

Introduction: Afghan Women's Resistance-- Forty Years of Struggle Against Gender Apartheid

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The defeat of the U.S. client regime in Afghanistan and the seizure of power by the Taliban in August 2021 marked a real turning point. These events represented another major setback for the United States in the wake of a failed war in Iraq. Journalists rushed to compare the debacle in Kabul in 2021 to Saigon in 1975, as Afghans fearful of Taliban rule scrambled to get onto US planes. Many were left behind as the United States rushed to get its own forces and those of its allies out.

The August 2021 regime collapse in Afghanistan, although sudden in its final manifestation, was a long time coming. The United States realized it had been defeated at least by 2020, as the Trump administration agreed to a total US withdrawal in direct negotiations with the Taliban. The Biden administration continued this policy, which had two basic aspects: the United States would withdraw by the end of August 2021, and the Taliban would not attack US forces during the period of withdrawal. Both sides kept to the bargain; the Afghan people were not consulted at all, nor was US-backed government of Ashraf Ghani, who was not even included in the negotiations.

There was an important difference from the situation in Saigon in 1975, however. The forces that defeated the United States in Vietnam included female combatants and officers. Moreover, the regime they installed to replace the US client state espoused a modernist if authoritarian ideology

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that extolled gender equality, land reform, and other forms of social and economic transformation.

In contrast, the return to power of the Taliban was instead a setback for women's rights of epochal proportions, and for other social and political rights as well. They set about establishing an ultra-conservative fundamentalist regime of a type not seen since the Islamic State was driven out of Raqqa, Syria, in 2017. The Taliban have again established a theocracy, which openly supports long-standing hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, religion, and class, albeit with a somewhat modern form of organization, including a surveillance apparatus and modern weapons. With its denial of secondary education to girls, the new Taliban regime's level of gender apartheid far exceeds those of Saudi Arabia and Iran. At this writing, not a single country, not even Saudi Arabia, has formally recognized the Taliban government.

The Taliban regime also showed every sign of excluding groups outside its Pashtun-speaking base centered in southern and eastern Afghanistan. Pashtuns constitute a plurality, but not a majority, of the total population. In negotiations with the United States and statements to global audiences before their seizure of power, the Taliban indicated that they would be more inclusive than during their first period of rule, 1996–2001. But little of such openness or inclusivity could be found in practice after their seizure of power. When the interim government was announced a few weeks after the US departure, it was composed pretty much of old-time, male Pashtun hardliners, with nary a Tajik (a Persianate ethnic group comprising about a quarter of the population), nor a Hazara (a Shia minority thought to comprise about a tenth of the population), and certainly no woman. The only exception to this monolithic cabinet were two (male) ministers drawn from the Uzbek minority (a Turkic-speaking group constituting about a tenth of the population).

Despite its 300,000 troops, at least on paper, the US-backed Ghani regime collapsed rapidly in the face of only about 50,000 Taliban fighters once the United States came close to completing its withdrawal. This ignominious collapse occurred for a number of reasons, among them endemic corruption that hollowed out these armed forces, as also happened with many of the Western-funded development projects. Prominent examples were schools never built or 'ghost battalions' of the armed forces whose funding went into the pockets of corrupt officials or officers.

In addition, most of the factions with real power in the US-backed regime, including those in the army as well as warlords, originated from the militias that fought against the Russian occupation in the 1980s. They were at best Islamists, and somewhat less extremist than the Taliban itself. In 2001, the United States labeled these forces, often based upon non-Pashtun ethnicities, as more moderate than the Taliban. Here, the fact that they were not linked to the Al Qaeda forces that had staged the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States was the key, rather than their views about governing Afghan society. The enduring Islamist coloration of these groups meant that military commanders and other officials ostensibly loyal to the regime could be induced to surrender or even join the Taliban as its strength grew.

At a broader level, the massive poverty endemic to the rural areas, inhabited by over 70% of the population, not only did not diminish but actually increased under the US-installed regime, especially after the Taliban were able to re-emerge and rekindle a civil war. The incessant bombings and military raids in rural areas by US forces ostensibly targeting Taliban combatants often killed or injured civilians, as recounted by journalist Anand Gopal (2021) in heartrending detail, albeit in a manner surprisingly uncritical of the Taliban. In August 2021, the global media publicized one prominent example of this kind of thing, for once visible because it occurred in the heart of Kabul in broad daylight at a time when

the media had gathered to witness the final US withdrawal: An August 29 US drone attack on a supposed ISIS target instead killed ten civilians, among them seven children.

