

## THE TALIBAN REGIME IN AFGHANISTAN

Joseph Smiles<sup>1</sup>

### 1. INTRODUCTION

More than three years ago, the brutal and tragic events of 11 September 2001 have brought the Taliban to the centre stage of world politics and the global political environment. The Taliban leaders, who ruled Afghanistan by faith and fear, gave shelter to the Al'Qaeda extremist group of Osama Bin Laden. Since the Taliban's dramatic and sudden appearance at the end of 1994, they have been regarded as the most extreme Islamist movement in the world (Rashid 2001a:1). Prior to this, little was known about the rise to power of the Taliban because of the deep secrecy that surrounds the movement, their political structures, their leadership and the decision-making process within the movement (Rashid 2001b:5).

Since the end of the Cold War no other political movement in the Islamic world has attracted as much attention as the Taliban in Afghanistan (Rashid 2001a:5). The political activities of the Taliban regime were feared in most parts of Afghanistan before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. Marsden (2002:153) argues that the Taliban movement represents an important phenomenon in recent international relations and with implications that go much wider than Afghanistan. In fact, through its extreme radicalism, it has taken on a symbolic role in confronting the dominant position of the United States of America (USA) by its assertion of an alternative value system to be imposed on the entire country at the expense of any material benefits.

The basic aim of the article is to establish an objective understanding of the political history and cultural and religious influences of the Taliban regime since it came into existence. In order to do this, the purpose of the study is also to investigate and explore the major problems the Taliban movement has created in Afghanistan. According to Babbie (1992:90) exploratory studies are most typically done to satisfy the researcher's curiosity and desire for a better understanding. In this case the formation and the political development of the Taliban will come under the spotlight.

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, University of the Free State.

The theoretical basis of the analysis is that the Taliban movement shows a strong totalitarian tendency in which the Islam religion is ideologised and used to support terrorism and also to control every sector of the Afghan society. Besides that, the Taliban's relationship with the USA and the region in Central Asia will also be investigated and explained. The objective here is to determine how the Taliban regime has attempted to position itself in the global political context.

## **2. A CONCEPTUAL ORIENTATION**

Before the Taliban's position or influence in the global context can be analysed, it is essential to define the following theoretical concepts for clarification:

### **2.1 Totalitarianism**

According to Heywood (1997:27) totalitarianism is an all-encompassing system of political rule that is typically established by pervasive ideological manipulation and open terror and brutality. Totalitarianism seeks "total power" through the politicization of every aspect of social and personal existence. This description characterizes the Taliban perfectly because its leaders abolished civil society and the private life of the individual in Afghanistan. Totalitarianism is thus an all-encompassing process of political rule in which the state, in this case the Taliban, penetrates and controls all social institutions (Heywood 2003:34)

### **2.2 Terrorism**

Heywood (2003:340) states that terrorism is the use of violence to induce a climate of fear or terror in order to further political ends. Umnov (2003:85) argues that the terrorists established themselves in Afghanistan as early as the period of Soviet-American confrontation.

### **2.3 Islamic Fundamentalism**

Throughout the history of Islam there has been a conflict between religion and politics. Fundamentalists believe in strict adherence to the principles and life-style of the Prophet. Fundamentalism in Islam means an intense and militant faith in Islamic beliefs as the overriding principles of social life and politics, as well as of personality morality. Islamic fundamentalists wish to establish the primacy of religion over politics. In practice this means the founding of an 'Islamic state', a theocracy ruled by spiritual rather than temporal authority (Heywood 2003:305)

## 2.4 Authoritarianism

Heywood (2003:328) is of the opinion that authoritarianism is a belief that strong central authority, imposed from above, is either desirable or necessary, and therefore demands unquestioning obedience.

## 2.5 Regime

According to Heywood (1997:412) regime means a system of rule, a political system. Marsden (2002:1) points out that the Taliban regime has been responsible for the following aspects in their dictatorial rule in Afghanistan:

- ❖ Abuses of human rights;
- ❖ the denial of female access to education and employment;
- ❖ their imposition of strict dress codes; and
- ❖ their dramatic military conquests which brought all negative stereotypes about Islam to the surface.

## 3. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TALIBAN

### 3.1 The religious movement

Afghanistan's strategic position on the major Asian trade routes has ensured a safe haven for the Taliban movement. It appears that this so-called religious movement was born in mid-1994 when the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, put down his Koran<sup>2</sup> to act against the warlords in Afghanistan. According to McGeary (2001:5) Omar once said that he discovered his destiny in a dream because "God was calling him to save his country from the warlords". It all started when Omar gathered together 30 like-minded men to avenge the abduction and rape of two young women. The guilty warlord was captured and killed and the movement was born (McGeary 2001:41). Marsden (2002:42) states that the Taliban's members are said to have felt outrage at the behaviour of the mujahidin (or mujaheddin)<sup>3</sup> leaders fighting for power in the city and to have decided to take action to end what they saw as corrupt practices, drawing on Islam as a justification for their intervention. Marsden (2002:57-8) points out that "they have emerged on the scene as holy warriors, overwhelming much of the country through the onward march of young men willing to martyr themselves for the cause".

