



Afghanistan: Women show the way against fundamentalist reaction

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Afghan women are leading the way in organising anti-Taliban protests in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan. They are doing what US and allied occupying forces failed to do: stand up to the Taliban. And that is despite increasingly fierce repression, the Taliban have killed a pregnant police officer, placed a ban on protests organised without government permission and detained more than a dozen journalists, two of whom were beaten so badly they were hospitalised.

The Taliban, in power since the ignominious exit of occupying imperialist forces, have claimed a commitment to women's rights, but told all women, except those in the public health sector, to stay away from work "until the security situation improves". Afghan women do not buy this: the same excuse was used during the 1990s, when the Taliban were last in power, to prevent women from participating in public life. They have also again imposed a strict reactionary dress code on women, making the hijab and niqab compulsory.

Protests and repression

In response to the increasing number of protests, Taliban have said demonstrators must not only get permission from the Ministry of Justice but the security services must agree the location and time of the protest, and even what banners and slogans will be used.

Women protesting against Taliban rule have been stopped, lashed with whips and beaten with electric batons. Live rounds, supposedly shot into the air over crowds, have killed three people already. As well as being called names they find 'shameful to repeat', women have been told to go home because, "that is their place". Yet still the women continue to protest, in defiance not only of the Taliban but often their families, too.

So far, most protests have been led by young women and men mostly from the middle and salariat classes. They show how urbanisation has impacted on Afghanistan under imperialist occupation. The 20 years of occupation and war have allowed a section of young Afghans to experience life in the cities with certain freedoms, such as the right to work. For them, Taliban rule would mean forcing them into a society they have never known, in which they lose the limited 'privileges' to work and participate in social life. Young Afghans, particularly women who grew up in the urban areas, are not ready to let that happen.

This was expressed vividly by members of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) during a protest in Balkh on September 6 with placards reading: 'We are not going back!' and 'Women will not go back!?'.

The RAWA statement on the Taliban takeover, made their position crystal clear: 'In the past 20 years, one of our demands was an end to the US/NATO occupation and even better if they take their Islamic fundamentalists and technocrats with them and let our people decide their own fate. This occupation only resulted in bloodshed, destruction and chaos. They turned our country into the most corrupt, insecure, drug-mafia and dangerous place especially for women.'

This underlines the progressive character of the demonstrations. They may lack strong, countrywide support at the

moment, but two factors could drastically change that. One, devaluation of the currency, the afghani, and rising inflation mean that most Afghans are struggling even to put bread on the table, making it more difficult by the day to keep order. Two, as the Taliban gain more control over the country, attacks on democratic freedoms are rising in direct proportion, resulting in increasing layers of society being drawn into resistance, opening up space for the class struggle that can effectively overthrow the current regime of reaction.

Contradictory sentiments

Today, the resistance expresses itself within an Afghan nationalist framework. There are sections that continue to hold illusions in an imperialist solution. Some are linked to international NGOs as well. At some demos, slogans were raised against the Pakistani state and its agencies, too. None of this takes away the potential that the simmering anger of the Afghans contains.

Anger against the Pakistani state and its historic two-faced role in the "War on Terror", not to mention the benefits, economic and political, it derived from it, is understandable on the part of ordinary Afghans. Even rank and file Taliban, if not the Mullahs, have questioned the great interest Pakistani journalists show in coming to Afghanistan for media coverage.

Illusions in US imperialism among some layers of Afghan society have to be understood in light of the fact that the occupation provided a completely new way of living for sections of urban women. Likewise, international NGOs provided employment opportunities, and thus the prospect of a life outside the confines of the home, to Afghan women.

As far as Afghan nationalism is concerned, this is not a single, monolithic sentiment. If there is the newly emergent nationalism of the Taliban or the US-reliant nationalism of Ghani, then there is also the sentiment of a small yet progressive section of society that bears no illusions in either of them. Instead, it looks to, and struggles for, an Afghanistan governed by those who produce the country's wealth, its workers and poor peasants. If an anti-Taliban movement grows in Afghanistan, this small force will have the opportunity to build itself, opening the doors to a revolutionary alternative in a region that has been reduced to ruins by the policies of imperialists and national bourgeois leaders.

If such an anti-Taliban resistance can sustain itself, it will show the world the power of the revolutionary subject. Imperialist powers could not defeat the Taliban and were forced to make deals with them, effectively bringing them to power in Afghanistan. It is now Afghans themselves who are fighting the Taliban. This shatters to pieces all the liberals' fairy tales, their conviction that Taliban reaction could only be defeated through foreign imperial intervention because the people of Afghanistan do not have the capacity or power to face the Taliban and the warlords. The current movement is a glimmer of hope against both imperial and fundamentalist reaction as it shows who really stays and fights the battle for freedom.

Control

The fact that protests could surface under Taliban rule also shows that they are not yet in full control of the country. Their bans continue to be flouted despite severe repression. As a result, the Taliban have had to stage counter-protests with veiled women in universities carrying Taliban flags in defence of Taliban rule. This shows that the Taliban, at least as of now, cannot rule quite as they did in the 1990s. These staged counter-protests are an attempt to create a social justification for the imposition of reaction, instead of simple suppression of all opposition through brute force.

Another important issue to factor in is the allegiance of the warlords. They may have embraced Taliban rule for now, but such allegiances will shift in times of conflicting interests. Similarly, infighting within the Taliban factions should not be ignored. The extent to which such factors could weaken and destabilise Taliban rule may depend largely on China's role. Chinese imperialism, with its Belt and Road Initiative, has its own interests in maintaining ties with the Taliban and the US exit allows it to emerge as a more powerful player in the region.

The League for the Fifth International extends complete solidarity to the emerging women-led movement in Afghanistan. This budding movement is currently divided, weak and has a mixed class character with the undeniable

presence of some pro-imperialist and middle- and upper-class elements. Yet it offers hope to the millions of embattled Afghans who are tired of imperial occupation, but also oppose the policies of the likes of Ghani and the reaction of the Taliban. In a country where 80 per cent of the population are unemployed or underemployed, such a movement is the need of the hour.

Revolutionaries in Afghanistan must build this movement and win its most advanced and conscious layers to the programme of Permanent Revolution. In the fight for basic democratic freedoms such as the right to work and socialise for women, this strategy fights to build the organisations of workers and peasants that can not only defeat the Taliban but also guarantee those rights. These democratic rights can only be safeguarded by a government based on such organisations taking power throughout the country.

Afghan revolutionaries must organise themselves on the basis of a programme of action for such a revolution in Afghanistan ? one that places no illusions in any imperialist power, be it the US, China, or Russia. This will be crucial for intervention in today's protests or any future movements in the country. The friends of Afghan workers, poor peasants, women, and national minorities are not the imperialist powers who, after wreaking havoc in the country, ran away like little chickens.

It is the workers of Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China who must fight on their own soils to welcome Afghan refugees. It is the British, American, German and French workers who must struggle not only to welcome Afghan refugees but also to stop their governments imposing sanctions on Afghanistan and to pay reparations for the rebuilding of the country.

Workers across the world must organise solidarity in action with our Afghan brethren who have seen war for far too long. Long live international solidarity! Long live the struggle against the Taliban and imperialism in Afghanistan!

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