[**Looming Afghan civil war**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1632329/looming-afghan-civil-war)

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The writer is the author of No-Win War — The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan’s Shadow.

WITH the revival of armed regional militias to stop the Afghan Taliban offensive, Afghanistan is edging towards a new civil war. Headed by old mujahideen warlords, these armed bands are fighting along the Afghan government forces in some areas, but in many cases they are defending their own regional fiefdoms.

It appears that we are returning to the 1990s following the downfall of the Najibullah government when several mujahideen groups fought each other, plunging Afghanistan into a devastating civil war and killing thousands of Afghans. Those events saw the rise of the Taliban movement, which swept away warlord rule and established the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. But the warlords returned to power after the American invasion. The withdrawal of the foreign forces and the looming threat of a Taliban takeover compelled them to raise their own forces. They don’t seem to have much faith in government security forces to protect them. Some three decades later, the same former mujahideen commanders are once again arrayed against their old nemesis.

**Read**: [*Top US general warns security in Afghanistan deteriorating*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1632248/top-us-general-warns-security-in-afghanistan-deteriorating)

Most prominent among them are Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ismail Khan and Ata Muhammad — the same old faces that symbolise four decades of conflict in Afghanistan. The Taliban offensive in northern Afghanistan in recent weeks has been a major reason behind the revival of the militias representing different ethnic groups, particularly the Tajik and Uzbeks.

Over the past weeks, the insurgents have achieved some spectacular successes in the region that has never been considered their stronghold. The Taliban have generally been seen as a Pakhtun-dominated movement, with eastern and southern Afghanistan as their main support base.

In recent weeks, the Taliban have achieved some spectacular successes.

The Taliban have overrun many northern districts and have besieged some major towns. They now control major roads leading to Mazar-i-Sharif. In many areas, Afghan government soldiers have abandoned their posts without any fight. In some cases, the soldiers have joined the insurgents. The Taliban now control the main border crossing with Tajikistan, a main trade route.

While these militia movements have helped reinforce the government forces fighting the Taliban in many northern districts, they have also strengthened the warlord fiefdoms, thus weakening the authority of the government in Kabul. These armed groups are nominally aligned with the Afghan government and their organisation could further fracture the war-battered country along ethnic lines and empower regional strongmen.

Some analysts, however, contend that these militias may eventually serve as the last line of defence, with the security forces unable to counter the Taliban onslaught. But there is also the question of whether these ragtag armed groups can stand their ground against a more committed enemy. Many believe it could be a repeat of the events of the late 1990s when local strongmen were swept away by rampaging Taliban forces.

For many analysts, the Taliban’s success in the north has not come as a surprise. While consolidating their military and diplomatic gains, the Taliban have also sought to secure the support of communities it had fought in the past in order to present themselves as a national movement. The Taliban had traditionally relied on ethnic Pakhtuns, but made a clear shift to recruit members of other ethnic groups with a view to expanding their area of influence.

Over the years, the insurgent group made significant inroads into the non-Pakhtun belt in northern Afghanistan and inducted several Tajik and Uzbek commanders in its ranks, giving them more operational autonomy. The non-Pakhtuns assumed important positions in the Taliban leadership and held key posts in the provinces.

The changing ethnic profile of the group was evident in the fact that non-Pakhtuns now constituted a quarter of the Taliban leadership council and its various commissions. Members of ethnic minorities were also handed out senior positions as provincial and district shadow governors and zonal commanders. By inducting Shia Hazaras, the Taliban wanted to make themselves more acceptable by presenting themselves as a multiethnic, multi-sect force in order to make themselves more politically acceptable.

As an example, the Taliban appointed a Shia ethnic Hazara as its shadow district chief before the intra-Afghan peace talks. The hard-line Sunni Taliban had been previously blamed for persecuting the minority group during its stint in power. The Hazaras largely inhabit the central Afghan provinces.

Moreover, the Taliban also exploited the fissures in northern Afghanistan to win over tribal chiefs who felt marginalised by the government in Kabul in terms of political representation. Some of them had joined the Taliban for protection since they could not rely on the Afghan security forces anymore. The Taliban approach has benefited the group as several minority ethnic groups joining them.

The Taliban also leveraged the peace deal with the US to their advantage in order to woo regional ethnic groups. With the withdrawal of US forces, joining the Taliban had once again become a serious option for many people and groups in Afghanistan. While internal discord has further weakened the Kabul government’s position, the Taliban have shown a greater degree of pragmatism. Some warlords and power groups have reportedly struck separate deals with the insurgents, which has further weakened the Kabul government’s position amid the American pullout.

With the latest military setback, the Afghan government has increased its reliance on regional militias. The growing dependence on the warlords is seen as a sign of the government’s desperation. A US intelligence report says the Ghani government in Kabul could collapse within six months of the US withdrawal. That could further aggravate the power vacuum and lead to the fragmentation of the country along ethnic lines, with dire consequences for the entire region.

What is most alarming is the prospect of the disintegration of the Afghan army and the trained soldiers joining different warring factions. Although the Biden administration assured President Ghani [during his visit to Washington](https://www.dawn.com/news/1631517/biden-meets-afghan-leaders-assures-kabul-of-sustained-help) last week of continued US financial, political and moral support, that may not be able to save Afghanistan from the looming civil war. It could be an unending war with no winner.

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