**Afghan women**

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The recent set of retrogressive policies announced by the Afghan Taliban has created concerns among women’s rights activists and all those who value human rights. These obscurantist rules fly in the face of the claim that the cloistered group has transformed and is willing to meet the expectations of the international community.

It also highlights the group’s dogged determination to impose its narrow interpretation of religion over Afghans. The now-viral photos of segregated classrooms in Kabul University give an impression that for the ruling elite, moral policing is the country’s most pressing problem that needs to be sorted out at a war footing. The urban centres of the landlocked country, which would witness an active presence of women everywhere just a few months ago, seem to have no traces of Afghan women who have borne the brunt of senseless wars that were mainly fought by men. They are also the first casualty of the Taliban takeover as their dreams shattered as the inherently anti-women group took control of the country. They will now face severe restrictions because of an ideology that believes women are inferior to men. At present, their freedom of movement is almost non-existent. Public places in Kabul, and other parts of the country, have been occupied by the Taliban who are quick at employing sledgehammer tactics against those who violate the so-called moral codes imposed by their pious leaders.

It is said that the first casualty of war is truth, but history has proved that women and children are not immune either. They are treated as chattels in every conflict. From the valley of Indian occupied Kashmir to the jungles of Colombia, women suffer everywhere. They were subjected to sexual violence during the first and second world wars, in several parts of the globe. The unforgettable Nanjing massacre tells the story of how the Japanese troops committed horrible crimes against Chinese women. The conflicts in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Rwanda, Congo, Somalia, Angola, Sudan and several other parts of the world witnessed terrible crimes against women.

In Afghanistan, women suffered during the first tenure of the Taliban back in the late 1990s. It is likely that they will have no respite under the current Taliban-led setup. The leadership seems to be more tilted towards the idea that women should not participate in politics. Not a single woman has been considered as minister or adviser so far. They are not considered capable enough of running any government departments, so no state entity is headed by them. Top provincial posts have also been doled out to those closer to the Taliban ideology which bears little resemblance to the views and rules of the modern world.

This is despite the fact that the country’s education institutions had witnessed an increase in the enrollment of girls over the years. These women demonstrated their talent and skills in various fields. Previously, during the first tenure of the Taliban, the country had an enrollment of nearly 900,000 male students, which rose to close to 10 million students (39 percent of whom are girls) under the US-installed Afghanistan government post-2001.

Women’s participation in employment also witnessed a phenomenal surge; they also played an active role in the political life of the country. Hundreds of thousands of women started small businesses that provided them economic independence. Widows and single women were especially thankful to a regime that, although was labelled corrupt, did not infringe upon the rights of women, letting them obtain the type of jobs they wanted or the type of dresses they chose to wear. The decisions regarding their day-to-day affairs were not dictated by the regime. Now this all has changed under the ‘egalitarian rule’ of the Afghan Taliban.

The Taliban should not assume that Afghan women will sit idle doing nothing against their oppressive laws. Women of this region have proved in the past that they have enough courage to stand up to the power. In Pakistan, for example, a tiny minority of journalist groups and women’s rights activists challenged the authoritarian rule of General Ziaul Haq. These women encouraged the political parties to challenge the dictator. The recent protests in parts of Afghanistan indicate that Afghan women are unlikely to accept subjugation at any cost. If the Taliban really want to gauge the level of popularity that they enjoy, they must allow political freedom to have an exact idea about what the people, especially women, of Afghanistan think about their regressive policies.

Those who are euphoric over the victory of the Taliban should not forget that the situation in Afghanistan has always affected Pakistan. The 1979 Afghan jihad brought drugs and Kalashnikov culture to the country. The rise of the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s prompted Maulana Sufi Mohammed to demand the enforcement of Shariah laws in Malakand besides emboldening sectarian outfits to plunge the country into communal chaos. The ‘war on terror’ pushed the country towards a conflagration that not only claimed over 30,000 lives, but also caused billions of dollars of losses to our economy.

The triumph of the Taliban has already prompted some religious organisations to take to the streets, demanding the imposition of a dress code for women similar to the one introduced by the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the coming months and years, it is possible that more religious groups will surface, demanding the imposition of their version of Shariah laws across the country. Pakistan is not only a multiethnic country, but it is also a place where people of different schools of thought have lived in harmony for decades. This unity was badly damaged by the policies of Gen Zia who tried to divide people along religious and sectarian lines to bolster his government. Such policies proved to be catastrophic for the country leading to the mushroom growth of sectarian and religious groups. The situation in Afghanistan is likely to affect Pakistan again, which would not only damage the country’s social fabric but also jeopardise women’s rights.

It is important that Pakistan and the international community use their influence and ask the Taliban to impose a system that doesn’t undermine the rights of women and other marginalised sections of Afghanistan. Any strategic interests should not be used as an excuse to turn a blind eye to the plight of Afghan women. Such an attitude will ultimately affect women of this country as well.

The US has withheld over $9 billion of the Afghan government. Several international NGOs have also stopped working in Afghanistan, citing the unfavourable conditions in the country. The international community should unfreeze billions of dollars on a conditional basis, and must use this opportunity to ask the Taliban to ensure the protection of women’s rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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