<sup>2</sup> **Koran:** The holy bible of the Muslims. Can also be spelled **Qur'an**.

<sup>3</sup> **Mujahidin or mujaheddin:** Fighters in a holy war or holy warriors fighting a jihad or holy war (Marsden 2002:27 and Rashid 2001:245). Although the spelling differs, the meaning remains the same.

The little group, calling itself Taliban which literally means 'students of Islam' set out to bring vigilante justice to the city. Its vow was to bring peace, law and order and 'pure' Islam to Afghanistan. Led by Omar's extreme interpretations, the Taliban subscribed to a unique extremist model, based on harsh interpretation of the Muslim law and a profound belief in never-ending jihad.<sup>4</sup> The Taliban laced its faith with the hard customs of the Pashtun tradition according to which faithlessness must be punished with unpredicted severity in applying sharia<sup>5</sup> commands for amputations, stoning and execution (McGeary 2001:41-3).

The ideological underpinning of the movement has been a further cause for debate. There appears to be little doubt that the Islamic madrassa or madrasahs<sup>6</sup> in the refugee camps, where Islam is taught on the basis of recitation of the Qur'an, have proved to be fertile ground for recruits (Marsden 2002:42).

It seems thus that the Taliban began as a small spontaneous group in Kandahar in early 1994. How they moved from a small group to a major force is not clear. However, the Taliban benefited considerably from the willingness of young people, both from the rural areas and from refugee camps on the Pakistan border, to join their ranks as they advanced through southern Afghanistan (Marsden 2002:42). The Taliban believes that their power really lies with God and the Afghan people.

Afghanistan is one of the most profoundly fundamentalist Muslim countries in the world. The Taliban's faithful leaders regard all Shi'ites<sup>7</sup> as heretics who face possible persecution for their minority beliefs. Tehran officials from Iran charged that the Taliban gave Islam a bad name (Macleod 1998:40). According to Umnov (2003:85-7) another important aspect is ideological. Naturally, both terrorists and the Taliban appeal to Islam. After all, in Afghanistan it is not only a religion but also a way of life. Islam always moved to the fore in times of crisis in Afghanistan, but within Islam there are many trends; different forces have added and are adding to their arsenals the interpretations of Islam that best serve their interests. The political core of terrorists adopted Wahhabism, which had originated in Arabia, as their ideological banner. By regarding the popular cult of saints as idolatry, Wahhabism created an ideal basis for an uncompromising struggle for revolution in local relations with the authorities and against all 'infidels' (including Muslims who distort Islam).

---

<sup>4</sup> **Jihad:** An effort or struggle to become a good Muslim. Also holy war to defend or spread Islam (Rashid 2001:245).

<sup>5</sup> **Shar'a or sharia** means Islamic law. The canon of Islamic law (Rashid 2001b:246).

<sup>6</sup> **Madrassa or madrasahs:** Islamic schools which teach religious subjects (Rashid 2001b:245).

<sup>7</sup> **Shi'ites:** A militant fundamentalist Muslim group in Iran.

The Taliban leaders found an ideological reference point in *deobandism*, which originated long ago in British India. Deobandists treated the cult of saints with respect, defended the traditional order, and placed local limits in its resistance to modern civilization.

The de facto disintegration of Afghanistan called for deobandism, the opposite of Wahhabism. This was added to the arsenal of the Taliban Islamic movement, which relied primarily on the Pashtuns. Having become firmly established in the country, the Taliban tried to impose rigid centralization and to win world recognition. The Wahhabis, who acted as an independent power center, hindered all this and after the failure of the Communist regime began to regard the United States as their main enemy and to employ terror as their main weapon.

In summary, it is clear that for some Afghans the Taliban created hopes that a movement led by simple Islamic students with an agenda of bringing peace to the country might succeed in finally disposing of the warlord factions which had devastated people's lives since the communist regime in Kabul had been overthrown in April 1993. Others feared that the Taliban movement would once more quickly degenerate into a warlord faction, determined to thrust despotic rule upon the hapless Afghan people (Rashid 2001b:5).

