



Women in Afghanistan: Resistance to Islamism and Imperialism

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The defeat and ignominious withdrawal of the imperialist occupation forces in Afghanistan brought the Taliban back to power. The defeat of the USA, NATO and their allies like the Federal Republic of Germany not only revealed the reactionary character of this rule - it also revealed that their alleged progress was largely a fiction. The Ghani regime had no real power base in its own country. The imperialist occupation, which brought another 20 years of civil war and cost tens of thousands of lives through US and NATO bombing, was essentially based on occupying troops, a corrupt state apparatus and an alliance with reactionary elites and warlords.

No wonder that this rule was always seen by the mass of Afghans, especially the rural population, for what it was: an occupation regime.

Since the Taliban came to power, however, the situation has not stabilised. Under US rule, the country's economy was essentially kept alive by Western donors. The only profitable export sector in the country was the formally illegal, but de facto always tolerated, drug trade. Of course, it was not the farmers and agricultural workers in the poppy fields who made the profits, but middlemen and warlords.

After the Western occupiers were forced to withdraw, they left the country to the Taliban. However, the USA confiscated the country's money and foreign exchange reserves in order to keep billions of US dollars of leverage over the new regime and to destabilise it economically after it had lost control of the country.

Thus, Western imperialism itself continues to contribute significantly to the de facto collapse of the Afghan economy and to a humanitarian catastrophe that poses a mortal danger to hundreds of thousands, even millions, of Afghans, threatening them with starvation or freezing to death. At the same time, the health system collapsed along with the economy and the supply of essential goods. Millions are forced to flee to neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan and Iran.

Yet the USA and its allies, who are largely responsible for the entire catastrophe, could have alleviated the famine and the lack of essential goods for months by releasing those billions of US dollars. For them, however, millions of Afghan workers, peasants and even the middle classes are mere puppets whose lives count for nothing when it comes to geostrategic advantage and wringing concessions from the Taliban in the reorganisation of the country. China and Russia, as one would expect, are also keeping a low profile in terms of humanitarian aid.

Millions of Afghans are thus forced to flee, either within their own country or to neighbouring countries such as Pakistan or Iran. The West takes in at most a few thousand former employees of the occupying armies - and even these are mostly abandoned. For the mass of Afghans, there is no way to Europe or the USA, those who do make it are threatened with deportation.

The economic crisis, however, means that the Taliban have not yet been able to fully establish and enforce their rule in the country. In many regions and provinces, they have to rely on traditional elites and structures. In some, their power is challenged by even more reactionary Islamist forces that are politically and ideologically close to the so-called Islamic State.

Women are particularly hard hit by the economic crisis because they move less in the public sphere and, except in a few areas, are effectively excluded from wage labour.

Oppression and resistance

Even under Taliban rule, however, many women are not prepared to submit as victims without resistance. On the contrary. They resist under these conditions and despite rampant repression that can cost them their own lives. Protests without government permission are banned and journalists arrested, many of whom have been severely beaten and hospitalised. And these are just a few well-documented cases of repression.

While the Taliban claim to be committed to women's rights, all except those in the public health sector have been told not to work until the security situation improves. The same excuse was used in the 1990s to keep women from participating in public life. In addition, the Taliban have again imposed a strict reactionary dress code on women, requiring the wearing of head coverings and face veils such as hijab and niqab. Secondary schools for girls have been closed. Longer journeys may only be made with a male escort.

In response to the increasing number of protests, the Taliban have stated that women demonstrators must not only obtain permission from the Ministry of Justice, but the security services must also approve the time and place of the protest and even the use of banners and slogans.

Women protesting against Taliban rule have been stopped, beaten with whips and electrocuted. Three people have already been killed with live rounds allegedly fired into the air over crowds of people in September 2021. Not only have the women been called names, which they find shameful to repeat, but they have also been told to go home because that is "their place". Nevertheless, the women continue to protest, not only against the Taliban, but often against their families.

