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Dr Razia Sultana *

Glancing the Past, Keeping an eye on Present and Speculating the Future of Afghan Women under the Taliban rule

Abstract

The recent take-over of Taliban in Afghanistan has raised questions whether women will be given their due rights or history would be repeated? The apparent situation till yet is not much encouraging. Women were initially stopped to attend secondary schools and even yet not allowed to attend universities as per Taliban assertion until 'safe environment' were made sure for them. Besides the limitations on education, working women are also barred from performing their duties with the same routine which they earlier practiced. However, women this time unlike the past are showing up for demanding their rights in the form of rallies and protests on roads and public areas. They of course are facing reaction but initial steps are already taken on their be-half; recording their resentment. Looking at the past, studying the present and speculating the future is the aim of the study. The study also intends to unveil foreign perspective of Taliban as misogynists. Whether the chanted slogans against Taliban are real or speculative is included in aim of the study.

Keywords: Afghan Women, Taliban, Women rights, Future for women.

Introduction

Taliban has raised concerns throughout the world regarding human rights, especially women rights. The study is here conducted in three parts that is glancing the past, viewing the present circumstances and suggesting a future fruitful governance through adaptation to the international standards and trends. The past has inseparable connections to the present and therefore bear influence on the future outcomes therefore the study touches upon all three spans of time. Afghan Taliban makes deep historical imprints on women rights in Afghanistan. Their sufferings have a long history that unfortunately continues itself in the present too. Even future is shrouded in dark clouds giving less hope of conducive environment for women.

Glancing the Past

The recent advent of Taliban rule in Afghanistan has come along with most possibilities of radical changes after the withdrawal of US troops. The changes are feared to be 'not so favorable' and appealing to the Afghan people, due to the reason of having a past history that left throbbing imprints on the nation. Taliban violation of human rights especially of women rights is a major concern throughout the world. Despite other shortcomings the last rule of Taliban –from 1996 to 2001, proved to be tarnished internationally because of its misogynous measures and forceful implementations of rules against women. These measures included depriving women from employment, independent living, seeking education, economic liberty and freedom of expression. Moreover, in the last Taliban regime, women were inflicted with pain and sufferings; including the physical and psychological torture. They were barred in the boundaries of their homes, mobility was curtailed and forced to be accompanied by a male family member, socializing and entertainment was banned.¹ In short their lives were left at the will of male members of family. Keeping this entire backdrop in mind when the current government of Taliban came into power, fear spread all over the nation, especially women. The fear was not merely because of the past memories rather the individuals who ruled in the previous government of Taliban were once again on authoritative positions; bringing flashbacks from the past. Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhunzada who is the current leader of Taliban has been the head of Sharia Courts in 1990s and also served as supreme commander of the Taliban in 2016. Also, the recent Prime Minister

* Dr Razia Sultana, Vice Chancellor Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University, Peshawar

Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund is one amongst the co-founders of Taliban and in the last government served as Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Moreover, current Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar is the co-founder of Taliban and became the lynchpin of Taliban resurrection against US armies after 2001 US-led invasion in Afghanistan. Also, he had been on the top list of FBI and later in 2010 he was imprisoned but after imprisonment for eight years in 2019 he was released in order to assist in smoothing plans on peace processes with Taliban. Besides he remained as head the political office of Taliban in Qatar since 2019 and had been communicating with Americans on this thread; also he had been the first leader of Taliban to speak to US president Donald Trump.ⁱⁱ The interim government brings him and the others back into authoritative positions. A report in dawn newspaper confirms that almost half of the members in the recent Taliban's government are those from the previous government.ⁱⁱⁱ Now that the previous ones are once again in top positions the present seems to be not much different than the past. Therefore, comprehending the current situations on basis of the past and the stereotypical association of Taliban with extremist fundamentalists' has embossed fear on minds, not in Afghanistan only but around the globe. Consequently, those who are concerned with individual liberties or human rights especially female rights are more worried; Taliban has a history of negating women empowerment and rights; at most occasions they have been cruel to them. Women in the previous Taliban rule were wiped and beaten publically if their shoes would mistakenly show their feet or make noise that were deemed to be distracting men.^{iv} Accordingly, torture suffered by females made them redundant to the extent that women population had no public mainstream role at the national level.