### 3.2 The political movement

The Taliban regime, as a political movement, started in 1994, two years after the mujahedin fighters had overthrown the Soviet regime in Kabul. At the same time rival warlords vied for power and criminals plagued the countryside. With thirty students and sixteen guns, Omar soon became an Afghan Robin Hood. His group attracted more recruits, mainly from the ranks of religious students, and eventually he received military support from neighbouring Pakistan. The mullahs<sup>8</sup> imposed their ultra-rigid beliefs on the areas they controlled, for example, forbidding women to go to school, requiring men to grow beards and outlawing neckties (Bartholet 2001:18-20). Thomas and Liu (2001:18-9) report: "(T)he Taliban may be wretched rulers, but they are fight-to-the-death fanatics". It has become a cliché that beating the Taliban would be easier with bribes than bullets.

According to some political analysts there were extremists and moderates within the Taliban. The moderates were those willing to bring about change in the political situation. The extremists repressed and threatened their own people. The former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, said this about the Taliban: "Initially

---

<sup>8</sup> **Mullahs:** Traditional leaders at prayer at local mosques.

people thought the Taliban was a stabilizing force. Pakistan gave the Taliban political and diplomatic support. But they are ruling by force, they subjugate women and mistreat everyone from missionaries to diplomats. Ordinary people are fed up with the militant clerics" (Foote 2001:48).

Marsden (2002:44-55) points out that the Taliban did not have enough experience in running government administration, nor did they see this as a priority when they took power. They demonstrated enormous single-mindedness in focusing on the military campaign, on the eradication of corruption and on the achievement of law and order. The maintenance and strengthening of administrative structures were very much secondary concerns. It shows that there was a lack of proper political governance. It must be noted that the Taliban's religious orientations have played an increasing role in enforcing their policies on the urban population.

The Taliban emerged in Afghanistan's political scene with the avowed objective of ending the civil war and bringing peace to the country. Ironically during their years of de facto rule, the Taliban tried to gain international legitimacy. However, such recognition was not granted to them. Civil wars are costly because they damage the entire infrastructure of countries. The Afghan case was no exception. The Afghan war was bloody and destructive. The Afghans paid a heavy price in the civil wars which caused destruction, death, disabled bodies, refugees and disunity. Prior to 1996, the Taliban expressed no desire to rule Afghanistan. Ever since then, they have committed themselves to conquering the entire country. The problems with the Taliban began when they started acting as the ruling élite. Eventually, their growing international isolation plus their ineffective administration alienated large numbers of Afghans. During the civil war they became more rigid. It was obvious that the Taliban transformed themselves from a movement into a ruling government. Their main priorities were to bring peace, at the same time staying in power to implement their mission of an Islamic state (Ghufraan 2001:462-70).

In a letter an Afghan-American, Tamin Ansary, says: "The Taliban is a cult of ignorant psychotics that took Afghanistan in 1992. Bin Laden is a political criminal with a plan. When you think Taliban think Nazis. When you think Bin Laden, think Hitler. The Taliban and Bin Laden are not Afghanistan (Ansary 2001:4). This statement reflects the general sentiment about the Taliban's political leadership. Lindgren (2002:3) argues that the Taliban imposed its values on the people of Afghanistan, which did not reflect the true public opinion, or the true culture of the Afghans. In fact, it only served as a device for an authoritarian regime to affirm its power by legitimizing persecution. On the other hand, the Taliban inherited a country full of training camps for Islamic activists and radicals from all around Asia. While they themselves had little external Islamic designs, they permitted the

presence of these fighters, large numbers of whom had helped to liberate Afghanistan from the Soviets (Fuller 2001:55-7). Nevertheless, the Taliban liked to portray itself as just, resolute and pure. But its enemies see it as corrupt and abusive (Quinn-Judge 2001:42).

In 1996 the Taliban seized the capital, Kabul, but Mullah Omar, their supreme leader, operated in Kandahar with a ten-man shura.<sup>9</sup> Kandahar is also the country's religious centre. The long years of United States (US) and Western neglect allowed the Taliban to turn Afghanistan into a sanctuary for extremist groups from more than two dozens countries (Rashid 2001:viii). It hosts Islamic extremist groups from Russia, Pakistan, China, Burma, Iran, Central Asia and several countries of the Far East. These groups fight for the Taliban, while quietly carrying out their political agendas at home. Once in power, the Taliban instituted Islamic law. The Taliban's reform of government was in part directed by scholars imposing Islamic law.

### **3.3 Mullah Omar: The supreme leader**

Mullah Mohammed Omar was born sometime around 1959 in Nodeh village near Kandahar to a family of poor, landless peasants who were members of the Hotak tribe, the Ghilizai branch of Pashtuns. Omar's tribal and social status was non-existent and notables from Kandahar said they had never heard of his family. During the 1980s he had his family moved to Tarinkot in the Urozqam province. His father died while he was a young man and the task of fending for his mother and extended family fell upon him.

