# Why Did the Taliban Win (Again) in Afghanistan?

**FLORIAN WEIGAND** [iD]

## ABSTRACT

The paper explores the long-term developments and dynamics in Afghanistan, which enabled the Taliban to capture the state in August 2021. It suggests that the Taliban's success was enabled by the failure of the international intervention to build legitimate authority in Afghanistan. Three factors contributed to this failure: First, different actors that were part of the intervention in the country pursued competing agendas, especially with the 'War on Terror' undermining human rights and state-building. Second, a gap between the Afghan internationally supported state and its citizens evolved and grew larger over time, especially due to the risk mitigation measures applied. Third, day-to-day interactions that ordinary people in Afghanistan had with the state were often perceived as corrupt and extractive, making it difficult for the state to convey that it was working in the interest of its citizens.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Florian Weigand**

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

*F.weigand@lse.ac.uk*

GUEST EDITOR:

**Michael Cox**

Emeritus Professor of International Relations and Founding Director of LSE IDEAS, UK

*m.e.cox@lse.ac.uk*

# INTRODUCTION

'Taliban sweep into Afghan capital after government collapses', the Associated Press [1] reported about what had occurred in Afghanistan on 15th August 2021. President Ghani fled Kabul by helicopter after all the country's provincial capitals had fallen to the Taliban in less than two weeks. The Taliban's capture of the presidential palace indeed looked like a sudden military victory—almost exactly 25 years after the Taliban had last taken the capital Kabul in September 1996. However, the Taliban's success rested on a slow but steady expansion of authority across the country. This included the establishment of governance structures in the predominantly rural areas under their control and influence. Drawing on long-term research in Afghanistan [2], this paper looks at these developments and dynamics over time, arguing that the Taliban's success was enabled by the failure of the international community's intervention to establish a legitimate authority in Afghanistan. At its core it suggests that three major factors contributed to this failure, and ultimately empowered the Taliban.

First, the international intervention was characterised by competing agendas and actors. In particular, the US focus on the 'War on Terror' undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan state that the international community tried to build. Meanwhile, it enabled the Taliban to craft a narrative of resistance to oppressive interveners and to establish themselves as an alternative authority, despite being ill-equipped to govern and often coercive.

Second, the Afghan state (together with its international partners) and the Afghan society grew apart quickly. The expansion of security measures, such as compounds and armoured vehicles, visibly divided the state from its citizens. The Taliban actively drove this division through their violent attacks, while portraying themselves as more accessible to many rural populations.

Third, the day-to-day experience many people had with the Afghan state was one of corruption. In the absence of macro-level accountability, such as in the form of functioning elections, experiences on the personal level severely undermined the state's legitimacy. Meanwhile, the Taliban successfully drew on these grievances. To win people's support they did not have to offer good governance, but simply governance that was viewed as less bad than what the state had to offer.

# COMPETING AGENDAS AND ACTORS

What was the goal of the US-led international intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001? There is no clear answer to this seemingly simple question. Following 9/11, then US President George W. Bush announced a global 'War on Terror', of which the first target was the Taliban-led government of Afghanistan, which Bush accused of hosting Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. The military intervention, which Bush implemented primarily for domestic reasons as a visible response to 9/11 against Al Qaeda, was also framed with broader ambitions, including realising Afghans' human rights and liberating them from the Taliban and their oppressive policies [see 3]. Bush argued, 'In Afghanistan, we see al-Qaeda's vision for the world. Afghanistan's people have been brutalised—many are starving and many have fled. Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television' (Joint Session of Congress).

Beyond the fight against Al Qaeda and the promised liberation of the Afghan people from the Taliban, the international community announced their intention to transform Afghanistan into a liberal democracy. Following the seemingly rapid military victory against the Taliban, the international community and its Afghan partners decided on the 'Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions'. The conference at Bonn in December 2001 included the winning Afghan side, mainly commanders from what is often referred to as the Northern Alliance but excluded the losing Taliban side. In line with the idea of 'liberal peace', the agreement outlined steps to support building a new democratic and liberal state in Afghanistan, pursuing both international and domestic expectations.

