**Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires**

[Mahnoor Sheikh](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/mahnoor-sheikh/)

August 26, 2021

Wars are easier to start but difficult to end. It took the United States two decades to bring an end to the lingering Afghan war but it was only a matter of days that Kabul fell into the hands of Taliban. The war fatigue forced the Afghan forces to bow down before the warlords as the President Ashraf Ghani resigned and fled the country. The deafening silence by the US and the international community on the entire Afghan fiasco is disconcerting but not unexpected.

Writing this from the comfort of my home, I cannot imagine the agony of Afghan women and children who are desperate to leave the country where they have only seen war and grew up hearing gun shots and bombings. As Taliban roam around the streets of Afghanistan with AK47s in their hands, the citizens have every right to be worried – about their life, protection and entitlements. Hence, we saw images of them desperately trying to get on the plane to somehow be able to escape the country, only either to meet their fate or face even tougher circumstances. Wherever the Afghans will migrate, if they manage to, they will be treated as second grade citizens, devoid of the basic human rights and amenities. On the other hand, the hosting countries will see them as a threat to their social and economic fabric. Nothing makes life easier for them.

One party that bears maximum responsibility for the ongoing chaos in Afghanistan is clearly the US. During the cold war, it used Afghan land for their proxy war with the Soviet Union where they trained freedom fighters/Mujahidin to defeat communism and then following the 9/11 attacks, it launched the so-called war on terror against the same freedom fighters-turned-terrorists. All this was done with Pakistan’s support and that makes a fair case for Kabul’s resentment against Islamabad. The major casualty, however, have been the people of Afghanistan who have never been able to recover from the trauma and destruction of war. The previous Taliban rule following Afghan Jihad was not too great either. It is remembered for their ultra conservative policies, violating basic human and women’s rights, and posing security threat to the world.

One party that bears maximum responsibility for the ongoing chaos in Afghanistan is clearly the US.

When former US president Donald Trump gave his South Asia Policy on August 21, 2017, he was criticised for proposing a military solution to the conflict by announcing to increase the number of troops. He took a U-turn and initiated the peace process which was concluded by incumbent President Joe Biden, taking at least four US presidents to bring an end to this long war. During the 20-month long peace talks, there were slight hopes of a smooth power transition in Afghanistan with Taliban being brought to the tables for talks in five star hotels but they were dashed with swift Taliban takeover. The peace process had singled out the Afghan government and other stakeholders which was perhaps the biggest flaw in the entire deal. This resulted in a weak Afghan state which is now left without any strong institution or leadership to help the country build back from the rubbles of war.

This was bound to happen, sooner or later. It could have been slow and smooth but the sudden pullout of troops and Ghani’s resignation left the floor open for Taliban who used this opportunity and stood victorious by taking control of almost all of the Afghanistan. Ideally, an election should have been held in the presence of US forces and a government should have been formed with public mandate. But withdrawals by imperial powers are mostly hasty and not so well thought-out. The US obviously does not care enough as Biden only blamed his predecessor, Ghani and Afghan forces for this debacle. After all, Biden’s goal was to ‘protect Americans from terrorist attacks, not building a country’, and the US does not see a point in prolonging a war at foreign land at the cost of the lives of American soldiers and their taxpayers’ money. Nobody cares about Pakistan either that suffered great losses in the war on terror and would now have to keep its heart and borders open for Afghan refugees. It is eventually every country’s own battle. In realpolitik, we cannot look towards foreign players to provide support or help clear the mess they created. The sooner the Afghans and Taliban realize this, the better. It is on them to rebuild their country and emerge as a stronger nation.

For now, the Afghan women, the children, the security forces and the minorities are afraid and rightly so, because a group that has been preaching violence cannot be expected to ensure peace. What different this time around is that Taliban are willing to work towards peace in collaboration with all the groups, announcing an amnesty and encouraging women to join the government. It is hard to believe this progressive stance as they say this while holding weapons in their hands but we do not have much of an option but to trust their goodwill. Maybe they have learnt the hard lesson that war is never the solution. One can only hope that history will not repeat itself and Taliban’s exposure with the outside world and their eagerness to form a functional government in Kabul will turn things around for the better. Now that the Taliban have forcefully taken charge, all eyes are on them as to whether they will work towards the development of the country or Afghanistan will continue to be the graveyard of empires.

*The writer is a communications and IR professional. She can be reached at mahnoor.sheikh3@gmail.com*