Looking for a job, Omar moved to Singesar village in the Mewand district of Kandahar province, where he became the village mullah and opened a small madrassa. Omar has three wives, who continue living in the village and are heavily veiled. He has five children who are studying in his madrassa. A tall, well-built man with a long black beard and black turban, Omar has a dry sense of humour and a sarcastic wit. He remains extremely shy of outsiders. His shyness makes him a poor speaker in public, as well as in the shura.

An aura of mystery surrounds Mullah Omar, because he is rarely seen in public or by visiting dignitaries. He limits his contacts to a few close associates, including the governors he appointed. This absolute leader of the Taliban was given the supreme religious title of Amir Al-Mu'minin or Leader of the Faithful. He presided over the Kandahar shura before the American invasion in Afghanistan. He acquired

---

<sup>9</sup> **Shura:** Islamic council.

a reputation as a brilliant commander and lost an eye in fighting against the Soviet forces. He is said to be in his late thirties or early forties and to be pious, living very simply (Marsden 2002:43). According to Bartholet (2001:18-9) Omar does not allow himself to be photographed, believing that Islam forbids 'graven images' of human beings. In a land where television is outlawed, even most Afghans have never caught a glimpse of Mullah Omar and do not know what he looks like. Years ago Mullah Omar spoke from behind a curtain in an interview with a BBC journalist.

Johnson and Thomas (2002:10-12) argue that in some circles Omar was seen as a man of the people who had brought order to chaos and at least tried to crack down on corruption. In the end Omar turned out to be a simpleton and a dupe for Osama Bin Laden. Mullah Omar is a man who uses his simplicity to pose as a symbol of purity in a world of sordidness. Omar's leadership was based on the model of Caliph Umar, the seventh century leader of Islam. Omar was born on the side of a road and never received a decent education. His handwriting is so poor that even his semi-literate chauffeur commented on it. A freedom fighter, blinded in one eye by a Soviet shell in the 1980s, he became a legendary figure in civil war torn Afghanistan in the 1990s by taking revenge on sexual predators who were roaming the lawless streets.

Omar was generous with favours, dispensing new cars to commanders who ask for them. He banned all forms of music. Omar also attended to small details, requiring that ground toilets replace Western toilets and asking for childproof sockets so his 12 children would not hurt themselves. His eldest son was ashamed to see his father riding on horseback when there were so many fine cars at his disposal. Omar's desire to live simply is almost primitive. The mullah's complex was designed with 10 rooms set aside for three wives, with an adjoining complex of four rooms for an additional wife (Johnson and Thomas 2002:11-2). It is thus clear that with Omar's leadership there was a tendency for more conservative elements to prevail.

### 3.4 The Taliban's gender policies

Marsden (2002:87-8) points out that there were four main elements to the Taliban's gender policy: a ban on the employment of women, except in the health sector, a temporary halt to formal female education, the imposition of strict dress codes on both women and men requiring women to wear burqas<sup>10</sup> and men to wear beards, unstyled hair, turbans and shalwar kameez,<sup>11</sup> and the introduction of strict controls on the movement of women outside the home so that women are always separated

---

<sup>10</sup> **Burqas:** A stylish garment; a head to toe covering with a mesh opening to see through.

<sup>11</sup> **Shalwar kameez:** Oriental trousers for Muslim men.



from male strangers or escorted by male relatives. Another major impact was on the number of children working in the streets.

The Taliban imposed draconian legislation banning just about everything. They also banned fripperies such as make-up, high heels, eyebrow plucking, loud talking and laughing in public (Fair Lady: 2001). Getting caught wearing nail polish means amputation of a thumb. Women may not leave the house unless on official business, or after curfew even for a pressing engagement such as giving birth. Goodson (2001:415-18) points out that no governance issue attracted such negative attention to the Taliban as their policy toward women. From the beginning of their period of rule, the Taliban turned the clock back on women's human rights in Afghanistan by instituting a policy based on a mutated version of traditional Pushtunwali conceptions of a woman's place and role in society. Thus, the Taliban made their social policy toward women the centerpiece of their approach to governance.

The restrictions that the Taliban imposed on women in Afghanistan seem atrocious by any standard: They forbade women from all positions of employment, eliminated schools for girls and university education for women in cities. Women were reportedly beaten and flogged for violating Taliban edicts (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002:340). It is thus clear that the rule of the Taliban was not germane to cultural freedom and expression (Shorthose 2003:9).

In summary, the Taliban's edicts had a severe impact on women who did not have a close male relative to accompany them in public. Hardest hit were the country's estimated 30 000 widows, many of whom were the sole providers for their families. According to Taliban representatives, the restrictions were said to be necessary because females were not safe outside their homes. The closure of schools also affected the children. Some international aid groups in 1998 estimated that there were 28 000 street children in Kabul (Ghufran 2001:476). Women thus suffered a great deal under the Taliban and their situation was very tragic (Shah 2002:62).