These kinds of attacks, as well as Taliban guerrilla warfare and terrorist attacks, persisted for years and created an atmosphere of despair and hopelessness among much of the population (probably the vast majority), in which economic privation played no small part. As Gallup reported several years ago on the basis of a poll that sampled the entire population, 'Afghans' ratings of their own lives are lower than any other population's worldwide,' adding, 'Almost no Afghans see their economic situation improving anytime soon' (Crabtree 2018).

In power again since August 2021, the Taliban face a daunting situation. There is little evidence that they enjoy significant popular support. Instead, they seem merely to have filled a void as the United States left, and the regime it backed collapsed. No large crowds have come out onto the streets to support the Taliban takeover. A movement with a mainly rural social base, and even there among the most conservative elements, the Taliban now face a much more urbanized society than in the 1990s. For example, Kabul's population, which stood at six million in 2022, was only 300,000 when the Taliban first came to power in 1996, after years of fighting that had left the city in ruins. They also face a much more educated populace, with thousands of younger people, including women, having received a university education. At a national level, half of the population was born after the first Taliban regime fell in 2001. At best, therefore, the Taliban are likely to face a passive and resigned population. But there is also likely to be large-scale passive resistance, as well as more active, open resistance.

Since the country fell again to the Taliban in 2021, women have shown the most persistent resistance to the new regime, especially younger women

and their male supporters. During the Taliban's first weeks back in power, women staged dozens of protest demonstrations around the country against the new regime. Some examples from these early days of Taliban rule will serve as kind of a snapshot (see also the Chronology in this issue).

On August 19, 2021, some 200 young women and men gathered in the streets of Kabul to protest Taliban policies while waving the national flag that the Taliban has replaced with one evoking their Islamic Emirate. Taliban soldiers soon arrived, insulted the women as 'indecent' and proceeded to beat up the men, firing on and wounding some of them.

In smaller cities lacking a global media presence, the Taliban tightened the screws more than in Kabul. In Herat, which had been one of the country's most liberal and cultured cities, very few women appeared on the streets without their faces covered immediately after the Taliban takeover. Female students were being prevented from going to the university. Most ominously, black marks were being placed upon homes occupied by members of the Hazara minority or by single women (Follorou and Golshiri 2021). But by September 2, open resistance broke out in Herat as well, as several dozen women marched through the streets after the Taliban announced that their new government would not include any women. They demanded that this policy be reversed, focusing their overall slogans on the right to 'education, work, and security' (Hassan 2021).

On September 8, several small rallies in Kabul protested the interim government's lack of inclusivity, especially its exclusion of women. In one of these actions, demonstrators began their action in the Hazara community, chanting, 'No women, no Hazara. It's completely wrong.' They marched across the city, arguing their way past armed Taliban checkpoints. But as they reached the center of the city, Taliban forces set upon the women and came down even more harshly on two male journalists covering the event. These Afghan men were beaten mercilessly,

and later showed their scars to the media. On the same day, the Taliban announced they were re-establishing their religious police apparatus, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice (Bulos and Yam 2021).

The 2021 women's struggle emanated from a sense of anger, despair, and dread. Roya Mandegar, a social worker living alone as a single woman in Kabul, stated in an incredibly brave interview, in which she allowed herself to be quoted by name,

I am an atheist and a feminist. I never stayed at home on March 8 [International Women's Day]. We fought for twenty years so that girls could wear colorful clothing in Kabul. Today the city has become quiet and empty. I am walled into my apartments, which I change regularly. My heart is burning with distress. All the work of these twenty years was reduced to naught in the space of one night.
(Golshiri 2021)

Over the next two years, the new regime gradually tightened its grip. The Ministry of Women's Affairs became the headquarters of the morality police. Women were excluded more and more from public spaces and from employment. By June 2022, Mullah Abdul Wahid explained to a journalist, 'The goal is to separate women and men in public spaces. In the parks, for example, there is one day for men, one for women, and another for families.' The mullah added that of course, Friday, the weekly holiday, would be reserved for men because fewer and fewer women were employed outside the home anyway. He also spoke of separate city buses for men and women (Follorou 2022a). By November 2022, however, women were excluded from public parks altogether, and also from the country's iconic public gardens, its sports facilities, and even the public baths—this in a society where modern plumbing is often lacking (Follorou

2022b). It is hard to overestimate how much this will shatter the lives of children as well as women.

