

Fall of Kabul

With Afghanistan under the total control of the Taliban, the future looks bleak

History came full circle on August 15 when the Taliban captured Kabul, almost 20 years after the U.S. launched its global war on terror. The city of roughly 5 million people fell to the Islamist insurgents without even a fight while Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, and the Americans abandoned their Embassy and rushed to Kabul airport. It was a surreal moment for the U.S., which had pledged to defeat the Taliban in every corner of Afghanistan, and a tragedy for the Afghans, who were left at the mercy of a murderous militia. The soldiers did not fight. Police abandoned their stations. Former Northern Alliance warlords left the country. And the government crumbled like the proverbial house of cards. There is already worrying news coming from the provinces that the Taliban are enforcing a strict religious code on the public and violence against anyone who resists. The last time the Taliban were in power, women were not allowed to work. They had to cover their faces and be accompanied by a male relative outside their homes. Girls were not allowed to go to school. The Taliban had also banned TV, music, painting and photography, handed out brutal forms of punishment to those violating their Islamic code, and persecuted minorities. The chaotic scenes from Kabul airport, where people are desperately trying to cling on to airplanes hoping to leave the country, bear testimony to their fear of the Taliban.

This is a historic development that will have lasting implications for global geopolitics. Unlike 1996, this is not only about the Taliban taking power. This is also about an Islamist group with a medieval mindset and modern weapons defeating the world's most powerful country. The U.S. can say in its defence that its mission was to fight al-Qaeda and that it met its strategic objectives. But in reality, after spending 20 years in Afghanistan to fight terrorism and rebuild the Afghan state, the U.S. ran away from the battlefield, embarrassing itself and leaving its allies helpless. The images from Arg, the presidential palace in Kabul, and the airport will continue to haunt President Joe Biden and the U.S. for a long time. In 1996, when the Taliban took Kabul, the government did not flee the country. Ahmad Shah Massoud and Burhanuddin Rabbani retreated to the Panjshir valley from where they regrouped the Northern Alliance and continued resistance against the Taliban. This time, there is no Northern Alliance. There is no government. The whole country, except some pockets, is now firmly under the Taliban's control. The Taliban are also more receptive to regional players such as China and Russia, while Pakistan is openly celebrating their triumph. It remains to be seen what kind of a regime a stronger Taliban will install in Kabul. If the 1990s are anything to go by, darker days are ahead in Afghanistan.