However, despite regular international conferences, this process was conducted without much of an international or national framework. Even the new Afghan constitution, introduced in 2004, was frequently ignored—both by the Afghan government and the international community. For instance, in order to find a political solution following the elections in 2014, the US pressured Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah into a power-sharing 'National Unity

Government', which created the position of a 'Chief Executive Officer'—a position that did not exist in the constitution. Admittedly, the constitution was criticised by many for being too centralised to provide a suitable governance framework for a country as diverse and de-centralised as Afghanistan [see e.g., 4]. Nonetheless, ignoring it contributed to turning the state into an entity that could be negotiated over and had to be re-negotiated constantly without any institutional framework.

Ultimately, there was no unity in approach. Different international and national actors pursued different agendas, given they had different priorities and different objectives. Indeed at times, single actors pursued conflicting objectives. Prominently, the US participated in the international NATO mission in Afghanistan that aimed at providing security and training to the Afghan forces while also continuing a combat mission to conduct military operations against 'terrorists', especially the Taliban. In addition, the US funded human rights and development projects. However, there is an obvious tension between fighting 'a war on terror', the implementation of human rights and building a state that is considered to be legitimate by its citizens.

First, most visibly, while the international community advocated for human rights, especially women's rights, the US-led War on Terror caused a large number of civilian casualties. In 2019, the UN attributed 786 civilian casualties (559 killed, 227 injured) to the international military forces, 96% resulting from airstrikes [5]. In addition, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) were responsible for 1,682 civilian casualties (680 killed; 1,002 injured) in the same year [5]. This way, the War on Terror directly undermined the legitimacy of the state, which was often perceived as not doing much to protect its own citizens [see 2].

Second, the military intervention in 2001 relied heavily on the commanders of the so-called Northern Alliance, which did much of the fighting against the Taliban on the ground, supported by US airstrikes and special forces. These commanders, often also referred to as strongmen or even warlords, were key participants of the subsequent Bonn conference and ultimately dominated the new Afghan state as close allies of the West. The international community enjoyed working with them as they presented themselves as reliable partners in the ongoing war against the Taliban as well as in terms of other international priorities, such as the war against drug production. As Malejacq [6] describes, Afghanistan's warlords successfully re-invented themselves to maintain and even expand their power in the new system. However, they often had little respect for human rights and the new state's supposedly democratic institutions, prioritising their own wealth and influence [see also 7].

Third, the international military presence, with its high-volume contracts and large number of contractors, fuelled corruption. Warlords were not only empowered politically, but also financially. Many others became rich, including politicians and the owners of key businesses, such as those in the construction and transportation sector. In stark contrast to the idea of building a democratic state that rests on the rule of law, according to Suhrke [8] 'The wide-spread perception among many Afghans that the international presence itself entailed diverse forms of corruption contributed to an acceptance of illegality'. Even much of the money spent correctly ended up in bank accounts abroad, owned by the foreign and Afghan experts and professionals implementing one of the various international agendas [see e.g., 9, 10].

Fourth, the international intervention in Afghanistan lacked local-level ownership and accountability. As Suhrke [8] points out, 'the dependence on external financial, military, and technocratic resources produced tension between what we can call "ownership" and "control"'. The War on Terror reduced local ownership even further, as much of it was conducted by international, especially US, forces, using drones and special forces. Even while Afghan forces became increasingly involved over the years, the War on Terror continued to be controlled by the US. For example, units of the Afghan intelligence agencies, such as the KPF and the 0-units, did not report to the Afghan government, but directly to the US [11]. Similarly, accountability remained limited, further undermining the belief that the newly created order was a true advocate of human rights and the rule of law. The International Criminal Court [12] announced in September 2021 that it would focus its investigation on war crimes committed by the Taliban and the Islamic Sate while deciding to 'deprioritise other aspects of this investigation'—crimes potentially committed by the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces and by the international forces, including those of the US. Such messaging suggests, even if unintended, a double standard as to whose human rights violations the international community pays more attention to.

