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'There will soon be normal relations with the Taliban'

Journalist Emran Feroz on corruption in the former Afghan administration, the moral failure of the West, and normalising relations with the Taliban

Are you surprised that the Taliban managed to take over the whole country so quickly after the troop withdrawal?

Apart from Kabul, where I would not have expected it this quickyl, I am not surprised. In previous weeks, several provincial capitals fell one after the other, including Kunduz, Mazar-i Sharif, Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar. It was long ignored that the Taliban had been present in the surrounding districts for years. Then, at the right moment, they emerged from the shadows. And all of a sudden, everything crumbled.

Why did the government troops, who had been trained and equipped by the West for the last 20 years, offer so little to counter the Taliban?

The Afghan security and government apparatus that had been built over the last two decades was deeply corrupt. And not only that: the corruption permeated all sectors in Afghanistan. Leading officials and military officers put a lot of money in their own pockets, while the soldiers on the ground in the provinces often lacked the bare minimum. I was travelling in Kunar province in the spring and visited soldiers on the border with Pakistan. They looked emaciated and it was obvious that they were lacking many things. Even for their drinking water, they had to leave their base and go down from a high hill to the valley to fill jerry cans. Everyone was asking the same question: why is there not even a water pipe laid to the base for these soldiers, while the leading military officers live in fat palaces, own properties in Dubai, and run private security companies?

Corruption has created many rifts. Young soldiers, who mainly came from poor families, have been used as cannon fodder in recent years. The political elites did not send their own children to war, but mostly relocated their families abroad. This could not work for long. Many

soldiers were completely demoralised and let this domino effect play out because they simply did not want to fight for the corrupt elite in Kabul anymore. Occasionally, deals are said to have been struck between the Taliban and government troops.

What should have been done differently in the last 20 years? How should the mission have been designed to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan?

One of the most fundamental mistakes was that twenty years ago, Western troops allied themselves with brutal warlords, criminal drug barons, and all kinds of other dubious actors to fight the Taliban. These were often on a par with the Taliban in terms of brutality and misanthropy. In fact, they were one of the main reasons why the Taliban came to power in the 1990s. Nevertheless, they allied themselves with these people to take action against the Taliban. In this important period of the Petersberg process, all actors were involved, except for the Taliban, who were much weaker at the time. But they should have been included; it would have saved many years of war. Bush, Rumsfeld, and their ilk were completely fixated on the "War on Terror". The weakened Taliban were able to reorganise themselves and became stronger.

Were the efforts of the last 20 years, both military and civilian, completely in vain?

For some, the answer must be yes, because they were very superficial. Many of these "positive achievements" have never left the cities of Afghanistan. Even if you went to the outskirts, you noticed that the rural structures did not benefit at all from this development. And that brings us back to the issue of corruption.

In all of this, however, one has to give credit to Afghans for having initiated great progress despite massive grievances. For example, the number of female journalists in Afghanistan today is impressive.

The US has negotiated with the Taliban. Can you imagine that there can be something like "normal" relations with Afghanistan under the Taliban regime?

I think at the regional level there will be normal relations with the Taliban very soon. China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian states have long since come to terms with the Taliban. The Taliban have built good bridges with these actors in recent years. I assume that Muslim-majority states will quickly recognise the Taliban.

The question is how the relationship with the West will be. The Americans have already negotiated with the Taliban and will certainly continue to do so. As far as the EU is concerned, I am worried that the current anti-refugee sentiment in Europe will quickly lead to acquiescence. If the first EU states continue to deport people to Afghanistan, they will come to terms with the Taliban. They are practically walking over dead bodies to continue with this policy.

China has offered friendly relations to the new rulers in Kabul and announced that it wants to play a constructive role in reconstruction. What is China's calculation? What does this mean geo-strategically?

I assume that Chinese influence in Afghanistan will soon increase massively. The Taliban have built up good relations with China. Issues such as the oppression of the Uyghurs are ignored – even though they are a Muslim minority. An attack on the Ummah, the community of Muslims in the world, is played down by the Taliban and their relations with China are justified as *realpolitik*. At the same time, I think China is worried that Afghanistan – if they don't have a close relationship with the Taliban – could turn into a home for refugee Uighurs. Among them, extremist actors could then develop who could become threats to China.

