

## INTERIM AFGHAN GOVERNMENT IN POWER – TWO YEARS ON

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



August 15, 2023, marked two years since the Taliban dispensation reassumed power in Afghanistan. Initially, there was lack of clarity regarding the Taliban's return to power and what it would mean for the future of Afghanistan, particularly the group's approach towards domestic issues such as governance, political freedom, human/women's rights, counter-terrorism measures, as well as overall commitment to regional peace and stability. However, the past two years have provided significant insights into the Taliban's approach, which can be characterized as a blend of authoritarian policies and pragmatism. The Taliban have undergone significant changes since the 1990s when they were widely perceived as outliers in the realm of modern politics. Today, despite lacking formal/international recognition, the group has seemingly solidified its position as the de facto political authority in Afghanistan, even if not formally recognized as the de jure governing body.

Domestically, the Interim Afghan Government's performance has been open to much debate and criticism, but the past 24 months have clearly indicated that the Taliban are a work in progress.

The current interim setup put in place on September 7, 2021, exhibits similarities to the governance system employed by the Taliban during their previous rule in the 1990s, with a supreme leader and a prime minister, with the addition of deputy prime minister posts whose policies are highly

influenced by their limited interpretation of Sharia. While the group has yet to establish a recognized and formal structure of governance, they have continued to operate under the ministries established by the previous government, claiming to have retained more than 500,000 members of the previous administration. Moreover, they have not made significant changes in terms of abolishing any ministry, with the exception of dissolving the electoral commission and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which has been replaced by the Ministry of Vice and Virtue – serving as a blow to the rights of women.

When the group took over, they spoke of an inclusive, accountable and responsible government that represents all the people of Afghanistan. So far, (with the exception of Abdus Salam Hanafi who is an old member of the group) the Taliban interim set up has given eight positions within its cabinet to members from the Uzbek, Tajik, and Hazara ethnic communities. While the inclusion of some members from Afghanistan's diverse ethnic groups may provide a veneer of inclusivity, the Taliban's cabinet remains exclusively male, overwhelmingly dominated by Pashtuns lacking female representation.

Moreover, the Taliban also suspended the previous Afghan constitution of 2004, which served as the governing framework for Afghanistan prior to their takeover. As of now, the Taliban has not announced or implemented a new constitution to replace it. The absence of a new constitution raises questions about the future governance structure and legal framework in Afghanistan.

Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, who serves as the Taliban's supreme leader, maintains a firm hold, exerting supreme control and influence over the group's governance and decision-making processes. Even though the group is facing opposition from 23 Armed groups including political factions, they have, however, failed to pose a serious threat to the Taliban. According to the U.N. Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, "there appears to be no significant visible political opposition to the Taliban inside Afghanistan," and exiled officials associated with the former government "are fragmented and their statements have decreasing resonance for the population inside Afghanistan."

In spite of shortcomings in the Taliban's governance structure, and lack of ethnic representation, they have been able to establish a level of security, stability and centralized authority across Afghanistan providing the people with some semblance of basic facilities and economic stability. Since assuming power, the Taliban have focused on governance, institutional changes, remodeling and building state institutions, including security institutions.

Since the group assumed power, Afghanistan has witnessed certain positive developments, which includes the attainment of overall security throughout the country. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), in 2022, violence in Afghanistan decreased significantly and for the first time since 2004, the conflict did not reach the intensity level of war. Moreover, perceptions of security have improved, with two-thirds of households reporting in December 2022, that they felt safer than a year ago. The group has also demonstrated visible pragmatism regarding the economy by generating revenue through taxation, customs, trade and reducing administrative expenses. The group has also clamped down on corruption and reduced poppy cultivation.

Despite these constructive developments, major concerns continue to remain regarding political and social cohesion, and the development of social, political, and economic structures exacerbated by the pressures of an ongoing humanitarian crisis and presence of transnational terrorist groups.

The persistent denial of basic yet fundamental human rights, and persistent discrimination against women (banning female education, employment, movement, and participation in public life) is of serious concern. Since August 2021, the group has issued over 70 decrees restricting women's rights. The Taliban's policies regarding women not only demonstrate major challenges within the group, but also cast a shadow over the group's aspirations of becoming a legitimate political entity within Afghanistan. Furthermore such policies continue to hamper the international community's willingness to fully engage with the group. Nonetheless, prominent members of the group have voiced their support of women's education which has led to policy differences within the group. These differences underscore the complexities within the organization and the possible room for change. However, at the same time, despite evident tensions concerning policy matters and public disapproval voiced by prominent group members, the Taliban's unwavering commitment to its ideology and the reverence shown to the supreme leader seem to be preventing these divergences from causing a major fracture within the group.