Present Circumstances

Repeating the history, as soon as Taliban came into power, they thoughtlessly hindered women education, activism, employment and resultantly their liberty. They closed down educational institutes for women, including the secondary schools and universities. Tacitly every newly established government goes through hard times of taking significant decisions; but decisions like cutting down education for women, is rare and that too has happened only in Afghanistan with the sudden rule of Taliban. Later it took almost three months to restore girls' education at secondary level. It was graver amongst women concerns to discontinue their attendance at educational institutes. On the contrary, in August boys were allowed to attend schools whereas girls were asked to stay home until suitable arrangements were made that ensure 'safe environment' for them. However, the 'suitable arrangements' that will ensure safety for women as per the Taliban's frame of mind is the application of Sharia which will segregate female educational institutes from the male institutes; it is their belief in a hyper-separated system which made them close down schools for girls immediately after coming into power. Also, the segregation will be made to ensure social distancing after Sharia implementation. Moreover, cutting down female education with the aim to segregate females' education from males' education is too big a claim to be made at this time of financial crisis faced by the government. The international aid provided by foreign nations including America and Germany beside other has stopped immediately after Taliban established their rule. The World Bank figures for 2019 establish the fact that 22percent of the gross national income comes from the development aid provided to the country by foreign countries. However, now that the aid is withdrawn Afghanistan in near future is most likely to encounter dismal conditions due to drastic fall of economy. In such scenarios Taliban's disregard for economic crisis and commitment to segregation of educational institutions for women proves their claims to be thoughtlessly vague. To separate universities and establish new buildings and equipping with necessary tools require time and money which is only possible through stable economy via trade and fruitful international relations. Unfortunately both: stable economy and fruitful international relationship is lacking in Afghanistan, currently. Therefore, commitments of segregating women universities and rehabilitating women education seem bleak in the present Taliban government. Moreover, critical motives behind closing the educational institutes made its way to reach the headlines of international news due to its graver rational in such economically catastrophic situation. Nevertheless, the initial step of closing schools when made to reach headlines has become vital for criticism by the western world and foreign media groups. The critics and experts under a wider view of the Afghans' political and international affiliation besides their draining economy forecasted the nation to collapse if economy is not restored and education is not promoted particularly amongst women of the nation.^v

For argument if the issue here be raised that segregated educational system is practiced in other countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan then why are these countries not labeled as extremist nations on such basis? Therefore it is crucial to mention here that although in Saudi Arabia female had long been the victim of discrimination against them in the education system^{vi} but they are financially stable enough to take the criticism. Similarly segregation of

education, not on basis of gender but do, exists in the first world countries also, most importantly in America; where segregation used to exist on racial basis^{vii}. Similarly OECD countries including Sweden, Denmark, Netherland and Norway have segregation on ethnic basis^{viii}. Each nation comes up with a justification of its segregation under their beliefs or social philosophies that deem to be justified on the basis of their economically stronger state. But if Afghanistan suggests a separation on basis of gender, that too because of complying with religious doctrines in financially dropped situation, it obviously is irrational and unrealistic.

The UNDP report has proposed a disastrous future for Afghanistan GDP; the report proposed that the GDP is likely to drop by 20percent within a single year. Besides, the condition can further be worsen and drop by another 5percent or loss up to US \$1billion if women are stopped from working. The reality is quiet clear and harsh but absurdly unacknowledged by Taliban.^{ix}

Meanwhile because of the mind-bogglingly difference of opinion from the rest of the world Taliban besides their less heed to international image are most liable to be hit as extremists with extreme reaction. In the interim period, Taliban sensed this national and international reaction and under pressure they being diplomatic had to announce it, contrary to the facts, to press and media that they had opened schools and 75 percent of girls resumed education in Afghanistan.^x But this 75 percent resuming of girls education in schools was not practiced throughout the country; in actual schools for girls opened in phases. Starting with the primary to open first and the higher grades to open later by October 2021, female education resumed gradually. However, it was by November that high schools opened up for girls, but sadly not throughout the country. It is as per the report and coverage that Herat, a province in Afghanistan, was the only one and privileged province to reopen high schools for girls. Furthermore agencies reported it to 'The News International' in December 2021 that local Taliban authorities have been persuaded to reopen schools for girls but the secondary education for girls is still not fully functioned.^{xi} However, the schools that re-opened in Herat and Northern provinces were not by the government recognition of significance of the female education but because of the public efforts made by the parents, teachers and students themselves. Besides Herat, some other districts towards Northern Afghanistan also reopened high schools for girls. The rest is still disappointing, although principals and students are struggling but not much is yielded from the efforts because, it is the central government and Ministry of Education that lack prompt action to reopen female educational institutions. Adversely, if the provincial authorities allow the continuation of education the central authorities hinder it more.

