massud had been confined. All other warlords had either surrendered or had escaped abroad. But in my visit of Afghanistan in the spring of 2001 I found out that the Taliban had become deeply unpopular for their harsh treatment of the people though they had brought them peace and security. Even a faction of moderate Taliban led by Mullah Khaksaur worked secretly for a broad-based government. It was in this atmosphere that the momentous event of September 11, 2001 happened in New York and Washington which by all accounts had been engineered by bin Laden in the training camps near Khost in Afghanistan.

The response of the American administration was quick and decisive. After Mullah Omar failed to surrender or expel bin Laden as President Bush had asked the
latter ordered war on terror and the overthrow of the Emirate. On October 7, 2001, General Tommy Franks led an intensive air campaign against specific targets inside Afghanistan while the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in collusion with the United States worked against them from within. By early December the Emirate ceased to exist, but Mullah Omar, bin Laden and others escaped to the tribal areas nominally under Pakistan’s control. The Taliban who now found safe havens with ethnic Pashtuns across the porous border were, thus, ousted but not defeated.

The fall of the Islamic Emirate made a replacement necessary. Unlike the Soviet Union, which raised its party of choice to power in 1979 the United States asked the United Nations to assist Afghans to set up a government for themselves. A conference of heads of anti-Taliban groups was convened in Bonn, Germany under the supervision of the United Nations. On December 5, it called for “a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government.” It chose Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun from Kandahar, to head the government in the transitional period. The group’s leaders were allowed to administer its executive branches. But the lion share of seats went to the Northern Alliance. All this was to be followed by the promulgation of a constitution and popular election, a task which was accomplished as a result of which Afghanistan so far had two presidential and parliamentary elections on the basis of a new constitution promulgated in 2004. However, peace and security are still illusive despite the existence of an elected government, national army and police, as well as NATO and American military forces,

The essential culprit for the present disturbed situation was and still is the existence of a weak, ineffective and corrupt government. This was partly because the Bonn agreement did not stipulate that new officials be appointed on the basis of merit. Instead, they were appointed on the basis of nepotism, partisanship, and relationship with warlords. In this situation, even illiterate and semiliterate persons were raised to government posts. Since their official payments were meager and the long disturbing period had impoverished many, these officials abused their power much by extorting money from any one who had any thing to do with a government department. Unprecedented degree of corruption was the result. People became much discontented, and the central government especially in the beginning could not even collect all of its revenue. More seriously, it could not rule the land according to its own laws while many governors especially of the frontier regions ruled their provinces as they pleased, appropriating all or nearly all of government revenues to themselves.

All this was because of the elevation to high official positions of the discredited warlords whom the author Ahmad Rashid calls “The One-Billion Dollar Warlords.” Perhaps an extreme example of this is Mohammad Qasim Fahim of the Northern Alliance, who, as minister of defense in the interim government became more powerful than President Hamid Karzai. He “continued to be feted by the Pentagon, while the CIA continued to pay lavish salaries to warlords and their militias.” It was even known to the US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld that Fahim’s income amounted to “nearly $ 1 billion a year.” Yet the warlords were supported by the US administration in the hope that they would stabilize the country so that American soldiers need not fight and be killed. This did not happen, as the warlords and their militias themselves became a source of instability. All this was because the US administration initially did not want to be involved in what it called “nation building” though it had created a political vacuum by
overthrowing the previous regime and that much of Afghanistan was in ruin as a result of the years of disturbances. In this atmosphere President Karzai and his few western educated and dedicated cabinet ministers could not do much.

What angered the people most was the bombing of suspected targets by International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) of NATO which entailed casualties of innocent civilians. Suspected targets are still bombed, and military operations are still carried on, but now cautiously, and along with Afghan forces. Strangely, in the beginning in the course of home search even women were searched by foreign soldiers, an action which intensified public anger. These measures caused the Afghan government to significantly lose legitimacy. They also dampened the good will the Afghans had for the United States which had assisted them much in defending their land against the Soviet invaders. In addition, all these measures along with the unprecedented corruption overshadowed the reconstruction of the land, and the democratic rights which the Afghans now enjoy under the new liberal constitution.

Specifically now after years of disturbance and lawlessness political freedom is a reality. Also, modern nongovernmental mass media are a conspicuous part of Afghan life as is the existence of political parties. Now also, because of the setting up of health centers in urban as well as rural areas the death rate of women during child birth has been significantly reduced while during the Taliban rule it was among the highest in the world. Now also, the number of school students is said to be as high as 6 million for boys and girls in a population of about 30 million. Technical educational institutes and universities have been multiplied. Women who had suffered much under the Taliban and Islamic Organizations since their emancipation in 1959 are now again members of parliament and ministerial cabinet, as they had been in the constitutional monarchy. In addition, now for the first time a special ministry had been set up for the promotion of their welfare.

The most conspicuous part of the reconstruction program is the pavement of highways throughout the land which has speeded up the transfer of commercial goods and movement of people. These and so many other accomplishments have become possible by the grants of billions of dollars of donor countries especially the United States and Japan. But since the original allocations of funds were filtered through subcontracts, the NGOs could spend only a portion of the original funds allocated for reconstruction. Noticeable is also the achievement in private sector of the rise of new and enlargement of the existing cities. But the instant millionaires have deposited their money in banks abroad not invested in the country in productive projects. Also the building of dams for bringing additional lands under cultivation, and the generation of cheap hydroelectricity have been neglected. This as well as increase in population and the presence of a large international community has resulted in high inflation. Likewise a matter of serious concern especially for international community is the exceptional increase in poppy cultivation which had been suppressed during the rule of Taliban. The circulation of a large amount of money of drug mafia and of the donor countries has caused inflation. The overall result has been an unprecedented polarization of society and public discontent.