So far, most of the protests have been led by young women and also men who are, or were, mainly middle class and employed. They show how urbanisation under imperialist occupation has affected Afghanistan. The 20 years of occupation and war have enabled a section of young Afghans to experience life in the cities with certain freedoms. For them, Taliban rule would mean being forced into a society they have never known and losing the limited "privileges" to work and participate in social life. Young women in particular, who have grown up in the cities, are not ready for this.

This was clearly expressed by members of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) at a protest in Balkh, in northern Afghanistan, on 6 September with placards: "We will not go back!" and "Women will not go back!"

Despite repression, protests have continued in recent months. For example, women organised public protests in several cities on 25 November, International Day Against Violence Against Women, and on 10 December, International Human Rights Day, with slogans like: "Fundamentalism + Imperialism = Barbarism!" Women in Kabul also took to the streets against the restriction of freedom of movement declared in December.

RAWA's statement on the Taliban takeover clearly presented their position: "For the last 20 years, one of our demands has been an end to the US/NATO occupation and it would be even better if they took their Islamic fundamentalists and technocrats with them and let our people decide their own fate. This occupation has only led to bloodshed, destruction and chaos. They have turned our country into the most corrupt, unsafe, drug mafia-infested and dangerous place, especially for women."

This underlines the progressive nature of the demonstrations. For now, they may lack strong, nationwide support, but two factors could drastically change that. First, the devaluation of the Afghan currency and rising inflation mean that most Afghans are struggling to put bread on the table at all, making it more difficult to maintain order by the day. Secondly, attacks on democratic freedoms are increasing as the Taliban gain more control over the country. This leads to more and more layers of society being drawn into resistance, creating space for the class struggle that can effectively overthrow the current reactionary regime.

Control

Since some protests have been allowed to occur under the rule of the Taliban, it is also evident that they are not yet in complete control of the country. Their bans continue to be flouted, despite strict repression. As a result, the Taliban organised their own counter-protests, with veiled women carrying Taliban flags in universities to defend their rule. This shows that, at least for now, the new masters cannot rule as they did in the 1990s. These staged counter-protests are an attempt to create a social justification for imposing reaction rather than simply suppressing any opposition with brute force.

Another important factor is the loyalty of the local warlords. They may have accepted Taliban rule for the time being, but such loyalties will change in times of conflicting interests. Fighting within Taliban factions should not be ignored either. The extent to which these factors could weaken and destabilise their rule depends largely on the role of China. Chinese imperialism, with its "New Silk Road" initiative, has a vested interest in maintaining relations with the Taliban. The withdrawal of the USA enables it to become an even more powerful player in the region.

The League for the Fifth International declares its full solidarity with the emerging women's movement in Afghanistan. This nascent movement is currently fragmented and weak and carries a cross-class character with the undeniable presence of some pro-imperialist and middle and upper class elements. Nevertheless, it offers hope for the millions of war-torn Afghans who are tired of imperial occupation, but also reject the policies of both the former Ghani government and the Taliban response. In a country where 80 per cent of the population is 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 struggle for basic democratic freedoms such as the right to work and social benefits for women, we advocate building organisations of workers and peasants that can not only defeat the Taliban but also guarantee these rights and fight for power.

The Afghan revolutionaries must organise on the basis of a revolutionary programme that does not create illusions in any imperialist power, be it the USA, China or Russia. This will be crucial for intervention in the current protests or in future movements in the country. The real allies of the workers, poor peasants, women and national minorities are not the imperialist powers.

They are the workers of Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China who have to fight in their respective countries to receive Afghan refugees. It is the British, American, German and French workers who must fight not only for the admission of Afghan refugees, but also against their governments imposing sanctions on Afghanistan and to pay reparations for the reconstruction of the country.

Workers around the world must organise their solidarity in action with our Afghan brothers and sisters who have been suffering from the war for far too long. Long live international solidarity! Long live the struggle against the Taliban and against imperialism in Afghanistan!

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