Considering women's condition further it is noticed that after closing schools, Taliban asked women to stay inside homes in order to avoid any redundant situation from happening due to the 'not yet trained' security individuals; women working on different positions were asked to stay home. Furthermore, Ministry of Women's Affairs was handed over to become Ministry of Vice and Virtue; they imposed their will upon women. Women journalists, bureaucrats, activists, socialists are amongst the adversely affected segments besides the politicians who were formerly 28percent but with Taliban established rule they are zero percents in the parliament^{xii}. Taliban deny any official proclamation against women employment because neither any written or government acknowledged orders are issued nor enforced openly in public. But because of Taliban's extremist undercover measures like sudden raids at night, uninformed investigations and tracing women activists have scared them and immediately put a stop to their practical life and activities. Also, they fear their lives due to the reason that their modern objectives, which are aimed in liberation, may not be very pleasing to conservatively rural Taliban. Taliban are ideologically working on religious and rural state of mind. They oppress public with their personal way of adaptation of Sharia. Therefore women are scared to face a sudden reaction on violation of Taliban's expectation; also because those who go against the religious obligations or Sharia are punished adversely; most importantly because of historical imprints of fundamentalist ideological and rural midst of Taliban.

Having a rural mindset, most of the Taliban are scholars from local religious madrassas with no or least formal education from any school or university make them unsighted towards the globalization and advancement around the globe. Besides, having rural mindset they have a fundamentalist approach; one reinforcing the other leads to making them as ultra conservatives. Moreover Taliban regime has another benefit, which is lethal for women empowerment that is the support of a vast rural population of the country. According to a report published by UNICEF Afghanistan has as much as 71percent of rural population whereas the remaining 29 percent has 5percent of nomadic Kuchis while only 24 percent is from urban areas.^{xiii} On the rural areas Taliban have immense influence. It is proved by 'The Wall Street Journal' the rural areas of Afghanistan gave a warm welcome to Taliban as they approve their rule, including both men and women. For the rural inhabitants Taliban are good news as their rule

make sure that no killing will happen anymore.^{xiv} Moreover, the rural population is composed of uneducated lot who disapprove education for women; therefore the locals other than Taliban are hindering education for women equally, as done by Taliban; Afghan literacy ratio includes 47 percent men and only 15 percent women (according to a report published by UNICEF). Therefore, keeping the rural population and literacy rate in mind it is envisaged that most of the women are living under culturally constructed social norms and ignorance. They are not exposed to urban standards of living yet, therefore unaware of advancement. Consequently, they have no desire to be someone different than what they are; although exceptions do exist but most population of women, the rural, are so brainwashed by the cultural and religious obligations on them that they cannot think out of the box; living in oblivion. They are happy under the rule just as their men are; as in patriarchal conditions whatever is the will of the men is the common will and good for the entire family. Therefore when such women join against the other women who work for liberation against Taliban they fall weak in number and support. Here, the argument intends to show women recession from the modern age brings approval for Taliban regime due to their family men. Additionally, Afghan women blame international community for the injustice against them for their silence against Taliban and giving them a free hand of practicing their will.

Moreover, Taliban are worldwide labeled to be misogynist which is in compliance to reality. They excluded Afghan women, proving to be fundamentalist, from major national fronts like: politics, administrative positions and foreign interaction through delegations. On the other hand when Taliban deal with foreign women they become biased because they reject allowing native Afghan women to work but accept working with foreign women. Therefore while dealing foreign women and their native women Taliban adopt biased attitudes. For instance, Marry Ellen McGroarty is a Donegal born Leader of World Food Programme in Afghanistan, who is working in the Taliban held Afghanistan. She determinantly is providing her services; continuously monitoring conditions making sure they are under safe conditions which are not much affected by Taliban after they resumed power. Also, Marry works along with her team and most of the team members stayed at home and worked online after Taliban resumed government but Marry has not reported any incident of Taliban hindering their services, rather she has told journalists that UN and humanitarians are not the targets of Taliban - even if they are women. Moreover, whenever delegations were sent to meet Taliban and the delegations had women members they never rejected meeting them. Fatima Gilani back in 2020 went for a meeting with Taliban in Doha beside three other women including Fawzia Koofi (former member of parliament), Sharifa Zurmati (former member of the Independent Election Commission), and Habiba Sarabi (former governor of Bamyān Province) Qatar for 'Intra Afghan Dialogue' as a senior member of 'Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's negotiating team'. The team comprised of twenty one members. She recorded her experience by saying that Taliban looked at us like politicians and we looked at them as negotiators. While the negotiation was conducted Fatima said they were not aware of their gender; proving Taliban to be biased to women and respectful to accept them on administrative positions only if the women are not Afghanistan inhabitants. It is the progression and empowerment of Afghan local women which fall under their government that they disapprove to promote. They mean to suffocate their living and oppress them under their prejudices and personal interpretation of religious doctrines. However, women coming to meet them from foreign countries are well received. They gave heed to what the meetings were about and respected women during meeting. Similarly Taliban also took initiative to meet senior Afghan women; they travelled from Oslo to Norway in 2015 to meet senior Afghan women delegation there.^{xv} However, the general practice under their government is to curtail women rights and empowerment throughout the country.