#### **4. THE ROLE OF ISLAM**

Islam conveys the promise of peace, justice and harmony that comes to those who do the will of God. Woodward (2001:57-8) states that Islam is an Arabic word which means 'surrender'. It is a word that defines the faith of more than one billion people, and embodies the aspirations of Muslim societies from the West of Africa across a wide arc to the islands of Indonesia. It also expresses the vision of the Quran. The vast majority of Muslims, Arab and non-Arab alike, deploy the slaughter of thousands of civilians that took place in New York City and

Washington, D.C. It violates the very foundations of Islamic law. Islamic principles govern every aspect of personal and social behaviour. It is obvious that the Taliban acted contrary to the principles of Islam. Marsden (2002:61-3) suggests that the aim of the Taliban was the purification of Afghanistan alone. There was no suggestion among the leadership that they were seeking to spread a particular interpretation of Islam beyond Afghanistan's borders. Thus the central tenet of the Taliban creed was to free Afghanistan from the control of the mujahidin parties and to establish an Islamic state based on shari'a law. These include the stoning of adulterers and amputation for theft.

In the same vein, Rashid (2001:93-4) argues that the Taliban and its supporters present the Muslim world and the West with a new style of Islamic extremism, which rejects all accommodation with Muslim moderation and the West. The Taliban's refusal to compromise with the United Nations' (UN) humanitarian agencies has given Islamic fundamentalism a new face and a new identity for the next millennium - one that refuses to accept any compromise or political system except its own. Some proponents point out that contrary to the Taliban's viewpoint, Islam is not addicted to war, and jihad is not one of its 'pillars', or essential practices. The primary meaning of the word jihad is not 'holy war' but 'struggle'. It refers to the difficult effort that is needed to put God's will into practice at every level - personal, social and political. Islam did not impose itself by the sword. The majority of Muslims see their religion as a moderate one. Despite centuries of invasion and strife, the faith has left an enduring legacy of art and learning, according to Le Quesne (2001:38-44). Barlotti (2002:111) says that the Taliban vision of society is intimately linked to culture and Islam.

The Taliban's brand of Islamic fundamentalism was so extreme that it appeared to denigrate Islam's message of peace and tolerance and its capacity to live with other religious and ethnic groups. They were to inspire a new extremist form of fundamentalism across Pakistan and Central Asia, which refused to compromise with traditional Islamic values, social structures or existing state systems (Rashid 2001a:2). According to Goodson (2001:415) the Taliban became the most celebrated Islamist movement of the 1990s, inspiring radical Muslims around the world and promoting the Talibanization of neighbouring countries. This support has helped the Taliban to maintain their radical policies despite their condemnation and rejection by the vast majority of the world community.

The Taliban inherited a country full of training camps for Islamic activists and radicals from all around Asia. While they themselves had little external Islamic designs, they permitted the presence of these fighters, large numbers of whom had helped to liberate Afghanistan from the Soviets. They did not want to expel them,

both out of Islamic loyalty and because these fighters had helped the Taliban against the forces of the feckless but more moderate previous Afghan Islamist regime. The single central reality is that Islam acts as the natural vehicle of politics across the Muslim world. In the Muslim world the Koran serves as a source for justice, humanity, good governance and opposition to corruption. Islam provides ideology both for internal struggle against 'secular' authoritarian rule and for Muslims minorities seeking liberation from frequently harsh non-Muslim rule. Many Muslims see Islamic movements as natural vehicles of struggle for change (Fuller 2001:55-7). The Taliban supported the same ideology in this regard.

Even if the entire Taliban is suppressed, Al Qaeda dismantled, and its leaders killed or brought to justice, militant Islamic fundamentalism will continue to provoke destructive strikes through other organizations and with the help or at least the condonation of some governments (American Foreign Policy Interest 2002:75-86). The proponents and activists of militant fundamentalism devote their entire lives to the cause and 'absolute truth'.

##### **5. THE TALIBAN'S REPRESSION**

The policies of the Taliban aroused controversy because of their particularly detailed and onerous restrictions on how women and men should dress and behave. Men were also required to conform to a strict dress code, avoiding Western clothing and abstaining from shaving. Besides that men had to pray five times a day to ensure a higher degree of religious observance (Marsden 2002:63-4). Forney (2001:36) points out that the conditions in the Taliban prisons were harsh: Prisoners slept eight to a room on concrete floors and ate little but bread and water. There was no beating but for punishment they had to chop wood. Under the Taliban rule there was no entertainment. When the Taliban imposed a regime of rigid religious joylessness in 1996, Afghans varied the outlawed televisions in the hope that they would one day tune in again, according to Saporito (2001:34).