What can the Afghan people expect now? Will there be a return to the pre-2001 situation or will the Taliban now rule in a more moderate manner?

Poorer people and the rural population in particular will simply be glad that Afghanistan – if that is what happens – will have some peace and quiet, that a certain degree of security will be guaranteed, even if it is by the Taliban. Many will be relieved not to have to be constantly afraid of bomb attacks and military operations. A friend in Kabul this week said, “Imagine nothing happening all week now, it would be the most peaceful week in over forty years.” Although the Taliban was a regime of terror, many people remember it as having been safe.

In the West or among privileged Afghans, the focus is often on universal values and personal freedoms. But for many average Afghans, all that is still far away. For them, the priority is safety; that when they are out and about, they are not attacked or robbed by a gang of thieves. The crime rate has been very high in the cities in recent years. Many people feel that the government has failed and are now hoping in some way for the Taliban to take care of that.

On the other hand, of course, many people are tremendously afraid of the regime. Almost all my female relatives in Afghanistan feel insecure. They don't know what will happen to them, whether they

will be allowed to go to school, university, or work. The Taliban have made such promised. But you have to remember that we are still at the very beginning of the revived Taliban emirate. We cannot give the regime a free pass now and say, “Great, you have changed. It all works fine.” In regions that have been controlled by the Taliban for a long time, puritanical conditions prevail again in some cases. Often, these are rural areas that you don't see much of. Revenge actions have already taken place there, although the Taliban claim in their press conferences that there is an amnesty for all except known war criminals and warlords. This is just rhetoric, for reassurance. I don't think the Taliban deserve a leap of faith here.

In the last few days, there have been shocking images of desperate people trying to leave the country somehow. What else can be done in this situation to support the people of Afghanistan?

As soon as it comes to such questions, you often hear politicians say that you can't bring all of Syria or all of Afghanistan to Europe. Nobody is asking for that. But undoubtedly the European governments bear their share of responsibility. We can't just duck out of the way now. Many local employees are still stuck, often because of bureaucratic details. Employees of subcontractors who have worked for the federal government, for example, are not recognised. I approached the German government in the case of one such local worker, but they simply brushed it off without wanting to hear any arguments: “That doesn’t lie within our competence.” I also hear from quite a few German-Afghans who do not come from the country. And then there is the group of refugees, some of whom have been illegally deported. We have to put pressure on the government to help these people, for whom Germany is clearly responsible.

The last Taliban regime gave Al-Qaida considerable leeway and thus contributed significantly to its rise. Do you see an external danger in the current Taliban regime? Is Afghanistan once again becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups?

I see the risk here as rather low at the moment. But of course it is difficult to predict. Al-Qaida has not been a dominant player in Afghanistan for the last 20 years. The highest NATO generals could not answer whether there were four or 4,000 Al-Qaida fighters in Afghanistan. At the same time, the goal of weakening Al-Qaida as a whole has not been achieved. The terrorist network has successfully spread globally, not in Afghanistan, but in Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and many other places. In their agreement with the Americans, the Taliban have made assurances that Afghanistan will no longer be a safe haven for such actors. However, the same applies here: One

should be careful with leaps of faith.

A more important actor in Afghanistan is the IS. It has carried out devastating attacks in recent months and years. The IS and the Taliban are fighting each other. This has ideological and political reasons, but of course it is essentially about power. A year ago, there were American airstrikes against the IS in Kunar province, while the Taliban were fighting on the ground. By then, some observers were already calling the Taliban the "new American ground forces". The way the Biden administration is acting at the moment, the "War on Terror" seems to be over; they want to focus more on China and Russia. But if the IS in Afghanistan becomes a serious threat to the West, I can well imagine that they will work together with the Taliban to fight it.

This interview was conducted by Anja Wehler-Schöck.



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