Accordingly newspapers and foreign reports on Afghan women are flooded with narratives of women that are suffering under the oppression of Taliban government. On December 27, 2021 it was reported in Dawn that Taliban has curtailed women travel by imposing an obligation of accompanying a close male relative and fully covering Hijab- Burqa. Women who are neither accompanied by a male relative nor wear a Burqa will not be allowed to travel; the previous measures are again implemented by the same old Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Not just ban on travel has been announced but entertainment through music and drama serials are also fully banned in order to prevent vices. However, it has been made clear that women should not be performing as actors in dramas and those recorded already should immediately be stopped from broadcasting. Besides, female news reporters are issued with instruction to fully cover themselves while they are on-air/broadcasting.^{xvi} Resultantly, the very rise of Taliban internationally is seen as a rushed fall of women in Afghanistan. Most importantly female activists, bureaucrats, advocates and politicians have little hope under Taliban. Female sportswomen, journalists, judges fear for their lives. They abandoned their offices right after

Taliban took over and hide in places to avoid confronting Taliban anywhere as they fear to be on the hit list of Taliban.

Future Speculation

The rising fear and depravity of Afghan women invites foreign interests and intervention into Taliban's government. Therefore, keeping the future concern on priority, Taliban need to negotiate and mingle with the international community by adopting flexibility so that their government sustains fruitful governance; they in spite of being fundamentalist need more flexible approach towards international countries. Samar (2019) had previously identified the case through her extensive study. She highlighted that the previous Taliban government was considered as threat to American security with the initiative taken by First Lady Laura Bush through her weekly radio presidential address. In addressing women rights she made powerful comments in which she highly personalized the situation of women in Afghanistan as a possible threat of imposing the same complexity by the Taliban on women throughout the country. Consequently, Taliban became a threat to the entire world. For argument sake if we consider Taliban, we see that Taliban see America as a threat to their national security. The fear is equal on both sides; peace deprived nations. In such a scenario if Taliban and America want to have peaceful relationship they need to adapt to the situations favorably for a better future.

Taliban in order to have international favor has apparently adapted to the changed circumstances, this is stated in light of the first press conference. Whatsoever, Taliban has a government with bleak history but the first press conference showed them different than what they were in the past from 1996-2001. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in his first conformation with media conference did not approve the stereotypical stances, rather he gave a positive come back. Aljazeera records his words as, "We are going to allow women to work and study. We have got frameworks, of course. Women are going to be very active in the society but within the framework of Islam", adding to it he said, "there will be no discrimination against women....they are going to work shoulder to shoulder with us." Furthermore claims were made that what brutality has happened in the past will not be repeated in the present; they are aware of the past injustice done by Taliban to Afghanistan therefore committed, as per Zabihullah words, not to repeat any such stance of injustice. Furthermore, he assured the journalists that media or foreign journalists can freely function as they have been doing in the past 20 years, they have no plans of oppressing international journalists. The entire press conference communicated positive intentions with no slight intentions of terrorism or ill will for international community; rather he presented a wish to establish peace with the help of international community assistance.^{xvii} Here giving a slight benefit of doubt, the words coming from a newly established government's spokesperson are fair but realistically and undoubtedly are diplomatic because they know that they are being under observation of the entire world. They verbally committed to deal women equal to men but practiced contrary to it in this short time. The protests and rallies against women oppression besides establishment of 'all male government' prove that Taliban's spokesperson sustained their previously identified bias in the first media conference. Contrastingly, in the month of September women protested inside Kabul on roads against the 'all male government'. As time passes the protests are increasing. Women are blowing harder on their aims and demands for justice. Taliban are hindering their protests with the objection to seek permission for conducting a protest. Women know it well that they will never be given any permission by the Taliban to strive for their rights and demands in compliance with the international norms. Therefore they are ready to bear the pains; they are beaten on roads when they rise slogans and are banned to conduct any social activism. By any means Afghan women are unstoppable, because unlike the past they are more aware and determined to take a stand for their rights.

