**The Afghan conundrum**

Javid Husain

Monday, Dec 13, 2021

The Afghan Taliban’s victory is a momentous development with far-reaching consequences for the peace and stability of Afghanistan, the Asian region and the rest of the international community. Undoubtedly, the Taliban practise an obscurantist ideology that is not fit for tackling the challenges of the modern world.

At the same time, there is no denying the fact that the Taliban, after their success in ending the US military occupation of Afghanistan, are the dominant reality on the Afghan political scene. The world cannot simply wish away this reality. Therefore, regional countries and major global powers must engage with them with a view to encouraging appropriate changes in their internal and external policies.

Desired changes in the Taliban’s policies will ultimately be dependent upon the interaction of Afghanistan’s internal political forces. However, major powers, Afghanistan’s neighbours and prominent OIC countries can play an important role in facilitating and accelerating these changes through appropriate diplomatic and economic policy initiatives at the bilateral and multilateral levels.

Even then, the changes will come gradually through a process of education and evolution, extending over a considerably long period. As recent history shows, any attempt to use forceful means to change the course of events overnight in Afghanistan would be counterproductive not only for its peace and progress but also for the international community at large, especially regional countries.

The Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan, undoubtedly, has come with its own set of internal and external challenges. Taliban leaders are confronted with the problems of evolving a political system which restores durable peace and stability in the country while maintaining its Islamic character, overcoming the humanitarian crisis which threatens the wellbeing of its people, putting its economic system back on rails, bringing about the much-needed social and educational reforms to meet the demands of modernity, especially women’s rights to education and work, preventing terrorist outfits from using Afghan soil for terrorism within Afghanistan or abroad, and securing de jure recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

In coming to grips with these challenges, the Taliban and the international community must ponder over the lessons of Afghanistan’s history over the past four decades. Any attempt to ignore these lessons will be fraught with disastrous consequences for peace and stability within Afghanistan as well as at the regional and international levels.

The first and the foremost lesson is that the government in Afghanistan must be the outcome of the internal political process in the interest of durable peace within the country. As the American military retreat from Afghanistan after a two-decade-long military occupation of the country clearly demonstrates, attempts by foreign countries to impose a government and policies of their own choice on the fiercely independent people of Afghanistan are likely to fail. Secondly, in view of ethnic, tribal and cultural diversity of the Afghan people, durable peace and stability in Afghanistan demand an inclusive political setup in which the country’s diversity is adequately represented.

Thirdly, it must be recognised that Afghan society is deeply religious and extremely conservative in character, especially in rural areas where most Afghans live. Afghanistan’s social beliefs and customs are a far cry from liberal Western cultural values. Afghan cultural ethos can change for the better only gradually through the process of education and reforms. Such a change cannot be brought about overnight even if the state employs its powers of coercion.

Thus, women’s rights to education and work will have to be exercised, keeping in view its peculiar cultural ethos. Attempts to railroad Western cultural values in Afghanistan are likely to be met with strong resistance on the part of the majority of its people and may lead to domestic instability instead of serving any useful purpose. An evolutionary process rather than radical changes is the need of the hour for societal and cultural changes in country.

The international community, especially Afghanistan’s neighbours, needs to encourage the Taliban to move in the right direction through appropriate diplomatic and economic initiatives. In this context, the talks between US and Taliban representatives – held in Doha on November 29 and 30, were an encouraging development. During the talks, the Taliban reiterated their pledge not to allow Afghan soil to be used for terrorist activities against any country. They also expressed their willingness to engage with the international community for monitoring progress towards the enrollment of women and girls in educational institutions at all levels.

The American side pledged continued support to the UN and humanitarian agencies in the provision of assistance to meet the basic needs of the Afghan people against the background of the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the country. However, there was no progress in the unfreezing of the $9 billion Afghan assets which had been blocked by the US or the lifting of US sanctions.

An extraordinary session of the OIC foreign ministers to be held in Islamabad on 19 December to avert a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is another welcome development in ameliorating the economic conditions of the Afghan people where 22.8 million are facing food shortages and 3.2 million children are suffering from malnutrition. OIC countries should also give serious consideration to the critically important issue of extending de jure recognition to the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

While, in principle, Pakistan cannot but welcome the end of the US military occupation of Afghanistan, the Taliban’s victory poses formidable challenges for its policymakers. Ideologically, this victory is likely to foment religious extremism in Pakistan whose latest manifestation was the tragic lynching of the Sri Lankan factory manager in Sialkot. Pakistan, therefore, can ill afford to identify itself with the Taliban’s retrogressive policies.

In its contacts with them, Pakistan must advise the Taliban to adopt the course of moderation and pragmatism in their internal and external policies. Simultaneously, it should provide assistance to Afghanistan to prevent a humanitarian disaster and an economic collapse.

We should also consider extending recognition to the Taliban government together with Afghanistan’s neighbours, major powers and prominent OIC countries if the Taliban agree to broaden the political base of their government, practise moderation in their policies, and pledge effective counteraction against terrorist organisations.

The writer is a retired ambassador, an author and president of the Lahore Council for World Affairs.

Email: javid.husain@gmail.com