The Taliban movement turned the time backward when they ruled Afghanistan. They put women in purdah and arrested Christians for teaching their beliefs (Bartholet 2001:18-9). They were intolerant and suspicious of the outside world. They have had a rigid form of Islam, women could not work and theft was punished by amputation. Idolatry, like the statues of Buddha, was forbidden.

The repression by the Taliban reached its peak when Mullah Omar declared that anyone using a satellite phone would be perceived as an enemy of the regime, punishable by death. President Bush's address on television stated: "It is not only repressing its own people, it is threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and

sheltering and supplying terrorists. By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder. (Transcript of President Bush's address: 2001.)

Drumbl (2002:1121-22) identifies the other crimes committed by the Taliban during their rule, like forced deportation; massacres; torture; extra-judicial executions; disappearances of prisoners; persecution of Shia Muslims; politicide; gender crimes and sexual violence; crimes against cultural property; war crimes committed during the autumn of 2001; international armed conflict and narcotics trafficking. Some of these abuses by the Taliban may constitute violations of customary international law. Many constitute gross human rights offences.

## **6. AFGHANISTAN AT THE CROSSROADS**

The political and military landscape in Afghanistan has been transformed since 11 September 2001. Whether the fall of the Taliban and the transition to an Afghan Interim Administration signify the emergence of a new peaceful order or a dangerous disorder is too early to tell. The underlying dynamics of the Afghan crisis have yet to be addressed. The Afghan crisis did not start in 1979 with the Soviet invasion, but is rooted in historical processes of state formation throughout the years (Goodhand 2002:837-38). There are multiple conflicts in the country and the Taliban forces became entangled in these localized conflicts. The Taliban regime failed to bring lasting and equitable peace to Afghanistan. In fact, the emergence of the Taliban placed new obstacles in the way of humanitarian programmes. Goodhand (2002:845) argues that the Taliban edicts made it impossible for many programmes to reach their intended beneficiaries. But Afghanistan comes with a history, and unless this country is understood and taken into account, both the political process and reconstruction are likely to end in failure (Johnson and Leslie 2002:861). At this crucial stage in its modern political life, Afghanistan needs a government that is both legitimate and accountable.

More than 500 000 people were displaced by Afghanistan's continuous civil problems. The refugees - mostly women and children - were forced to live in appalling conditions in camps near Peshawar in northwest Pakistan. Malnutrition and mortality among refugees would probably increase (Ahmad 2001:207).

The Afghans were one of the victors of the Cold War, but they are also tragic victims of their own battlefield successes against the Soviets and of subsequent international apathy. The Taliban's acts of defiance were the result of a long history of great power neglect, interference by neighbors and severe economic decline. The Taliban are also Afghans, who are masters of bazaar politics and economics, and know a good deal when they see a good deal (Rashid 2001a:410). Afghanistan is

therefore presently at the crossroads because it was devastated by almost three decades of war and civil strife (Shah 2002:62).

Virtually all the infrastructure and human resources for major economic activity in Afghanistan were lost. Ethnic vilification and the massive destruction of infrastructure have led to the departure from Afghanistan of nearly all highly trained and skilled nationals. Banks, universities, private firms and government research/innovation efforts are practically non-existent. The result is a dragging back of the clock some 50 or 60 years. The ascent of the Taliban was piecemeal efforts at refounding a unified and cohesive government, but to date those attempts were racked with ineptitude, inexperience, "in-fighting and increasingly, corruption and thuggery" (John 2001:633).

Wali (2001:15) points out that the United States' foreign policy in Afghanistan has a long history of misguided plans and misplaced trust - a fact that has contributed to the destruction of the social and physical infrastructure of the Afghan society. Afghans contend that after having fought as U.S. allies against the Soviet Union – with the price of more than two million dead - the United States swiftly walked away at the end of that bloody, twenty-three year conflict. The toll of the war on Afghan society is staggering and unimaginable:

- 12 million women living in abject poverty;
- 1 million people handicapped from land mine explosions;
- an average life expectancy of forty years;
- a mortality rate of 25,7 per cent for children under five years old; and
- an illiteracy rate of 64 per cent. (Wali 2001:15).

Bearden (2001:17-30) regards Afghanistan as the graveyard of empires. In fact, he states that if anyone is to replace an emir in Afghanistan, it will have to be the people of Afghanistan themselves. Anyone who doubts should ask the British and the Russians. U.S. forces brought down the Taliban regime in Afghanistan with terrific speed. And yet the apparent success of the military strategy is illusory (Marshall 2002:5). Command structures and the cells of the terror network still exist, including the Taliban.

