

What's next for Afghanistan?

There is little evidence to suggest that the Taliban have changed ideologically

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Almost 20 years after they were ousted from power by a U.S.-led invasion, the Taliban, who rose from a group of madrassa students in the 1990s under the leadership of Mullah Omar, are back in Kabul. The city fell without a fight on August 15, as President Ashraf Ghani and most of his Ministers and elected lawmakers fled the country. The whole world is now looking at the unfolding situation in Afghanistan as the Taliban are now tightening their grip on the country.

What's happening?

The Taliban are yet to form a transition government. Their leaders, including Amir Khan Muttaqi, a former Information Minister, are currently holding talks with former President Hamid Karzai, top government negotiator Abdullah Abdullah and Hezb-e-Islami leader and former warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar on transition.

The Taliban call themselves the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Currently, Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic, where President is the head of state. The Taliban are expected to change the name in the coming days, which would also mean that their supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada would be the 'Emir' of Afghanistan. As the transition process is under way, the Taliban have moved to assure the foreign diplomatic missions as well as the public that they would not target anybody.

On August 17, Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's spokesperson, held a press conference in Kabul where he said the new government would respect Afghan women's rights "within the framework of the Islamic law". Mujahid, who was a shadowy figure until recently, also said the Taliban would not target anyone who worked with the fallen government

or foreigners, and asked government employees, including women, to continue to go to work. Media houses continued to allow women journalists to work, while the streets of Kabul were patrolled by Taliban militants in the military vehicles abandoned by government soldiers. The Taliban have also set up checkpoints across the city.

Have Taliban changed?

The press conference in Kabul suggests that the Taliban are concerned about the public perception, at least for now, as the transition is under way. They also want to assure the Afghan people, many of whom are desperately trying to flee the country, that things have changed from 1996. But the question is whether these statements are mere optics given the delicacy and complexity of the current situation or signals of a genuine transformation. While clarity is yet to emerge on what kind of a regime is going to be formed in Kabul, there is little evidence to suggest that the Taliban have gone through an ideological transformation.

When the Taliban were in power during 1996-2001, even basic human rights were suspended in Afghanistan. Women were not allowed to work and girls were not allowed to go to schools. Women could not venture out of their homes without a male companion. Men had to grow their beard.

Amputation, flogging and stoning were common. Kabul's famed football stadium had been turned into a public execution ground. Music, TV, cinema, photography, painting and even kite-flying were banned. The sixth century monumental statues of Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed. The Taliban did all these because they believed in a puritanical interpretation of Islam and in their bid to establish a "pure Islamic system". They haven't dis-



A Taliban fighter standing guard outside the Interior Ministry in Kabul. ■ AFP

owned these beliefs. The Taliban may have taken Kabul within a day without bloodshed. But their long road to victory has been marred with violence. Over the past 20 years, they have carried out many attacks, including suicide attacks, killing thousands of civilians. Particularly after the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed in February 2020, Afghanis-

EXPLAINER

tan saw a series of assassinations of journalists, liberal critics and even pilots. And in areas the Taliban captured since May, there were reports of public executions, beatings and forced marriages of young girls with Taliban militants.

In Kabul, many residents say, the Taliban were doing a door-to-door search, looking for those who worked with the government despite assurances from the group's leadership that no one would be harmed.

The chaotic scenes from Kabul airport indicate how much sections of Afghan society fear the Islamist militants. On Wednesday, Taliban militants in Jalalabad opened fire into a crowd of protesters, putting down the first demonstration of public dissent violently. So the Taliban spokesman's comments about moderation and rights of the people are not supported by the Taliban history and the developments on the ground. It's up to the mil-

itants to prove the sceptics wrong. On the other side, the Taliban have shown more willingness to engage with other countries this time, especially with China and Russia. And Pakistan has openly welcomed the Taliban's capture of power.

Is there any resistance?

In 1996 when the Taliban took power, the Mujahideen government of President Barhanudeen Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud retreated to Panjshir where they regrouped the Northern Alliance. This time, the Taliban appear to be more powerful. They reached Kabul after forcing the U.S., the world's most powerful country, to pull back. Most top officials in the Afghan government, including President Ghani, have fled the country. The only top official who still stays defiant is Amrullah Saleh, the former First Vice-President.

Mr. Saleh, a former aide of Massoud during the Northern Alliance days, is believed to be in Panjshir along with Ahmad Massoud, son of Ahmad Shah Massoud.

On August 17, almost at the same time as the Taliban's Mujahid was holding the press conference in Kabul, Mr. Saleh tweeted, saying he's "the legitimate caretaker President" of the country, according to the Afghan Constitution. He also asked Afghans to join the "resistance". It's too early to say which direction Mr. Saleh's efforts would take.

In the 1990s, Massoud had the backing of Russia, Iran and India, and the Northern Alliance was strong across northern and northeastern provinces. This time, Panjshir is the only province that stays out of the Taliban's control. It's to be seen whether Panjshir could hold off the Taliban and Mr. Saleh could muster enough domestic and regional support to mount a credible challenge to them.