Women have also been squeezed out of paid employment. Most female government workers have been dismissed. While more women continue to work in the private sector, their numbers are decreasing rapidly there as well (Amnesty International 2022). This has created even worse economic deprivation for women than men, amid the terrible economic collapse that followed the fall of the Ghani regime, the drying up of Western aid, and the refusal by the United States and other powers to turn over to the Taliban regime the country's national currency reserves until it reversed its draconian policies, especially with regard to women. Moreover, even amid severe food shortages, the Taliban regime continues to spend a huge percentage of its resources on social control in the form of morality police and armed forces operating in urban areas on a substantial scale.

A wrenching scene took place in March 2022, when it was announced that girls would again be allowed to return to secondary school. Thousands of girls arrived at school, dressed in their uniforms and full of hope, only to be turned away as it was announced that the decision to reopen the schools had been rescinded. As of this writing, the policy closing secondary schools for girls remains unchanged, two years after the Taliban came to power. Girls are thus limited to an elementary school education, and even here the government has limited the number of years girls can attend school.

On August 13, 2022, near the first anniversary of the Taliban seizure of power, women came out onto the streets of Kabul, about forty strong, to demonstrate for their rights. This small demonstration was the first of its kind in several months. Their main banner read, 'August 15 Is a Dark Day.' Gathering in front of the Ministry of Education, they were dispersed after just a few minutes by armed Taliban, who fired their rifles into the air. The Taliban militia then chased the women into local shops, where they

seemed to receive some support from men. The militia beat those they could catch with rifle butts, confiscated their mobile phones for later prosecution and investigation of their networks. The most prominent chant, however, was 'Bread, Work, and Freedom' (AFP 2022). Notably, this slogan recalled the Arab Spring of 2011 in how it tied economic demands to political and social ones.

The Taliban struck a further blow against women's right to any public space in July 2023, when they closed all beauty shops for women. Kabul alone had 10,000 of these shops, and their sudden demise also represented a huge economic blow to the tens of thousands of women who earned their livelihoods in this occupation across the country (Follorou and Golshiri 2023). This led to a demonstration by some fifty women in Kabul on July 19, who were dispersed with water cannons. 'Don't take my bread and water,' read one sign (AFP 2023).

During the initial two years of the new Taliban regime, Afghan women have shown much greater persistence and resilience than men in the face of incredible obstacles that make any kind of political activity extremely difficult. There have also been signs of popular support for the female activists from the broader population, at least in urban areas. While the women's rights demonstrations have been small, they are very significant nonetheless, especially when one contrasts their enduring impact with the failure of attempts to resurrect the old Northern Alliance of anti-Taliban warlords, such as the one in 2021 in the Panjshir Valley. We can also expect that Afghan women will continue to struggle in the shadows, working as educators, beauticians, and in other fields, just as they did during the long, harsh years of the first Taliban regime. This time, their support networks are sure to be larger and stronger.

The Taliban regime has been consolidating itself along lines broadly similar to those of 1996–2001. Even its promises to sever connections with Al

Qaeda turned out to be fictional when Ayman al-Zawahiri was assassinated by the United States in the heart of Kabul, in a residence linked to the Haqqani network, a family-based faction of the Taliban leadership with particularly close ties to Al Qaeda and to Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI. At the same time, younger members of the Haqqani family seem to be among those factions that support reopening secondary schools to girls. Whether any of these divisions can moderate the regime or open up fissures that allow feminists and other oppositional forces to gain headway remains to be seen. What does seem clear is that resistance will continue, particularly on the part of urban women.