Afghanistan has thus an arduous road to rebirth. In 2003 the developed world has taken on the task of rebuilding the shattered economy of Afghanistan and has pledged \$1,8 billion in the first year with a total of \$4,5 billion over the next few years. For example, roads have to be passable in bad weather, the water has to be on, the airport has to be functioning and health care has to be adequate (McRae 2002:4). Indeed a very difficult task for the interim prime minister, Hamid Karzai.

## 7. THE TALIBAN IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

Although the Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001, their controversial policies ostracized them from the world community. After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on the US, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab States (UAE) in Central-Asia cut diplomatic ties with the Taliban. The entire Taliban regime at that time faced international scrutiny and condemnation for their policies.

Even the Central Asian élites fervently battled against what they interpret as the onslaught of an alien and inherently violent brand of Islam, exemplified by the Taliban regime that controlled most of Afghanistan since the mid-1990s (Cornell and Spector 2001:195). Central Asian élites are not opposed to Islam per se, but rather to radical, politicized Islam, which is often a basis for political opposition to the governments. Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, the country served as a training ground for Islamic militants who later fought in conflicts in Central Asia. Moreover, many members of international terrorist networks did part of their training in Afghanistan. Afghanistan thus emerged as a safe haven for the global Islamic militant movement and had a destabilizing influence on practically all of the neighbours and far beyond (Cornel and Spector 2001:198).

The Taliban did not have widespread international recognition. States in Central Asia and the USA isolated the Taliban. Their political rigidity was not contributing positively to their aim to cultivate relations with other nations. According to Guhran (2001:486) the Taliban's totalitarian policies alienated many of its own people. Furthermore, international sanctions complicated the economic situation. In the end, Afghanistan paid a high price for its past isolation.

The United States (US) imposed sanctions on the Taliban in early 1999, followed by UN Security Council sanctions in November of the same year. According to Rashid (2001:406) the US used sanctions to express its disapproval of the Taliban's involvement with terrorist organizations and forced the United Nations (UN) to impose sanctions on the Taliban in December 2000. This move was criticised by the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, on humanitarian grounds.

## 8. AFTER THE TALIBAN

Three years ago, as the bombs began to drop, President George W Bush promised Afghanistan "the generosity of America and its allies". Now the familiar old warlords are regaining power, religious fundamentalism is renewing its grip and military skirmishes continue routinely. The post-Taliban government is a façade because it has no money and its writ barely runs to the gates of Kabul, in spite of democratic

pretensions such as the election planned for next year. The Americans gave each warlord tens of thousands of dollars in cash and truckloads of weapons. In other words, they bribed them to stop fighting each other and fight the Taliban instead. Since it overthrew the Taliban, the US established 13 bases in the nine former Soviet Central Asian countries that are Afghanistan's resource-rich neighbours. The war that expelled the Taliban never stopped. It seems that the Taliban are coming back in the Pashtunheartland and on the border of Pakistan (Pilger 2003:20-1).

Ratnesar (2001:46) is convinced that the Taliban has not vanished completely, because fighters loyal to Omar may attempt to strike back with guerrilla ambushes. The invasion of the American soldiers in Afghanistan set the people free from the Taliban's medieval rule and freed them from theocracy. The Taliban warriors who had promised a fight to the death disappeared in the middle of the night like a long bad dream (Gibbs 2001:36). They might have integrated with the local population after getting rid of their long beards and turbans.

It was no surprise that the Taliban folded faster than anyone had predicted. After five years of puritanical rule by the Taliban, many Kabul residents welcomed the invaders. It is also important to note that after the Taliban's swift collapse the next battle is to rebuild a shattered nation. The Taliban's invincibility turned out to be a myth (Liu and Hammer 2001:26-7). The reality is that the politics of post-Taliban in Afghanistan still needs to be sorted out.

Zakaria (2001:7) argues that the country went through invasion, occupation and civil war for two decades. Economic activity came to a standstill, a condition worsened by periodic famine and drought. Millions of Afghans fled their country. Thus the most urgent priority in Afghanistan is a strong multinational force that will bring security and stability to Kabul. The international community will have a very difficult task to resurrect Afghanistan after the misrule by the Taliban.

## **9. CRITICAL EVALUATION**

While the Taliban presented itself as a reform movement, it has been criticised by Islamic scholars as being poorly educated in Islamic law and history – even in Islamic radicalism, which has a long history of scholarly writing and debate. The 'talibanization' of society in the long run gave a negative reflection of the Islam religion and put every sector of society under a repressive religious rule. What makes this all the more appalling is that these policies were deliberate and falsely justified as Islamic. According to Goodson (2001:424) they are the clearest symptoms of the disease of Talibanization. The political context within which the Taliban operated was one of almost universal condemnation. It is thus clear that

both the political and cultural life in Afghanistan suffered greatly under the repressive regime of the Taliban.