In the milieu, if it be anticipated for the current Taliban rule that they are letting women to work beside them, then it is well to state here that some evidences show Taliban different than past, but the reality overall is depressing because evidences for such claims are minimal; majority are deprived. There are a few women out of numerous who are working beside Taliban; but it's again asserted here that they are minimal in number. The number of working women is a constructive in regard of future hope, although the hope is little but not dead as women at least get minimal chances of working in the current Taliban regime. Therefore instead of blaming the system the counter reality should equally be considered. As one instance here we can consider of Karima Mayar Amiri who, after the previous US-backed administration fell apart, continued her high job as Director of the Ministry's Quality and Safety Department. She asserted that she continues to work as she did previously under the previous administration, also she not only continues working but effectively manage to coordinate with the Taliban administrators regarding the Dengue and Corona virus spreading. Additionally, she as per her experience remarked that she has been able to

communicate her concerns effectively to Taliban government regarding merging two departments in order to control them feasibly and reduce financial burden. Moreover, her personal experience is witness of proving Taliban's flexibility towards respecting women's opinion and making it practical immediately. She has shared an experience with Taliban where she was asked to hand over her bag for security checking which she denied with the reason that there should be women separate chamber where the checking should be done and she was immediately spared.^{xviii} But she is one amongst those millions who are deprived of their work place and are on roads for obtaining their due rights.

As they are on roads in current state of affairs; women themselves necessarily be striving for their rights. International pressure can only make a temporary change through pressure or alliance but personal efforts of women can be long lasting and most fruitful. Also, most majority of the urban women in Afghanistan are well aware of this fact therefore they are witnessed as protesting on roads and before major fronts like embassies and presidential building in Kabul. Further, it is unlike the past that Afghan women are protesting and recording their grievances publicly; previously they had no courage to do so. Not only on national fronts but Afghan women outside Afghanistan are also rising to make a difference. As, US appoints an Afghan born US Scholar Rina Amiri as an envoy in order to defend Afghan women rights and make Afghanistan peaceful, safe and secure for all.^{xix} Such Afghan women who can freely speak for other native women of their homeland due to the privilege of being away from the direct access of Afghan Taliban, including Amiri who previously worked in the State Department of US under Barrack Obama, and women who have the strength of knowledge and reason while living under Taliban regime in native country, if they join hands together for women rights they can make a better difference. The future of Afghan women in the current situation at large depends on women struggle for themselves.

Conclusion

Taliban's government is in premature state therefore deciding anything about it or attributing the past flaws to the present government or the future outcomes is too early step to be taken at this point in time. Every government takes time and means to establish itself firmly, besides past always teaches lessons for the future. They are fundamentalists, lacking flexibility to absorb international dynamism. Moreover, it is their lack of comprehending the circumstances and complying with it with desired suppleness that make them liable for criticism such as extremist fundamentalists rejecting women rights bluntly. But they have to show flexibility and accommodate international concerns with regards to women rights. Women rights are denied to them, moreover they forcefully made to follow and observe their cultural norms and religious doctrines. In view of the present situation International Community needs to deal Taliban differently. On priority they need to establish trust, on trustworthy grounds they can proceed to work harmoniously with international community; chances are they develop a change with the passage of time. Further oppression from international community may tighten women's living therefore the matter need tactful solutions

Suggestions

- Taliban are economically draining therefore economic alliance with them can help gain their trust and on trustworthy ground invite them for change.
- Afghan Taliban oppression of women needs be addressed in time to avoid critical but favorable outcome in the future.
- International community needs to keep their spirits high and efforts accordingly to help Taliban need to mould and evolve with the other nations and fulfill the contemporary demands of time.
- Women in the country need to help themselves, it is their efforts that can be most fruitful and empower them reasonably.

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