In this special issue, Afghan and Iranian writers have attempted to provide us with the history of women's resistance to gender apartheid in the last four decades both inside Afghanistan and in the Iranian diaspora. Our first feature article is by Karima Bennoune on the Taliban's imposition of a regime of gender apartheid in Afghanistan in violation of international law. Bennoune argues that gender apartheid poses specific human rights problems requiring particular, heightened responses and necessitates different counter-strategies. Her article proposes a conceptual architecture for analyzing and responding to this aspect of the current Afghan crisis and argues that the robust international legal framework that helped end racial apartheid should be urgently adapted to address gender apartheid. In her *Voices of Dissent* piece, Kobra Sultani begins with the current situation of women in Afghanistan and their resistance to the complete takeover of power by the Taliban in August 2021. Sultani tells us about the history of the Afghan women's movement since the early 1920s and shows how various Afghan governments, occupation by imperialist powers, and conflicts between fundamentalist forces, together with deep sexism and prejudices among Afghan progressives made it impossible to develop a coherent and persistent women's movement.

Mahnaz Afkhami interviews two former government officials from Afghanistan. In October 2021, Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) convened a conversation with Sima Samar, former minister for women's affairs in Afghanistan, and Habiba Sarabi, former governor of Bamyan Province. The panel was moderated by Thoraya Obaid, former UNFPA executive director, and Mahnaz Afkhami, WLP founder and president. Audience members came from around the world, including directors of WLP's partner organizations in Asia, Central Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. A question and answer session followed the conversation, which was moderated by WLP Executive Director Allison Horowski. Here we publish an abbreviated version of the interviews.

Delaram Hosseinioun explores the art work of Shamissa Hassani (b.1988), the first female graffiti artist of Afghanistan, and Keyvan Shovir (b. 1985), the first post-revolutionary graffiti artist of Iran, using the works of Judith Butler and Hubert Hermans. She argues that Hassani and Shovir have used their art as a way to be heard and to encourage self-reflection in the restricted discourses of their home countries. She further explores these artworks as a form of revelation of the suppressed self and concludes that art manifests the possibility of self-revelation and the reclaiming of one's voice beyond the restricted social discourses of one's native homeland or diaspora. Marjan Zima Jalali looks at how Afghan women who migrated to Iran gained greater self-awareness and experienced many changes in their traditional gender roles. Jalali conducted a qualitative study through in-depth interviews with Afghan working women in Tehran. The women had a median age of thirty-nine (between twenty-three to fifty-five) and had been living in Iran for one to twenty-five years. Most of the responders had migrated to Iran after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 1995. A few were more recent migrants who arrived after the Taliban took over in August 2021. The article addresses the ways in which Afghan women have attained self-awareness and the multiplicity of factors that have facilitated or impeded this process. Jalali shows that these women have gone far

beyond the immediate restrictions and impediments that were imposed by their traditional families, as well as the strict gender division of labor in their communities. In their new social environment of Iran, they often lived in much smaller families and had to take on new responsibilities. These factors helped them to attain greater self-awareness and to rediscover their capabilities, helping them to achieve a new and better social status at home, one that helped them individually and their family members as well.

Frieda Afary examines Afghan women's resistance to the Taliban after their return to power in August 2021. She also critically evaluates the different attitudes expressed by global feminists toward the plight of the Afghan people and the need for solidarity with Afghan women. Soraya Baha provides a short story, excerpted from her memoir, *Raha Dar Bad* (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp, 2012). Baha was the sister-in-law of Mohammad Najibullah (1947–1996) who served as president of Afghanistan from 1986 to 1992. Najibullah became head of the secret police when the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan in December 1979. He was infamous for his brutality and ruthlessness. When Soviet forces withdrew in 1989, Najibullah became president of the country. His widely despised government was considered a puppet regime of the Soviets. Baha was against Soviet occupation, as well as the dictatorship of Najibullah. She fled with her husband and their two children and joined the war front in northern Afghanistan (Panjshir), where the famous partisan commander Ahmad-Shah Masoud had stationed his mujahedin forces against Russian occupation. Masoud led the largest war front in the mountains and valleys of Panjshir. Soraya Baha stayed at a small cabin with her two children. She later wrote her memoir drawing on this experience.

Homeira Qaderi's short story is about a woman named Yaqoot. She narrator recalls her youth when she gave up her love for Rahim, a young mujahid, because her father opposed the marriage and demanded that

she marry the son of a communist friend of his. During the civil war with the Taliban forces in the 1990s, she lost her husband. When we meet Yaqoot, she has a son who is engaged to be married. On a hot summer day, Yaqoot accidentally runs into Rahim, who has survived the war years. Rahim, too, has also lost his wife. They visit a shrine together, and their love is rekindled.

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