**Taliban and the women**

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Afghanistan has drastically transformed in the one year since the fall of Kabul and the Taliban coming to power. Large numbers of the population have fled the country in the last year, some due to economic uncertainties while others due to fears over what their lives will look like under Taliban rule.

Onlookers were hopeful that the Taliban would stick to their promises of upholding human rights this time around; however that hope was dashed by them banning girls from secondary school, mandatory head scarfs and face coverings and edicts that women must travel with a male chaperone and only leave their houses if there’s a necessity.

These decrees were issued by the Taliban’s Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which was set up as a replacement for the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. It also further states that if a woman does not cover her face outside the home, her father or closest male relative will be warned, fined, and can eventually face potential prison or firing from state jobs.

Before the Taliban-led government takeover, more than 100,000 of the 400,000 civil servants in Afghanistan were women. The number of girls and women enrolled in schools and universities numbered in the millions, with more than 80,000 female teachers and professors. Constraining women by putting restrictions on their movements limits their ability to access healthcare, earn a living, escape abusive situations, or simply to exercise their right to move around with freedom. UNDP reports have stated that restricting women’s employment has led to a loss of $1 billion which amounts to nearly nine per cent of Afghanistan’s GDP.

Nicolette Waldman, researcher at Amnesty International and one of the authors of the report ‘Death in Slow Motion: Women and Girls under Taliban’, states that: “what really came through during the research was how all of the restrictions on women and girls are so interconnected. I would start out documenting a case of forced marriage and then realize I was also documenting a violation of the right to work or to move or any number of other violations that just one woman would be facing in her daily life…Taliban’s restrictions are like a spider web, trapping and entangling women and girls.”

Unemployment and living costs continue to rise throughout Afghanistan. Millions of people are facing acute food shortages and the economy continues to be in free fall. The government seems to be relying on humanitarian aid to fulfill the demands of the people; however that is also not in sufficient quantity. It would be beneficial for them to be recognized by the international community but that cannot be achieved until the issues of human rights and gender equality are met head on. Observers are of the view that the radical elements within the Taliban seem to have won the power struggle that was happening within its factions and these radical elements would never agree to these changes.

The Taliban themselves seem to be stuck in a difficult position. If they continue with this policy of absolutist consolidation, they will face protests and backlash internationally. However, if they allow leniency, the extremist factions from within them might abandon their support and would be tempted to join hardliners such as ISIS-K. The Emirate collapsing or continuing with its current policies, both are not palatable options for the international community and human rights groups and watchdogs. The Afghan state’s collapse would lead to further unrest, economic uncertainty, civil war, humanitarian disasters, starvation and displacement.

There does, however, seem to be a thawing in the relationship between the international community and the Taliban, especially with the Tashkent Conference that happened on July 26. The US held talks with Taliban representatives regarding the Afghan Central Bank Reserves that have been frozen since August 2021. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has, along with Pakistan, made efforts to convince the Taliban to allow girls to return to school. He also launched the US-Afghan Consultative Mechanism (USACM), which aims to enable Afghan citizens to communicate directly with American policymakers.

China has added that it will not charge tariffs on 98 per cent of goods being imported from Afghanistan. This is being done to boost bilateral trade with Afghanistan. Nearly 30 countries attended the Tashkent Conference, including India and Pakistan, signaling that there is the development of a collective will to engage more with the Taliban.

The world is faced with a difficult choice: either they can maintain a distant relationship and continue with humanitarian aid and support or they can choose to deepen economic, diplomatic and military ties. The former will not be enough and the latter, without demanding any social reforms and guarantees from the Taliban, could lead to the consolidation of the hardline regime, leaving women and minorities disheartened and isolated.

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