**The fall of Kabul: A public value perspective**

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There is a prominent theory in the public administration known as public value (PV) which, put simply, argues that politicians, bureaucrats, and civil society must work together to create value for the wider public, while also reflecting the values of the public. My previous three books have expanded this theory towards budgeting praxis, bureaucratic typology, and the digital economy. Although much of the work in this theory focuses on stable democracies with advanced economies, there is a strong case for applying the PV discourse towards the now deposed government of Ashraf Ghani and its monumental public value failures.

The Ghani regime enjoyed a unique opportunity to create value for the public during its tenure, insofar as it had the three main ingredients of public value on its side. These three ingredients are usually placed within a “strategic triangle”: legitimacy, a recognition of value, and operational resources.

[CIA chief holds secret meeting with Taliban leader in Kabul: Report](https://nation.com.pk/25-Aug-2021/cia-chief-holds-secret-meeting-with-taliban-leader-in-kabul-report)

In terms of legitimacy, Ashraf Ghani enjoyed full international recognition, and even though the Afghan people at large might not have supported his government, he was treated abroad as the legitimate holder of high office in the land. In terms of recognition of value, the Western powers hoped that a stable and prosperous Afghanistan would no longer serve as a safe-haven for hostile ideological movements, and recognised that an efficient government could help bring this about. The ordinary Afghan people might not have recognised the value of the Ghani regime to the same extent, noting that rampant corruption, inefficiency, and extortion was the order of the day; one to which the Western powers might turn a blind eye, but to which average Afghans struggled to reconcile themselves.

Meanwhile, the operational resources that the Ghani government enjoyed were the most of any government in Afghanistan’s history, including: funding, international institutions, media access, technical experts, international consultants, and much more. By the US government’s own admission, a trillion dollars was spent over 20 years arming and institutionalising the Ghani regime, which is a scope of investment rarely experienced by a country of Afghanistan’s size. In short, the government of Ashraf Ghani had all the ingredients of the strategic triangle in its favour. Yet looking beyond this generous endowment, there were two problems in the way the former government was built and run: it did not represent the full public; and it didn’t create sufficient value for the public in spite of the PV capabilities that it enjoyed in principle.

[Real Madrid extend deal with Uruguayan midfielder Valverde](https://nation.com.pk/25-Aug-2021/real-madrid-extend-deal-with-uruguayan-midfielder-valverde)

The first problem of not representing the full public was that the now deposed government was a minority government in two ways, class and race (ethnicity). The class issue was that many if not most holders of high office were upstarts who had lived abroad and cultivated some Western sympathies. These people were not representative of the boorish and largely destitute country folk who constituted the majority of Afghan society. Instead, those representatives were liberal Afghans who dressed and spoke in a manner palatable to a Western donor base, and who spent most of their days assuring the donors that everything was by and large fine in the country—and where it wasn’t, they could conveniently blame Pakistan for anything and everything.

The ethnicity issue stemmed from the fact that the government didn’t adequately represent Pashtuns. Ashraf Ghani was an Ahmadzai Pashtun, but his government had a disproportionate presence of non-Pashtuns from Dari, Tajik, Uzbek, and other backgrounds. Yet although accurate census data would be impossible to gather in war torn Afghanistan, a reasonable estimate would be that more than half (55 percent) of the population is Pashtun, a proportion that was at times deliberately under-counted for political reasons. As an under-represented majority, the Pashtuns of Afghanistan could and would see armed conflict as an alternate vehicle for political engagement. Pakistan’s advice on this matter has long been prudent: it has argued for an inclusive and ethnically participatory government, and not one which excludes the majority ethnicity.

[PM Khan to visit Lahore today](https://nation.com.pk/25-Aug-2021/pm-khan-to-visit-lahore-today)

These issues of representation could have been sidelined, one might argue, if the former Afghan government would have been an efficient, clean, and value-creating authority that mobilised its endowments towards the benefit of the public. In that case, perhaps racial and class divides would have mattered less. But the Ghani regime was extremely corrupt by all accounts, “raking in the dough” and misusing the generous foreign aid that it received. By contrast, the Taliban had a single party platform: speedy justice, as I have covered in my second book on public value under the theme of judicial performance. Extremely violent justice, yes, but efficient justice for regular folk was what the Taliban promised. The Afghan government was not interested in justice, public service provision, public accountability, transparent government or any other mechanisms of assuring value creation in a democratic polity.

Ashraf Ghani’s government was keen to line its own pockets with the dollars and euros that came into the country, and even on his flight from Kabul he fled with bags of cash, according to the Russian embassy in Kabul. During his tenure, Ghani and his underlings consistently laid all blame on Pakistan, which was in fact busy successfully juggling much larger problems: the Covid-19 pandemic, for which it ranked 3rd-best in the world on the Economist’s Global Normalcy Index in July; the radical-extremist government in Delhi; and the ramifications of the US-China tussle. In any case, ordinary Afghans were not buying the government’s scapegoating exercise, because they saw the big cars, large entourages, and fancy houses of crooked Afghan government officials on a daily basis. As a result, ordinary Afghans would sign up for jobs in the much-hyped Afghan army, but they certainly weren’t going to lay down their lives for those petty crooks.

[NATO chief says Kabul airport should remain open for evacuations](https://nation.com.pk/25-Aug-2021/nato-chief-says-kabul-airport-should-remain-open-for-evacuations)

With these points in mind, it becomes evident that the Fall of Kabul was but a matter of time, since the Ghani regime was supremely disinterested in creating value for the Afghan public, and did not represent the values or aspirations of ordinary Afghans to begin with. In this context, Biden’s apologia for American defeat and withdrawal does lay sufficient blame on the former government for failing to deliver on America’s demands and on Afghanistan’s potential. Public value theory thus helps to demonstrate some of the important local reasons for the ultimate collapse of Ashraf Ghani’s government.

That said, the Taliban faces a very different set of public value problems, since it faces deficits in all three nodes of the PV strategic triangle. It does not enjoy international legitimacy, and must prove that it will behave mercifully towards the vanquished before the comity of nations even begins to consider it a legitimate authority, even as the Afghan people appear to have welcomed their march towards the capital. The recognition of the value that the Taliban create, beyond just speedy (and often brutal) justice, remains an open question; as does their treatment of women, girls, and minorities. Finally, the Taliban is going to work with far fewer operational resources, as the US does not intend to deliver the Afghan central bank’s reserves (perhaps $10 billion or so) held within US jurisdiction, leaving the initial phase of the Taliban economy somewhat cash-strapped.

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As such, public value failure may continue to persist in Afghanistan, albeit for different reasons. Where successive governments in Afghanistan (particularly Karzai and Ghani) have failed to represent the public or create value for it, the international committee must take a fresh look at what can be done to assist Afghanistan. This is because, no matter which faction holds the seat of power, the beleaguered people of Afghanistan remain the same.

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