In addition to the Taliban's internal constraints and shortcomings, the Taliban are confronted with challenges emanating from a fragile economy, weak institutions, and a continuing humanitarian crisis. According to the UN, an estimated 20 million people face acute hunger in Afghanistan, with 6 million people at 'emergency' levels (one step away from famine), resulting in one of the world's highest figures in absolute terms.

Although domestically the Taliban have managed to achieve some semblance of security, the presence of transnational terrorist outfits, primarily the Daesh regional affiliate Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) continues to pose grave challenges not only for Afghanistan but the wider region. Since

August 2021, the ISKP, a longtime adversary of the Taliban has continued to be a persistent security threat for the country, launching multiple attacks against Taliban members, Afghan civilians (mostly minority groups, Shia, Hazaras and religious minorities) and Afghanistan's immediate neighbors who are equally troubled by the threats emanating from such entities. While the Taliban's crack down on ISKP cells initially weakened the capacity of the group, the ISKP has been able to make steady comeback as indicated by the recent spike in its attacks. According to the United Nations Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report, Afghanistan has been referred to as a place of global significance for terrorism, with approximately 20 terrorist groups operating in the country. Moreover, apart from the ISKP, the TTP has been emboldened by the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, as the group has gained momentum, focusing on high-value targets in border areas and soft targets in urban ones. The Taliban have 'rejected' the report, terming it as 'baseless'.

Notwithstanding the Taliban's assurances that they will prevent Afghan soil from becoming a safe haven for international terrorist organizations, the surge in attacks by these groups against neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan has raised serious diplomatic challenges for the Taliban, further casting serious doubt regarding the group's commitment to addressing as well as combating such threats. In fact there appears to be an increasing sense of fatigue and frustration amongst Afghanistan's neighbors towards the Taliban's reluctance or inability to deliver on counter terrorism assurances. It is imperative for the Taliban to recognize the significance of their counterterrorism commitments made in Doha, understanding that these assurances not confined to a particular country; rather, they encompass the international community at large, which includes immediate neighbors. If the Taliban are not able to consolidate their position, and ensure some semblance of stability, the fear is not so much of a civil war emanating, but rather of transnational terrorist elements taking advantage of the situation and filling the vacuum. Moreover, if the group is unable to counter such threats, it will only further hinder the group's access to diplomatic support and assistance, as well as the chances for legitimacy.

Despite lacking international recognition, the Taliban seem to have learnt the art of diplomacy, and have been extensively engaging with the immediate neighborhood as well as the larger international community in one form or another. While the Taliban's engagement was initially limited to regional countries, the scope of the group's diplomatic engagement has increased and moved beyond the immediate neighborhood. This involvement includes engaging with representatives of diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, hosting incoming foreign delegations, traveling abroad, and participating in various international and regional interactions such as Moscow Format, Antalya Forum, Samarkand Dialogue and China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral meeting. During the past two years, around 80 high and middle level officials from different countries have met with Taliban representatives in

Kabul. At present, 16 foreign missions (including international organizations) are present in Afghanistan. Moreover, the group has also assumed charge of Afghanistan's diplomatic missions in at least 16 countries as majority of Afghan diplomatic missions in the West, continue to be run by officials of the previous government.

Even after two years, the group still seems to be in a phase of transition - while still heavily an authoritarian structure with tinges of pragmatism towards becoming an established and administration. There continues to be immense disparity between the Taliban's declared/stated policy and its actual conduct in terms of implementation. The Taliban's aspirations to gain international recognition as the legitimate representatives of Afghanistan continue to be undermined by their unwillingness to uphold commitments made pertaining to inclusivity, human/women rights, upholding international norms and standards and implementing CT assurances. It is important for the Taliban to realize that even within the confines of their current interim set up, the real test for the group is by no means limited to securing power, but revolves around legitimacy, performance and ultimately gaining acceptance from the masses themselves and that can only happen when they deliver on basic yet fundamental rights.

Following August 2021, Afghanistan has widely been viewed as a regional concern, particularly within the context of ongoing crises in different parts of the world. However, this assessment is a miscalculation. History has demonstrated that Afghanistan is a country with enduring global repercussions, and its significance extends far beyond its borders. In this context, it is crucial to emphasize that the danger originating from transnational terrorist groups such as ISKP is not confined to Afghanistan alone, but transcends regional confines, as the group harbors aspirations for a global caliphate - therefore no conflict should take precedence over the other. Learning from past mistakes is crucial; this is a rare chance for the Taliban to focus on a political system that is inclusive, accountable, and, most importantly, one that serves the people of Afghanistan. Despite the challenges that come with a group like the Taliban, it must be asked whether there are any viable alternatives at this stage - either way Afghanistan should not be abandoned nor ignored - the international community should continue to engage patiently yet persistently.