

## TALIBAN DILEMMAS

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*The Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan in recent weeks is partly the result of a strategy based on conceding significant local autonomy to the different factions within the movement. Governing the country effectively will prove far more difficult. The Taliban now face a series of challenging dilemmas.*



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SEPTEMBER  
2021

Any international in Kabul interested in talking to the Taliban in recent years could easily meet a series of what some sarcastically called “peace entrepreneurs”. Either presenting themselves as former Taliban or as Afghan mediators with a privileged line to the leadership shura based in Quetta, Pakistan, these “peace entrepreneurs” offered their services to internationals interested in engaging with the Taliban.

With the Taliban controlling about one third of the country, the government another third and the remaining third contested, engagement with the Taliban had become increasingly necessary in the past twenty years for everything from discussing the prospects to a political settlement to negotiating humanitarian access.

With the Taliban’s surprisingly swift takeover of the country and the unforgettable images it has left behind of fear filled Afghans trying to leave the country, one key question has been mostly forgotten: How did the Taliban suddenly achieve this full takeover with barely any fighting in the past weeks?

In short, it seems to have come down to a combination of factors including the exhaustion of the Afghan people and security forces after years of a brutal Taliban onslaught, a discredited Afghan political leadership, the precipitated pull out of US forces and a pragmatic Taliban strategy adapted to the different realities across the country.

With the Afghan government having failed to reach agreements with key local actors and internationals withdrawing in such haste, the Taliban could quickly buy over key actors across the country. In cases where this was not possible and resistance ensued, demoralized Afghan forces left vulnerable by the lack of US air support, mostly retreated or abandoned their posts.

Examining how the Taliban have taken power is critical to understanding the Taliban that now rule Afghanistan. One of the key elements to understand the success of the strategy, has been the strategic autonomy that the Taliban has operated under. Local Taliban leaders have acted with significant autonomy in developing their strategies to take over in their respective areas of the country.

This strategic autonomy seems largely born out of necessity. As Michael Semple, a former deputy EU Special Envoy expelled by the Afghan government for negotiating with the Taliban in 2007 says, the “genius of the Taliban... is that it is simultaneously centralized and decentralized”. While Haibatullah Akhundzada is the uncontested leader of the Taliban and his broad guidelines on military and spiritual matter are respected, to survive and expand in the past twenty years the leadership has had to accept the political autonomy of local leaders.

This strategic autonomy of the Taliban has always created doubts as to the command and control its leadership exercised over its forces throughout the country. Since secret talks between the US and a Taliban political commission first started in Qatar back in 2010, it was always an open question how far down into provinces, districts and towns the decisions reached in Qatar went.

While it seems agreements reached in Qatar, ranging on issues from the banning of improvised explosive devices to the opening of schools or clinics in specific areas, were mostly respected, there were also cases where directives seemed to either have never reached some Taliban or to have been ignored.

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Having ruled over large swathes of the country for many years now, the Taliban developed shadow governments with their own mayors, judges, police forces and, not least, lucrative taxation systems. While the many reports of serious human rights violations by the Taliban are well known, it is important to remember that Taliban governance mostly existed in rural areas where there was a complete vacuum of power.

And the Taliban have also proven quite efficient administrators in some cases. As experts like Anand Gopal or Ashley Jackson have reported, in areas where corrupt government actors and unruly government-aligned and sometimes US-funded militias were also present, local populations sometimes preferred Taliban rule to the government’s one. This sad reality,

also seen in very different contexts like Mali, also point to the grave failure of the government and international actors to develop governance at the local level.

Afghanistan now enters a new chapter in its tumultuous modern history. As some Afghan political actors try to negotiate an inclusive government, and international actors scramble to develop a new strategy, it is critical to remember how the Taliban reached power.

The Taliban clearly learned how to operate adapting to different local realities and mixing brutal force with negotiating with a range of local and international actors. Will they now be able to do the same at a national and international scale, in the face of massive governance challenges in a poverty-stricken, aid-dependant country?

Some moderate voices in the Taliban are aware that they must, at the very least, change their tone to consolidate power. Taliban negotiator Mullah Baradar this week recognized that “now is the time when we will be tested on how we serve and secure our people and ensure their good life and future to the rest of our ability”.

But will other more radical elements within the Taliban be as pragmatic? With the Taliban in power, how will local Taliban forces react if their local autonomy is reduced? And will the leadership of the Taliban be willing to compromise to reach agreements with Afghan political leaders of different ethnicities?

A critical factor for the Taliban will be international recognition. Judging by the level of diplomatic outreach that the Taliban have done from Peking to Moscow it seems they have learned the costs of international isolation from the last time they governed. But how far will the Taliban leadership compromise in exchange for international recognition?

There are no clear answers to all these questions. But with power comes responsibility. The Taliban leadership now face challenging dilemmas that will determine to what extent they can consolidate their victory. The Taliban must urgently deliver on governance and economy to secure more popular support. Their success on these fronts will also directly impact the level of international recognition they gain from key neighbours and beyond.

Ruling over Kabul and the entire country will be far more difficult than sparsely populated rural areas. Beyond the armed resistance to the Taliban Tajik leaders have already announced, with over 60% of the Afghan population under the age of 25, the Taliban will face considerable opposition from an urbanised youth. Winning over Afghans “hearts and minds” just became a lot harder for the Taliban.