Finally, the War on Terror made it difficult to seek a peaceful solution with the Taliban. For instance, the Taliban offered to surrender in 2001 and again in 2003, but thinking at the time that a military victory was likely imminent, the US rejected both offers [see e.g., 13]. The focus on the War on Terror even undermined a potential peace process in 2020/21. Desperately trying to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible, following years of high costs and large numbers of US victims with little positive change in Afghanistan, the US signed an agreement with the Taliban in Doha in February 2020, promising 'complete withdrawal of all remaining forces from Afghanistan within the remaining nine and a half (9.5) months' while the Taliban promised that 'Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies', and to enter intra-Afghan negotiations with the incumbent government to achieve peace [14]. The agreement enabled the US to pretend to have been successful in achieving victory in the War on Terror while also having tried to achieve peace. However, the narrative ignored that the US War on Terror was long directed against the Taliban and that the Taliban had little incentive to strike a peace agreement with the Afghan government.

Inevitably then, the Taliban felt empowered to take the country by force. The Taliban entered Kabul in mid-August, essentially capturing the Afghan state, while the US desperately attempted to evacuate their diplomatic staff and, often unsuccessfully, Afghan allies and citizens. Despite this, on 31 August 2021 President Biden announced: 'Last night in Kabul, the United States ended 20 years of war in Afghanistan—the longest war in American history' [15]. The US claimed victory—despite having clearly failed on every front. The idea of supporting Afghan state-building was also abandoned. Following the take-over of Kabul and the capture of the Afghan state by the Taliban, the US froze the assets of Afghanistan's central bank and most development aid was stopped. As an economic and humanitarian crisis started to evolve in Afghanistan, the international community focused on humanitarian aid instead of development aid in order to bypass the state institutions it had been building for the previous 20 years and to avoid any impression of supporting the Taliban, ignoring that its revoked support for the Afghan state was a key driver of the crisis.

While certainly not being a sufficient condition, to have a chance at being more successful, the international community would have necessarily required a clearer approach and defined objectives, including criteria and indicators that set out when the objectives are met. In contrast to the international efforts, the agenda and narrative of the Taliban was clearer, centred around what they framed as resistance against the international 'occupiers' and the Afghan 'puppet government'. They successfully exploited the contradictions of the international efforts, for instance, by pointing out the corruption of the supposedly democratic regime and the casualties of a system advocating for human rights [see e.g., 16]. Instead, they established the narrative that an Afghanistan liberated from foreign occupation and following Islamic rules would prosper.

## GROWING DISTANCE AND DISREGARD

What further enabled the Taliban's victory in 2021 was the distance of the Afghan state and its international partners from the Afghan people. Given that it was externally led, the international intervention lacked local ownership and local accountability. But, even worse, the deteriorating security situation over the years resulted in a growing gap between a state and government trying to protect itself and a population largely left to fend for itself; while this growing gap also limited the ability of the state to understand and connect with its own population.

While much of the combat in the War on Terror originally took place in more remote areas, away from the glare of international attention, in the late 2000s insecurity in urban areas also started to grow. The Taliban conducted large-scale attacks in towns and cities, even in Kabul, often resulting in large numbers of civilian casualties. Contrary to their own propaganda, the Taliban were arguably often responsible for more civilian casualties than the international military and the ANDSF (e.g., 4,904 in 2019; 1,301 killed, 3,603 injured) [5]. The consequence of the Taliban's attacks was that both the Afghan political elites and its international partners felt forced to improve their own security, most often through adopting hard security measures. After every Taliban attack, successful or otherwise, there was further withdrawal into heavily protected compounds, and ever more travel via fleets of armoured vehicles on the streets of Kabul.

