[**The Taliban challenge**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1645170/the-taliban-challenge)

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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 fall of the last pocket of resistance, the Afghan Taliban now virtually control the entire country. It took days of fighting to [clear the Panjshir valley](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644815) that had remained out of the Taliban’s domain during their previous rule. Having swept the entire northern territory it was not much of a challenge for the Taliban forces to capture the treacherous mountainous region that has a lot of symbolic value.

With the last bastion of opposition now gone, the Taliban have fully established their rule in the war-ravaged country. Yet the transformation from an insurgent group to one in power is never easy. Victorious in a protracted war against the world’s mightiest military power the Taliban may be, but the path ahead is a challenging one. Governing a bitterly divided land ravaged by decades of conflict is perhaps more difficult than winning a war.

The Taliban have finally announced an interim government comprising all their leaders. It’s probably meant to fill the void, but it is clear that the new rulers don’t have any intention of forming an inclusive government. The delay in announcement indicated the difficulty the leadership must have been facing in forming an inclusive government.

Perhaps the most serious challenge for the Afghan Taliban is to maintain the unity within their ranks. Many of the ideological and factional differences that were swept aside during the war have resurfaced with the group now in power. With no absolute authority, a power struggle is bound to ensue.

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Some fear that the [formation of an interim government](https://www.dawn.com/news/1645047/taliban-announce-interim-government-mohammad-hasan-akhund-to-be-pm-baradar-deputy-pm) will further widen the cleavage. The struggle between the moderates who would want to take a break from some of the harshest legacies of the previous dispensation and the hardliners who are not willing to reform could sharpen. While the Taliban may have appeared as a monolith during the war the differences over military tactics and other policy matters kept surfacing. Yet the disagreement didn’t affect the resistance. The end of the war has widened the fault lines.

Many of the commanders in the field are believed to have more hard-line views. Among them are those who joined the resistance as teenagers after the fall of the Taliban government in December 2001. This new generation of Taliban commanders has replaced the old guard who have either died or been sidelined. The political leadership that negotiated the peace deal with the Americans mostly comprised veterans who were not in the field.

Many of them spent time in detention and lived abroad after they were released. They have had greater exposure to the outside world and a relatively better understanding of the new reality. Unsurprisingly, they appear more moderate in their views, at least in their statements

But one must not expect a complete transformation of the conservative movement that has fought for the restoration of the old order under the banner of the ‘Islamic emirate’. The issue is one of how far the Taliban leadership can go in accepting pluralism and changing their regressive views on women rights for the international community to recognise the new dispensation. It’s also important for the new government to deal with other pressing challenges.

Seemingly, the Taliban are now in complete control over the country with the fall of Panjshir valley. There is no organised resistance to the so-called Islamic emirate. But the calm could be deceptive. The Taliban cannot rule the country through brute force. It is not the same Afghanistan of the 1990s when they could enforce their harsh social order.

The mere promise of change and the pledge to establish a pluralistic political order may not satisfy the new generation of Afghans who are better educated and have greater awareness about their situation. The exodus of educated Afghans in such large numbers is driven by the fear of a reversal to the old order. The assurance given by the Taliban does not have a calming effect. The unease is tangible.

**Read:** [*Return of the Taliban*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644365/return-of-the-taliban)

The recent [demonstration by a group of women](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644187) is a manifestation of the brewing resistance to the attempt to curb their rights. The number of women participating in the protest march may not have been very large, but it nevertheless shows that people are prepared to fight back. The exodus of educated sections of the population is largely driven by the fear of Afghanistan returning to harsh conservative rule. Any crackdown on the protests could fuel discontent.

The complexion of the new Afghan government will also determine the future course of Taliban 2.0 regarding the political system and human rights issues. A more conservative orientation could be disastrous for a country facing multiple economic, social and political challenges. It cannot deal with problems isolated from the international community.

One of the poorest countries in the world, Afghanistan is on the brink of a human catastrophe with the large-scale internal displacement of a population fleeing the conflict and worsening economic conditions. According to a recent UN refugee agency report, more than a quarter million people have been forced to leave their homes since the beginning of this year. And over 90 per cent of Afghans are believed to be living below the poverty level. Further instability in the country could push more people into starvation.

These are some of the more serious problems the Taliban administration needs to focus on. The economy cannot be revived under a regressive rule. In order to run an effective administration, the Taliban need educated, trained and skilled manpower. The exodus of professionals has already left a big gap.

Many more are ready to leave the country to escape retribution and search for a better economic future for themselves and their children. The only way to stop further migration is for the Taliban to restore the confidence of the people. The uncertainty regarding the government and the prevailing ambiguity in human rights issues, particularly women’s right to work and their access to education, are not encouraging. Afghanistan is once again at a cross roads. The restoration of a regressive social and political order could push Afghanistan further into the abyss.

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*Published in Dawn, September 8th, 2021*