



The victory of the Taliban and its international significance

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The victory of the Taliban and the fall of the Ghani government are a humiliating defeat of global significance for the US and its Western allies. The image of helicopters lifting fleeing diplomats from the roof of the US embassy is powerfully evocative of the fall of Saigon in 1975, but the difference is more important. Then, the only global rival to the USA, the Soviet Union, was itself already a declining force, today, China is a vigorous imperialism, obliged by its own growth to extend its power and its reach at the expense of the USA.

Trump's decision to agree the US withdrawal with the Taliban in Doha, without even a pretence of consulting the Kabul government, was not just a personal whim of an eccentric president. It expressed the growing recognition that this war could not be won, better to cut and run. That conclusion was already shared not only by many Republicans but also by Joe Biden, who, as Vice President, had opposed Obama's "surge".

In Doha, a new generation of Taliban leaders, advised, if not directed, by those elements of the Pakistan state that had supported them in exile, tactfully agreed to a deal that envisaged some form of future power-sharing government. While that was face-saving for the USA, the Taliban knew that, in the greater part of their homeland, social relations had not changed and the entire regime was completely dependent on the US presence. Economic and social development would have required the overthrow of the landowning class which was never going to happen under the US or its stooges in Kabul.

The Taliban might not have anticipated the extraordinary speed with which they took the whole of the country, but they were always rightly confident that, once the occupying imperialist troops had left, the regime and its troops would collapse, revealing the harsh truth that the government had no real social roots in Afghan society.

After 20 years of occupation, hundreds of thousands of deaths and 7 million refugees created by the long asymmetric war, the country was left by its occupiers in a state of devastation. Some 80 percent of the population is unemployed or underemployed and 60 percent of children are facing hunger and malnutrition.

The combination of poverty and warfare not only drove millions out of the country, often to be recruited by the Taliban, but also into the cities. Here there have been changes in social relations, perhaps most importantly for women but also in terms of jobs and a degree of political democracy. Like the regime itself, however, these, too, are heavily dependent on the resources supplied by the US and its allies.

Pakistan

The fact that the Taliban were able not only to survive against the most powerful state on the planet but to grow and develop to the point where they could take over the whole country in a matter of weeks was obviously not dependent solely on the recruitment of impoverished refugees. The key was the backing from Pakistan, especially from the Inter-Services Intelligence agency, ISI, which had long seen Afghanistan as a potential factor in its feud with India.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, at a time when semi-colonial Pakistan was a willing ally of the US, the ISI played an important role in developing the Mujahideen and gained valuable experience and expertise in channelling US

aid to their guerrilla fighters. However, times change, and so do allegiances. The twenty years of the US occupation of Afghanistan have also been the years of the rise of China, now the more important source of economic aid to Pakistan, which has a strategic importance in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. No doubt there are still pro-Western elements in the Pakistan state apparatus, but the speed with which the prime minister, Imran Khan, has welcomed the victory of the Taliban suggests that the pro-Beijing faction is now dominant.

The global, perhaps historic, significance of the Taliban's victory is that the US invasion, like the subsequent invasion of Iraq, was intended not just to demonstrate US power but to consolidate it by cementing its grip on the whole Middle East. This was to set the scene for the New American Century, ushered in by the collapse of the Soviet Union and globalisation.

The barbaric and reactionary attack on the Twin Towers served as a pretext, a justification, for the "war on terror", in which Washington claimed the right to intervene militarily wherever it believed its interests were threatened. Today, after military defeats in both Iraq and Afghanistan and the economic crisis of 2008/9, that whole world view is in question. The USA is, undoubtedly, still a very powerful state, but it is no longer an unchallenged hegemon.

The changing balance of forces will inevitably encourage not only rival imperialisms, China and Russia, but also regional powers, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, India, for example, to try to gain advantage from the situation. Further afield, countries that have taken US backing for granted, Taiwan comes to mind, must be wondering what the future holds. Even EU imperialisms such as Germany and France will be calculating how far they should diverge from US priorities.

In Afghanistan itself, the restoration of a Taliban government clearly will not open the road to peace and prosperity. Twenty years of exile in Pakistan and the Gulf states, the development of new leaders, the challenge of forming a system of government in a much changed country, and the possibility of tensions between the returning exiles and those who maintained the organisation within the country under occupation, are likely to create internal tensions, victory always divides the victors.

Amnesty

At its first press conference, the new regime's representative declared a general amnesty for all those who worked for the previous government and assured women that their rights to education, work and engagement in public life would be guaranteed, provided Islamic norms were respected. Stressing that the Taliban wanted no revenge and would seek to engage others in the governance of the proposed theocratic Emirate, an appeal was made to the public to return to work as normal.

No doubt such a pragmatic approach makes good practical sense for a movement that has no civil administrative apparatus of its own and was the advice given by its potential international supporters. Time will tell whether that will last or whether the most reactionary currents in the country are prepared to tolerate such concessions, having fought for twenty years for a return to their own preferred standards. What is clear is that, at present, there are no forces such as political parties or trades unions that could mobilise to stop any regression.

Internationally, defenders of the democratic rights of the exploited and oppressed in Afghanistan should do everything in their power to prevent revenge being taken by the defeated imperialists. Any attempts to impose sanctions or refuse recognition of what is now the de facto government of the country must be opposed, they can only add to the misery and poverty already suffered.

For the masses in Afghanistan, dark times are dawning. The victory of the Taliban will effectively drive all democratic organisations, women's organisations, trades unions and socialist or communist forces into illegality. At the same time, however, as can be seen in all theocratic regimes, the social contradictions will by no means disappear. Class antagonisms and other social conflicts are inevitable sooner or later, the youthful protests in Jalalabad are a first sign of that. Revolutionaries in Afghanistan have to prepare for this organisationally, politically and programmatically under conditions of illegality, of conspiratorial work.

Party

Two lessons will be central: first, in the struggle for democratic and social demands, no reliance can be placed on any of the imperialist powers or their regional agents, political independence will be crucial. Real allies will only be found amongst those forces, regionally and further afield, that have proved their own independence from "their" governments. Secondly, Afghan revolutionaries must forge a new party organisation based on a programme that links the inevitable social and political struggles to the building of working class and peasant organisations that can, in time, become the agencies for the overthrow of the existing regime and its replacement by a workers' and peasants' government, in other words, the strategy of permanent revolution.

The development of such an organisation is undoubtedly a long-term prospect. Immediately, millions are threatened with brutal political repression. Others are trying to flee to neighbouring countries or to Europe. The left and the workers' movement internationally must wage a common struggle for the unconditional opening of borders and campaign to raise material resources for the refugees who remain in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries.

The dramatic events in Afghanistan confirm that we live in a period of increasing inter-imperialist rivalry, a period in which economic competition can give way to trade wars, sanctions can become blockades and regional conflicts can generate wider wars. The economic and territorial frictions typical of the twentieth century now unfold in the context of the developing climate catastrophe which, by its very nature, confirms the need for an international solution. For that, an international organisation, an international party is a prerequisite - that is the principal task of revolutionaries around the world, the building of a Fifth International!

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