Such measures drove an ever-larger wedge between those trying to build a new state and its citizens [17, 18]. Arguably more importantly, it put ordinary people at higher risk. Being

close to the state in the form of a compound or military vehicle meant being closer to a potential target. Ordinary people were left navigating blast walls and faced greater threat from explosions and attacks than those behind the Hesco barriers and armoured windows. Furthermore, with the state focusing on protecting itself and so physically distancing itself from the people, it increasingly removed itself from the lives of most people. Research in rural areas of Afghanistan in 2014/15 [2, 19] found a commonly held view to be that the state was just a distant phenomenon, a project for largely corrupt elites and foreigners, something located somewhere in the district or provincial capital. Instead of engaging with the state, people relied on community authorities for issues such as conflict resolution as well as, increasingly over the years, the Taliban.

Naturally, segments of the Afghan state consequently lost touch with the population. This was particularly true for President Ghani. A former World Bank official, who wrote a book called 'Fixing Failed States' [20], he strongly believed in his intellectual capability. He surrounded himself with a small group of loyal supporters, while maintaining distant and frequently difficult relationships with most others. Known for his outbursts, Ghani likely faced little constructive criticism. Instead of placing trust in other government institutions and people, he centralised power at the presidential palace, where a small, disconnected bubble micromanaged even the operations of the security forces [21].

This approach resulted in a growing number of people feeling sidelined, excluded from decision-making, while it also led to a further deterioration of the security situation. For example, while Ghani's approach to weaken warlords was partly successful—for instance, he removed the influential Attar Noor from his position as Governor Balkh Province—Ghani was not able to fill the vacuums he created. This in turn created an opening for the Taliban to enter, influence and ultimately gain control of new territory. On 2nd August 2021, less than two weeks before the Taliban captured the Presidential Palace in Kabul, Ghani stated to Parliament that 'I want to tell you that a clear plan is prepared for reaching stability in six months and [that] the implementation of the plan has started' [22].

It was not only the government and its citizens that became distant. The government and the international community also grew apart, with Ghani an increasingly isolated figure and the relationship between Ghani and the US Special Representative Khalilzad particularly dysfunctional. It became especially so as the US began to extract itself from Afghanistan. The political tension, resulting from the widespread impression that the US was only trying to ease its withdrawal through a half-hearted peace process, did not help improve this relationship as Ghani who, fearing to be left without international support, tried to block and delay it.

Meanwhile, the international community also withdrew from Afghan society. In the aid sector, security managers increasingly limited the movements of international staff, making it difficult for them to gain an understanding of the dynamics in the country, while this withdrawal shifted the risk to national employees [17]. In 2019, 43 out of 58 aid workers who were victims of security incidents in Afghanistan were Afghan [23].

Much of the US War on Terror was also conducted 'remotely'—through drones, the targeted used of special forces and, in the later years, the use of remote-controlled Afghan forces like the KPF. The US military bases across the country attempted to reduce risk wherever possible and at whatever cost, often through outsourcing as much as they could. This further reinforced the already widespread corruption. For instance, Aikins [24] describes a bribery scheme that steered contracts for supplying fuel to Kandahar Airbase towards certain companies.

The distance between the government and the international community from the reality on the ground in Afghanistan also translated into a limited understanding of the Taliban. The state often ignored evidence of marginalisation and discontent at the local level, especially in rural areas. Many members of the international community, as well as the Afghan government, viewed the Taliban fighters, most of which had grown up in rural areas with little access to education, as 'stupid', underestimating their capabilities [see e.g. 25]. In addition, they frequently viewed the Taliban as a mere proxy of Pakistan, ignoring evidence of support for the group within Afghanistan's population. While Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI's support for the Taliban could certainly not be ignored, such a view overlooked the fact that the Taliban had a local support base that was expanding while the government was losing support. By

labelling the Taliban as 'terrorists', the Afghan government was prevented from engaging with the Taliban, even if just to understand them.

