
Making sense of the Taliban's resurrection

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Years of war result in a fragility for the state for decades to come



After 20 years in the wilderness, the Taliban are once again back in Kabul. Two decades of war have apparently achieved nothing. More than two trillion dollars and thousands of lives were lost “to replace the Taliban with the Taliban”.

It is pertinent to note, however, that the Taliban have grown exceedingly mature over time. Their takeover of Kabul, long feared to be a messy and violent affair, was accomplished in a very smooth manner and without bloodshed. The Taliban have also held out assurances that they will form an inclusive government and guarantee respect for human rights including women's rights to education and work “within the ambit of Islam.” They have promised not let anyone use the Afghan soil against another country, to engage constructively with the world at large Afghanistan's neighbours in particular, to forgo revenge, and to reach out to all minorities. Their leaders and spokespersons have said that nobody needs to leave the country for fear of persecution.

If the Taliban can do all this, why did the global community have to wage a long and expensive war against them? Perhaps it was a mistake after two decades of war with the Soviets, followed by an ugly civil war to expect the Taliban regime to function like a mature government in a developed country, safeguard human rights, establish democratic processes, formulate well-established institutions on modern lines, certify transparency and transparently display strict self-accountability. Perhaps, they could have achieved all that eventually, transitioning from a rather primitive social order to a more modern one if the world, particularly the West, had given them the space and time.

What if the US and its allies had not removed their previous government? The Taliban might possibly have evolved more than they have done. Had there been no war to fight and the Taliban were allowed to govern, would they not have matured faster? What if influential regional players like Russia and China had engaged constructively with the Taliban? And how did the Taliban survive? Why did the US fail with all its most modern military apparatus and scores of international allies? Why was it that Washington could not establish/ sustain its brand of institutions in Kabul? Why did the American-sponsored institutions fall to the ground like a house of cards the moment the US troops moved out?

Those familiar with institutional economics would understand the argument easily. Institutions emerge, evolve and establish over time. The critical feature regarding institutions – the rules of the game – is that they have to have strong roots in the indigenous culture, value system, social fabric and informal institutions. That is why they create a distinct social order for each society. Let me give you a brief synopsis of social orders and how they function.

Social order refers to the way various components of a society work together to maintain the status quo. These include social structures, informal institutions, social interactions, social behaviour and cultural features such as norms, beliefs and values.

Violence has long played an integral part in creating social orders. Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, political economist and writer, studies the undercurrents of violence. Fukuyama remarks that unluckily, there is no authentic historical record of the early transitions from group to a tribe or from tribe to a pristine state, and one can merely speculate about the dynamics stirring them.

The transitions depended on technological change and economic incentives. While these were facilitated by capital endowment, the factors themselves do not seem to be sufficient because ancient societies were often institutionally rigid in production methods and social organisation. Thus, archaeological record and its interpretation propose that it was primarily military competition that brought about transitions.

The threat of violence, for instance, generated solid demand for new rules of game. New institutions then emerged to guarantee the groups' survival. We can therefore categorise all human history into three kinds of social orders. The first was the Foraging Order, characterized by small social groups of early hunter-gatherer societies. The other two social orders emerged over the preceding ten millennia.

Douglass North, an American economist, known for his work in economic history, has classified them as Limited Access Order (LAO) and Open Access Order (OAO). Limited Access Order, or natural state, is a setting in which the political system manipulates the economic system. In simpler words, an LAO limits political or economic opportunities to the privileged class. Elite groups deliberately restrict the entry of ordinary citizens to avail these economic and political opportunities. This is a part of the system to control violence.

We can classify Limited Access Order, also known as Natural State, into three categories, *i.e.*, fragile, basic and mature natural state. A fragile natural state can only support the state machinery for the sake of the state. A basic natural state can support a few organisations but within the overall apparatus of the state. A mature natural state can support a wide-ranging organisation within or outside the domain of state apparatus. An Open Access Order, hypothetically speaking, does not restrict political and economic opportunities to any class.

Afghanistan can be placed in the category of a fragile natural state. Given time, it can graduate to a basic natural state. The transition from a basic to a mature level may take longer - a decade or so. Similarly, evolving to an Open Access Order from a mature natural state may take an additional two or three decades, perhaps even more. It is important that whatever changes take place in the social order will only be sustainable if they are made from within.

All societies have to solve the problem of violence. They do so in different ways. The way they do so turns out to be very important for their economic and political performance. Thus, a Limited Access Order solves the problem of violence by creating rents. The key here is that the political system uses rents to put limits on access to forming of organisations and rights to do a certain business. In contrast, an Open-Access Order has the provision for all the people or citizens to form such organisations. It creates and sustains both political and economic competition and has a prosperous civil society; so, there is an extensive web of different organisations.

We need to understand that every society has a specific context and distinct structures. It engineers public policies that generate rents and privileges that solve the violence problem and provide stability. People often miss this point. Exogenous endeavours to introduce rule of law, market reforms and democracy are unsuccessful when they do not take into account the logic of a natural state. Transplanting the institutions from developed countries into developing countries cannot yield political and economic development on its own.

When these institutions are introduced in reluctant societies by international or domestic gravity but do not take into account the prevailing beliefs about its political, cultural, social and economic systems, the novel institutions mostly work worse than the ones they displace. Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria are some of the recent example of this.

Positive change is indispensable, but it ought to be subtle and inclusive. When indigenous systems are overthrown and foreign institutions, like the free-market economy and political competition, imbued, chaos and uncertainty are usually the outcomes. Afghanistan is an open book example in this regard. The onus is on the Afghans; their political groups, warlords and other stakeholders need to listen to one another and carve out a better future for Afghanistan. A system for Afghanistan can only be sustainable if Kabul holds the steering wheel. All other players, regional or international, should seek no more than to facilitate change.

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