The Taliban exploited the discontent, especially after the US’ priority shifted in 2003 from Afghanistan to its war in Iraq. During the US air campaign those Taliban who survived crossed the border to Quetta and Waziristan where they were welcomed by locals who were their own ethnic Pashtuns. Quetta and Pashtunabad were like their second home where they had lived during the resistance period and attended madrassas.
Even when in power some of their leaders had left their families there. It was in Quetta that Mullah Omar in 2003 set up a ten-man leadership council known as the Quetta Shura. He also commissioned four senior commanders to reorganize the Taliban for fighting in Kandahar and its adjacent provinces. These commanders had links with bin Laden, and were known for their belief in global jihad. Among them was Mullah Dadullah who in waging jihad was as ruthless as Commander Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Commander Haqqani and thousands of Taliban and the al-Qaeda fighters took refugee in Waziristan when they were forced out from Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan and from the Paktia province as a result of the Anaconda Operation. Thus the al-Qaeda fighters took refugee in the rugged and narrow ravines of South and North Waziristan where they were joined by Arab, Uzbek, and other fanatics. The young Wazirs and Massuds of Waziristan who helped them much were rewarded with cash. Subsequently, they also became radical and founded a Taliban Movement of their own under Baitullah Massud. These Wazirs and Massuds have organic links with their own tribesmen across the porous border in Afghanistan.

Commander Haqqani, who as minister of Tribal Affairs of Taliban had established good relations with the frontier tribesmen as well as al-Qaeda and the ISI, now felt unrestricted in launching a guerrilla war, targeting foreign troops and government officials, as he had done against the Soviet invaders. The ISI did not rein in the Taliban in Quetta or Waziristan, thinking that the US will again abandon Afghanistan and so they better keep them alive as its own proxy. It also viewed them as a counterpoise to the Northern Alliance which had dominated the Afghan government, and was also receptive to India, and more importantly acted as the proxies of Iran and Russia. Actually, Pakistan as before viewed Afghanistan as a junior partner in its agenda of “strategic dept “in case India invaded it. This fitted rather well with the US perspective which considered the Taliban a spent force, but viewed al-Qaeda and the foreign fighters more dangerous. The US pressured President Musharraf of Pakistan to neutralize them. Pakistan was able to arrest in its different parts a large number of second and third degree operatives and members of al-Qaeda.. Pakistan also undertook military operations in Waziristan, where terrorists were being trained, but the operations ended soon without achieving much. Afterward, Pakistan became the scene of horrible bomb explosions as Afghanistan had already become.

It is impossible to describe all the destabilizing operations in Afghanistan of the Taliban from their new quarters. Suffice it to say that the commanders of the Quetta Shura concentrated their operations in southern Afghanistan while Commander Haqqani’s Taliban and others hit targets in eastern Afghanistan mainly in the Kunar and Paktia provinces. These are mainly Pashtun areas. Subsequently, they also carried on operations in northern and other parts of Afghanistan.

The Taliban acted against foreign troops a few years after the fall of their Emirate in contrast to the mujahideen who acted almost immediately against the Soviet invaders. Also, the insurgent Taliban were a small part of the population whereas mujahideen outnumbered them much, and who additionally in contrast to Taliban enjoyed the support of almost all Afghans. This was because as Ahmad Rashid states in support of my own observation, “[T]here was a powerful feeling of optimism on Kabul’s streets in those early months of 2002.” Yet over time the Taliban were able to destabilize the country after the NATO and Afghan armies failed to neutralize them. This became evident when
the original optimism of Afghans evaporated, because of the unprecedented degree of corruption, the domination of government by warlords, and ISAF's frequent military operations which also resulted in the killing of innocent civilians. In this atmosphere the estranged Afghans in rural areas especially Pashtuns did not or could not oppose the Taliban who reappeared in their or their own villages, and acted as local rulers in settling disputes. They increased their activities after 2003 when the US' priority shifted to Iraq and Mullah Omar in that year commissioned senior commanders to make life for Americans in Afghanistan "... fire, hell and total defeat."

They chose southern Afghanistan especially the Helmand province whose people are known for fighting invaders. Even though a sizable NATO troops under a British commander were stationed in Helmand to curb opium production, and neutralize the Taliban, nevertheless by 2004 half of the four southern provinces was said to have passed to their hands. However, simultaneously, they also became unpopular for killing those whom they suspected of spying for "infidels". Numerous other civilians also have fallen victims to road bombs which the Taliban laid essentially for foreigners. The Taliban also targeted and still target government officials, teachers, and police, in addition to destroying or being responsible for the closing hundreds of schools. As if these were not enough the extremists or the al-Qaeda men among them resorted to suicidal bombing, indicating that they are against life. Mulla Omar in fact made life "fire" and "hell" not for Americans but for his own compatriots. The same is true of the Haqqani network which has hit targets in similar fashion in parts of eastern Afghanistan. In addition it has carried on some spectacular operations against foreign targets in Kabul.

The ISAF by now (December, 2011) have curbed their activities to a large extent, but they are still alive, and can become the agent for another round of vicious civil war when the NATO troops leave Afghanistan in 2014, as it has been said they would. The government's efforts to make peace with the Taliban on certain conditions are unlikely to bear fruit. On such political matters the Taliban can not act on their own without the consent of Pakistan when they are there. Besides, they themselves would not join the government as long as it is dominated by the Northern Alliance. So, as the former American ambassador in Kabul, Karl Eikenberry has said "... NATO could not win in Afghanistan without addressing the sanctuaries the Taliban enjoyed in Pakistan." Actually, it was impossible either for the Quetta Shura, or the Haqqani network, including their al-Qaeda fanatics to do what they have done in Afghanistan without the consent, nay support, of the ISI of Pakistan.

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