Conversely, the Taliban often benefited from closer relations with rural communities. While many communities were certainly not happy to be governed by the Taliban, local compromises could often be negotiated—for instance, on what kind of schools to keep open [26]. The Taliban successfully exploited the weaknesses of the state—its slowness and corruption—while co-opting its strengths, such as the funding it provided for schools and hospitals. In particular, the Taliban successfully drew on perceptions of marginalisation and discontent with the state to bolster their own legitimacy, offering an alternative form of governance as well as a platform to channel people's frustrations against the government. And while the national elites and its international partners had difficulties understanding the Taliban, the Taliban had a very good understanding of them. Even the money pumped into the country to fight the Taliban or to build a new state often also benefitted the Taliban. For instance, contractors supplying US bases with much demanded fuel frequently made payments to the Taliban to ensure secure passage for their trucks [see e.g., 24]. Similarly, development projects, especially in the construction sector, were commonly taxed by the Taliban [see e.g., 27, 28].

## INTERACTIONS

Both the competing agendas as well as the growing distance from the local population, despite being abstract, had a significant impact on people's daily lives in Afghanistan and the way they experienced the Afghan state, ultimately undermining its legitimacy. For Afghans there was little accountability on the macro-level, with no oversight over how the US was conducting its war on Afghan soil and a wide-spread perception that elections were rigged. Hence, people were especially concerned about day-to-day interactions with authorities [2]. However, the state also failed its citizens on this level. For many civilians, especially in rural areas, the few interactions people did have with the state were perceived as corrupt, extractive and, in some cases, even coercive. 'My main motivation [to join the Taliban] was the bad behaviour of governmental officials and their manner of dealing with the local people', was how a former Taliban fighter justified his decision in an interview in October 2014 [2].

Most directly, the War on Terror resulted in a large number of civilian casualties. Often the victims and their families received little or no attention at all, let alone compensation or accountability. But as well as this devastating harm, more banal harms were done, with everyday interactions with the state often being deeply unpleasant experiences for Afghans [2]. Shaped by the war, the Afghan security sector was designed in a way to fight enemies and protect the newly created state—not its citizens [29]. For example, the Afghan police was trained primarily in handling weapons, with little capacity to fulfil actual policing responsibilities such as tackling crime [29]. Little effort was put into teaching basic policing skills, including literacy, protecting women's rights and the nature and content of the Afghan Constitution [30]. A senior police officer concluded in an interview: 'In the past... the training was about the code of conduct, culture, Islam and so on. But it was not about fighting at all. Today the officers receive a brief training. Then they have to fight... Today it is a two-week training. Then the officers are called "experts of the battlefield". I did a much longer training and have 35 years of experience and still don't call myself "expert of the battlefield"' [Interview July 2015; see 2]. This focus however, reflected the deteriorating security situation, with police also increasingly needed on the battlefield and the frontlines, manning checkpoints and remote outposts. Lacking trained police officers, crime in places like Kabul spiked in 2019/20.

Not only were the police unable to provide much support for the civilian population, but they also relied on payments from the people, with officers routinely demanding 'fees' at checkpoints [see e.g., 31]. Due to systemic corruption, police officers often had to pay for their position, especially the most potentially lucrative ones. As such, the prevailing experience for ordinary people with the police was one of corruption. A university student explained: 'The police take money from the people. For example, it is quite common for them to do so at wedding receptions. A while ago, one could hear the [celebratory] gun fire of a wedding reception. The police rushed there, thinking it was a wedding party. But, when they got there they realised that a murder had taken place. So, they quickly left again, not taking any action' [Interview November 2014; see 2].

Realising that top-down initiatives were failing the international community tried to take a more localised approach. However, this too failed to bridge the gap between the state and its citizens. In the development sector, they attempted to strengthen state-society relations through programmes such as the National Solidarity Programme and the Citizens' Charter. While achieving basic development outcomes, these failed in their intended effects of linking state and society [32]. In the security sector, rather than considering how best to protect civilians, a focus on winning the war still prevailed. The US introduced the 'Afghan Local Police' (ALP) in 2010 that, contrary to its name, was not responsible for law enforcement, but for conducting counter-insurgency operations [33]. As the National Security and Defence Forces were unable to provide security on local level in the countryside, the ALP was created to help villages to protect themselves against insurgents. The idea was to work 'bottom up', empowering 'local Afghans in rural areas to defend their communities against threats from insurgents and other illegally-armed groups' [34]. In practice, however, the local character of the ALP inevitably became entwined local power dynamics, with diverse sets of results. While being a first line of defence in some places, in others the ALP became extractive and exploitative, turning against civilians [35, 36].

