

The New Mullah Omars

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The Taleban leader may be out of power but some in authority today continue his repressive policies.

Two years have passed since the international community came together to overthrow the Taleban and establish an interim government in Afghanistan. It was thought that this new administration, having international backing, would not repeat the Taleban's misdeeds. But those expectations have been dashed, and a new group of governmental Mullah Omars has come into being.

To understand the power of these neo-fundamentalists, it is necessary to understand their role in Afghanistan's history. Many fought in the jihad against the Soviet Union. One of the main reasons for the Taleban's ascendance in Afghanistan was the devastating fighting between mujahedin or anti-Soviet resistance leaders in the early 1990s.

Under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taleban entered politics in the name of religion and Sharia, or Islamic law, vowing to restore stability. They captured 95 per cent of the country and ran their emirate for five years by force of whip, lash and weapon.

Ignoring all humanitarian values, the Taleban imposed special laws. They called those laws Sharia and the principles of Islam.

They considered the God-loving Muslim people of Afghanistan, whose faith goes back 1,400 years, to be faithless, and set out to enforce religious observances that the people were already undertaking without any pressure.

The Taleban banned girls from going to school and women from attending social gatherings and university. They decreed TV and films forbidden and imposed hundreds of restrictions with which Afghanistan went centuries backward, adding to the tragedies of the already heartbroken nation.

Every tyranny has been transient, and the Taleban didn't last long. But others have stepped forward to take their place.

We can single out the chief justice of the supreme court, Fazel Hadi Shinwari, the deputy chief justice, Fazl Ahmad Manawi, and the governor of Herat, Ismael Khan, as among the governmental Mullah Omars who hamper freedom, democracy, women's rights, and development in the country.

The real face of Ismael Khan is Mullah Omar's. This face, though not similar in outward appearance to the Taleban leaders, is the same in ideology and action. By disregarding the new conditions in the country and refusing to honour human rights, Ismael Khan has become nearly as restrictive as Mullah Omar.

In Herat, whose people are famous for their grand, centuries-old culture, there is no freedom. The women of Herat who rallied against ignorance, darkness and backwardness and survived the Taleban now don't dare to participate in community activities because of the restrictions imposed by Ismael Khan.

A governmental envoy who visited Herat recently reported that 180 women set themselves on fire there in the last year; 65 of them died. The women were protesting against a lack of freedom, forced marriages and

physical abuse at home. Ismael Khan could organise awareness programmes, enact laws and instruct imams to preach against forced marriage, but he doesn't.

Yet no one dares to criticise Ismael Khan, and on the basis of his decrees male and female students are now separated by a curtain. When a girl is seen walking with a boy, she is taken to a hospital, where doctors examine her to determine whether or not she is a virgin. As in Iran, the doors of movie saloons and video arcades are closed, and cassettes and CDs are confiscated as they were under the Taleban. The restrictions continue even though a moderate Islamic constitution has recently been approved.

Armed gangs terrorise Ismael Khan's political enemies. A central government representative, sent to Herat to check the governor's power, was targeted in a grenade attack, and a well-known liberal mullah was badly hurt when a car nearly ran him down. Those who criticise Ismael Khan and defend democracy and independence are in danger.

Chief Justice Shinwari, and his deputy, Manawi, use the supreme court's authority to oppose freedom of speech and women's rights. They bring forth Ayat and Hadith - verses from the Koran and the sayings of Muhammed - to silence voices in favour of freedom and human rights.

Shinwari and Manawi have sent letters to the information and culture ministry in an attempt to ban broadcasts of Afghan women singing on Kabul TV. Manawi has occasionally stood up for women's rights, as he did last year when he overruled a group of religious scholars who announced that Afghan women could not work for non-governmental organisations. But he has taken other measures, such as firing the court's only female justice, that suggest his views on women are hardly progressive.

Ismael Khan and Shinwari, like many other politicians and commanders, have created their own organisations called Ulema Councils that put forth rulings not much different from those decreed by Mullah Omar.

These councils, made up of mullahs, have always existed in Afghanistan and have usually been at the service of the government. They have great influence among the people. Today, such councils use the general rules and values of religion to give weight to the political opinions of various leaders. Thus they exploit religion for their own purposes.

But we can't speak of all the Mullah Omars by naming only a few people. We can also count Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf, leader of the Ittehad-e-Islami party and a major figure in the Afghan jihad, former president and Jamiat-e-Islami leader Burhanuddin Rabbani, and Harakat-e-Islami party leader Sheikh Asef Muhsini among the new breed of fundamentalists.

While Ismael Khan is the governor of Herat, Sayyaf, Rabbani and Muhsini do not hold positions in the government but are nevertheless powerful within the administration. All three are leaders of jihadi parties whose loyalists hold key posts in the government. In many ways, these leaders have more power than President Hamed Karzai because they represent armed groups while the national army under Karzai's command is still being trained.

The Afghan people suffered grievously while Sayyaf, Rabbani and Muhsini were fighting the civil war. Muhsini is now building a big madrassa in Kabul's Kart-e-Sey neighbourhood to train students in fundamentalist Islam. Rabbani and Sayyaf, in addition to being accused of the ruthless massacre of Kabul's civilians in the 1990s, are finding opportunities to interfere with the country's attempts to shape its future disrupt its rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Afghanistan can't be built this way. America, the international community and Karzai have agreed that all efforts to restore stability, democracy and freedom for women, hold elections and select a president, form

a national army and police force and even rebuild roads and cities, are futile if such conditions continue.

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Location: Iraqi Kurdistan
Iran
Afghanistan

Topic: Komentar

Focus: Afghanistan

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