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August 12, 2021

**Women and the Taliban**

World attention remains focused on Afghanistan in the wake of US and Nato military withdrawal from the country.

As foreign forces continue to leave, Taliban commanders have embarked on an aggressive military campaign, and to everyone’s surprise and beyond expectations, with considerable success. Although Taliban fighters hail mainly from the Pakhtun belt, they have managed to take over control of several northern districts from the Afghan government forces.

They now control border posts which control customs and immigration with Afghanistan’s major neighbours. They have taken over Spin Boldak on the border with Pakistan, Sher Khan Bandar with Uzbekistan as well as posts bordering Iran and Tajikistan.

Women’s rights in Afghanistan were in a dire state. After the establishment of the Karzai government following the Bonn process, women’s participation in national life was somewhat restored. But in Afghanistan’s tribal society there is hardly any support from the Afghan leadership for protection of women’s rights.

Significantly, wives of Afghan leaders have virtually no participation in national life. This has been true also for the Karzai and Ghani presidencies. Moreover, the families of many of the top Afghan leaders live abroad. Abdullah Abdullah’s family lives in India and Rasheed Dostum’s family lives in Ankara.

The Doha agreement leading to withdrawal of US and Nato forces has led to major challenges within Afghanistan as well as for the regional countries. While the Ghani government faces a precarious situation following the Taliban’s military successes, he had been assured of military and economic support by the Biden Administration – which may help with his survival for some months.

The Afghan Taliban and the Ghani government have been holding talks in Doha to negotiate a political settlement but the progress so far presents bleak prospects. Given the Taliban’s aggressive military campaign, there is a fear of a civil war in Afghanistan, with all its attendant adverse implications for the neighboring countries.

While this scary scenario continues to build, there is heightened international concern regarding human rights, and especially women’s rights, in Afghanistan. In this context, women’s rights organizations in Afghanistan and all over the world, as well as among the Afghan diaspora, have warned of the dangers that women in Afghanistan are likely to face in Afghanistan if there is a takeover of the country by the Taliban through use of force. In this situation, there is grave fear that, as the Taliban grow in power, education for girls and women would be at risk and the current rights women hold would be rolled right back.

During their earlier rule (1996-2002) the Taliban had adopted harsh discriminatory practices against women who were virtually denied education, access to healthcare and participation in public life. Also, their freedom of movement was severely restricted and they could not leave their homes unless accompanied by a close male relative; women were also subjected to unfair punishments.

Given the fact that even now women remain deprived of their basic rights in areas presently controlled by the Taliban, it is feared that they would be subjected to extremely harsh treatment if the Taliban succeed in taking over Afghanistan. Given their obscurantist views, the Taliban implement their own strict interpretation of law and Shariah and have strong proclivities towards stopping women from working outside their homes. The women of Afghanistan are traumatized by the prospect of a revival of the Taliban’s rule.

In the last 20 years, the Taliban may have learnt to use Twitter and other social media for propaganda but in their actions on the ground, in areas they control, there is no change in their mentality. The US-Nato withdrawal has seriously threatened peace and stability in Afghanistan as well as in the region.

In this challenging phase for women in Afghanistan, it is essential to engage them and to ascertain their views and concerns on issues like protection of their rights, education, freedoms and security. Women must be empowered and engaged at the negotiating table. Governments across the world must insist that the participation of Afghan women in the processes is important for the stability and implementation of international agreements.

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