Much like in the security sector, the experience of the justice sector for many was one of exploitation. The systemic corruption 'trickled down' to the local level. The land right issues common in Afghan often took years to solve, inevitably being reduced down to the party that paid more or had more influence winning [37, 2]. Abdul Wahab, a teacher from Herat City complained: 'If I take a case to the government, it doesn't matter if I am guilty. One always has to pay' [Interview, October 2014]. People had similar experiences with wider bureaucracy, for instance, when applying for documents such as ID card or a passport.

The Taliban successfully exploited these weaknesses. Beyond their propaganda of fighting a corrupt regime, they also established their own governance structures. Most importantly, the Taliban introduced their own court system. The Taliban's court system in many ways matched the system of the government, with primary courts on the district level, appeals court on the provincial level and a supreme court on the national level. These courts were often more accessible for civilians from rural areas and were widely perceived as less corrupt [37–39]. In addition, the Taliban controlled the provision of the government-funded education and health sectors in some areas [40, 41]. Ultimately, in parts of the country, the Taliban provided more stability for people living under their control than the government. But while this helped the Taliban to win the war, having gained full control and being responsible for the entire country they have to offer much more to maintain and further expand their legitimacy.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Taliban's victory in 2021 was ultimately enabled by the failure of the Afghan state and its international partners to establish and maintain legitimate authority. This was especially the case in rural areas, away from the influence of the state, where people felt marginalised and forgotten, and often only experienced the state through interactions that were perceived as being corrupt. Drawing on these failures, the Taliban successfully portrayed themselves as a lesser evil in the parts of the country under their control, aiming to be less corrupt and less extractive. They had long claimed that while the international community had the watches, they had time. And they certainly managed to outwait the US.

However, taking control of the country was the easier part. Now, the Taliban are not the underdog but they are responsible for governing the entire country, including many areas in which people have experienced their attacks and are terrified of their conservative ideology and practices. Maintaining control is the real challenge that lies ahead. They have to build both external and internal legitimacy. Internally, they must live up to people's expectations of being treated with dignity, ensuring that interactions with them are perceived as respectful and fair [see 2]. In order to do so, they need to do what the international community failed to do: use the experience of ordinary people as a starting point for all policies to ensure that everyone feels respected, regardless of geography, gender, ethnicity, class or beliefs, including political opinions. However, the reports of coercion that followed their victory, including the disregard of promised amnesties, the crackdown on free speech and the media as well as the severe limitation of movement and access to education for women, suggest that the Taliban are unwilling and unable to achieve this. Women, minorities and their critics are at particular risk of not being treated with dignity by the Taliban.

Meanwhile, the Taliban face a challenge of external legitimacy. With many countries hesitant to recognise a Taliban government, with the country's Central Bank's reserves frozen, and with several prominent members of the movement remaining on the UN sanctions list, the Taliban have been struggling to establish themselves as the new legitimate representation of Afghanistan internationally. Making it even more challenging, they have been unable to draw on the extensive international support that used to cover most of the expenses of the government—as well as, ironically, those of the Taliban, which generated its revenue as an insurgency through taxes and levies, benefitting at least indirectly from international funding. This has placed the Taliban in a considerably more difficult position than the Afghan government of 2001.

Crucially, this lack of external legitimacy has the potential to undermine the movement internally. If it does not have sufficient resources to pay for its fighters and government employees, a Taliban-controlled state is likely to turn even more coercive and extractive vis-à-vis its population. Meanwhile, lacking resources also increases the risk of fragmentation, with commanders turning against the Taliban, in some cases perhaps supporting the armed resistance or even joining the still active presence of the Islamic State.

While the battle over gaining and maintain authority in Afghanistan lasts, also the suffering for ordinary people continues. With little international support, it does so even more so than before.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATION

**Florian Weigand** *orcid.org/0000-0003-2629-0934*
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

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