[**Shooting in the dark at Taliban**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642332/shooting-in-the-dark-at-taliban)

[Jawed Naqvi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/280/jawed-naqvi)Published August 24, 2021 - Updated a day ago

The writer is Dawn’s correspondent in Delhi.

COMPETING approaches are emerging towards the Taliban’s second arrival in Kabul. There are the megaphone-wielding critics, and there are the earnest, hands-on negotiators for the women’s and children’s rights of varied Afghan ethnicities. The latter include reliably seasoned local and international workers on the ground. They seek to secure the tiniest respite from the ever-present mayhem that they can squeeze out for those trapped in the conflict zone.

The agitated critics include Western militarists and Indian news channels. They also include an odd mix of liberals who may disapprove of the occupation forces in Afghanistan but also indulge the myth of deliverable human rights at gunpoint. Indian critics see in the situation a self-serving opportunity to press the pedal on their electorally polarising Hindu-Muslim binary — anything to boost a victory chance in Uttar Pradesh next year, or something that becomes an occasion to further twist the knife on Kashmiris to evince a counterpoint for the nationalist chorus.

The Indian right has declared the Taliban a mortal enemy, and has lodged criminal cases against those allegedly taking heart in the US defeat. This has reportedly happened in BJP-ruled states. But the mobs can’t do much about Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s closest adviser Sudheendra Kulkarni’s advice that India and Pakistan should come together to work with the Taliban, and create an atmosphere for regional peace and harmony around the troubled nation. Nor can the carping media do much about the seasoned commentary by former Indian diplomat who once handled Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran affairs. M.K. Bhadrakumar has advised India to enable Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to play a sovereign and unbridled role in Saarc and possibly in the Shanghai club.

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The right-wing Indian response is rooted partly also in the perceived gains for Pakistan and China in the turn of events — only perceived gains at present, mind you, behind the fluttering curtain of uncertainty. Western militarists like Tony Blair have called the American withdrawal imbecilic. The fault lies perhaps with Mr Blair for not discovering a project of mass destruction being assembled by the mediaeval militia in Helmand or Kandahar.

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Of the serious ones tracking the Afghan flux there are two schools rather unlike each other. One belongs to the cut-and-run school and doesn’t have further appetite for continuing the war on or within the landlocked impoverished nation. US President Biden leads the group, not necessarily out of empathy for the Afghans, but because he evidently has bigger fish to fry in the South China Sea. Biden may be hoping that his commissions and omissions in the humiliating cut-and-run departure from Kabul would be forgotten if he can show up elsewhere as a hero.

The truer instincts that can’t afford to lose hope for Afghanistan, one which comes together with a deeply assertive confidence, lie with the UN workers. They represent the invincible spirit of continuing their good work unfazed. And they are the ones that possibly have the best assessment of the ground reality as the world frets and strikes postures over the arrival of the Taliban at the head of a new order in Afghanistan.

Consider the fact that some near and distant cheerleaders in the fray are seeing better hope for Afghan women — to cite just one concern — only in the event that the northern forces of Panjshir militarily resist the growing influence of the pronouncedly religious extremist Taliban. A grounded discussion by the UN mission stationed in Afghanistan in the Panjshir hub showed clearly that the hapless lot of women was not any better under the care of an apparently less strident religious northern leadership. Zarifa Razaee, a prosecutor working in Panjshir, cited a mix of positive and negative factors to a seminar held under the now abandoned administration in 2018.

“Lack of female defence attorneys and minimal public awareness about women’s fundamental rights are the two main challenges preventing women from enjoying their full rights,” Razaee told delegates at the discussion sponsored by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. We are talking here of a situation two or three years ago that failed to apparently improve significantly in the long and eventually corrupt foreign military occupation of Afghanistan.

Unicef’s 65-year-old presence in Afghanistan has been easily the most reassuring and constructive feature for its citizens, chiefly the children and women in the organisation’s charge. While standing its ground rock solid, the Unicef is organising critical food deliveries through connected donor agencies. More, it is actually hoping to step up the work for the eradication of polio during the Taliban’s tenure. This is the work that US forces had selfishly impaired.

“During the last phase of the armed conflict until the final takeover of Kabul a few days ago, Unicef has continued to deliver for Afghanistan’s children and respond to their urgent needs,” a mission statement said in a clear and unruffled tone. “Despite all the unanswered questions that lie ahead, one thing is certain: Unicef is here to stay and deliver for every child and every woman in Afghanistan.”

“It is true, that for our own safety, in some provincial areas, the Taliban asked us to pause operations until order is restored. But we are in daily contact with the local leadership in almost all provinces, and their message is clear: they want us to stay and continue our work in Afghanistan.”

Culturally regressive Taliban carry a burden of past nightmares inflicted on innocent civilians, particularly targeting the secular arts and music. They have been at it again as the dance veteran Sheema Kermani noted despondently from Karachi. They had broken the musical instruments of a national ensemble and told the players to go home. However, Emperor Aurangzeb is said to have banished music too. But the greatest compositions of Indian music resurged during the era of future, more eclectic Mughal courts. Afghanistan can’t be too different.

*The writer is Dawn’s correspondent in Delhi.*

[**jawednaqvi@gmail.com**](http://mailto:jawednaqvi@gmail.com)

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