

Aftermath

Only the threat of global backlash can stop the Taliban from inflicting harm on Afghan society

As nations come to terms with the abrupt change of regime in Afghanistan, they will seek answers to many questions about the nature of the new Taliban government that controls most of the territories. Almost as an emergency measure that reflects the sense of alarm in Afghanistan's prospects of a stable future, U.S. President Joe Biden and U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson have agreed to hold a virtual G7 leaders' meeting to discuss a common strategy and approach. Yet, it will be a complex and likely frustrating task for the G7 to reconcile its position on minimum governance norms for Afghanistan with the ground realities of rule by the Taliban. In its May 2021 Foreign Ministers' communiqué, the G7 noted that "a sustainable, inclusive political settlement would be the only way" to achieve a just and durable peace that benefits all Afghans. To that end, the G7 promised its support to the negotiations in Doha and efforts to convene a high-level conference on Afghanistan in Istanbul. But the sheer audacity of the Taliban takeover and its promise to make Sharia orthodoxy the basis of jurisprudence suggest that Taliban interlocutors attending these parleys may not truly represent the voice of their commanders and administrators on the ground. Similarly, the G7's enduring aspiration for meaningful participation and inclusion of the voices of women, young people, and those from minority groups, looks to be dashed.

Given that the project of long-term military occupation and regime change has amounted to naught in this country, going forward, the only lever that G7 might have to press for internal change in Afghanistan is foreign aid and, should the circumstances warrant it, sanctions. Indeed, the May 2021 communiqué noted that "Current and future support to the Afghan government relies on the adherence to the principles set out in the Afghanistan Partnership Framework and progress towards the outcomes in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework II as decided upon at the November 2020 Geneva donors' conference". Yet, if there is one signal that the conditional norms elucidated by the G7 will be brazenly disregarded by the Taliban it is that they have already been disregarded to the extent that the Islamist group has been linked to numerous attacks on civilians, including targeted campaigns against women in public life, human rights activists, and media persons. This means calls for eschewing violence and allowing unhindered access to humanitarian aid may fall on deaf ears unless there is a punitive element that lends teeth to such demands. If the Taliban have distilled past strategic learnings, it might hold out hope that this time around, they will limit the damage they inflict on the fabric of mainstream Afghan society, if nothing for fear that the backlash that it will bring from the global community will once again break their grip on power.