Under the ignorant Taliban the Afghans have suffered enough. They are a brave nation with a strong sense of pride and independence. What Afghanistan needs desperately now is hope. The Taliban reduced these proud people to beggary and deprived them of peace and stability. After the political instability and mismanagement of the Taliban, Afghans deserve better treatment. They were on the receiving end for more than two decades. The Taliban failed to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. One of the Taliban's weak points was that they exemplified a radical new fundamentalism that refused to compromise with any ideas, Islamic or otherwise, which departed from their world-view. This was based upon an extreme form of Deobandism, as mentioned earlier. Heywood (2003:307-8) argues that the Taliban attempted to root out all forms of 'non-Islamic' corruption and to enforce a harsh and repressive interpretation of shari'a law. Censorship was so strict that all forms of music were banned. The Taliban rule was thus highly authoritarian, with political power being concentrated in the hands of a small group of Taliban clerics.

President Karzai is correct in claiming that the Taliban movement in its previous form no longer exists. It has evolved into a decentralized guerilla group that portrays itself as a vehicle for Pashtun nationalism, according to Sedro (2004). The danger is that the Taliban adopted a new approach, shifting the focus of their attacks from military to 'soft targets'. The Afghan government and the international community should be vigilant in this regard.

The impact of the Taliban rule on the Afghans was devastating and disappointing. It will take years to rebuild the country's civil society to its rightful place in the world.

The discriminatory policies of the Taliban and the issue of terrorism have changed the political attitudes of the international community and their leaders. Since 11 September 2001 they are more alert and vigilant to groups like the Taliban. The Taliban's efforts to restore peace were derailed as a result of leaders with hidden agendas. It is unlikely that the Taliban will emerge as political leaders in Afghanistan in the very near future. Their entire organizational structures are presently in disarray after the American invasion.



## 10. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the Taliban's position in the global political context has demised. It will be a difficult exercise for them to re-emerge in Central Asia and in world politics. The future of the Taliban regime is thus unclear, because many of its most radical leaders and supporters were killed, taken prisoner, or fled the country.

There is also a strong possibility that moderate Taliban leaders might re-emerge on the political landscape, representing religious, ethnic or regional factions. But it remains to be seen.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahmad K 2001. UN sanctions imposed against Afghanistan while thousands flee. **The Lancet** 357, p. 207.

**American Foreign Policy Interest** 2002. For the record. After the Taliban. 24:75-86.

Ansary T 2001. A letter from an Afghan-American. **UP Front**, pp 4-5.

Babbie E 1992. **The practice of social research**. Sixth edition. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Bartholet J 2001. Inside the Mullah's mind. **Newsweek** CXXXVIII (14):18-20

Bartlotti LN 2002. Christian NGOS and best practice under the Taliban. Development in Islamic contexts. **Transformation**, pp. 107-17.

Bearden M 2001. Afghanistan, graveyard of empires. **Foreign Affairs** 80(6):17-30.

Cornell SE and Spector RA 2001. Central Asia: More than Islamic extremists. **The Washington Quarterly**. 25 (1):193-206.

Drumbl M 2002. The Taliban's other crimes. **Third World Quarterly** 23(6):1121-2002.

**Fair Lady**, 4 July 2001.

Footo D 2001. The price of patronage. **Newsweek** Vol. CXXXVIII (15), 8 October, p. 48.

Forney M 2001. Carjackings, shoot-outs and banditry. **Time** 158 (24):36.

Fuller GE 2001. **Afghanistan and terrorism fall**. Fall, pp. 55-7.

Ghufran N 2001. The Taliban and the civil war entanglement in Afghanistan. **Asian Survey** 41(3):462-87.

Gibbs N 2001. Blood and joy. **Time** 158 (22):36.

Goodhand J 2002. Aiding violence or building peace? The role of international aid in Afghanistan. **Third World Quarterly** 23(5):837-59.

Goodson LP 2001. Perverting Islam: Taliban social policy toward women. **Central Asian Survey**. 20(4):415-26.

Hirschkind C and Mahmood S 2003. Feminism, the Taliban, and politics of counter-insurgency. **Social Thought and Commentary**, pp 339-52.

Heywood A 1997. **Politics**. London: Macmillan.

Heywood A 2003. **Political ideologies**. New York: Macmillan.

John E 2001. Viewpoint: Economic development in Afghanistan. **Development in practice** 11(5):633.

Johnson C and Leslie J 2002. Afghans have their memories: a reflection on the recent experience of assistance in Afghanistan. **Third World Quarterly** 23(5):861-74.

Johnson S and Thomas E 2002. Mullah Omar off the record. **Newsweek** CXXXIX. (3) pp. 10-2.

Le Quesne N 2001. Islam in Europe: A changing faith. **Time** 158(26) 38-44.

- Lindgren RV 2002. W...men under the Taliban. **Humanist** 62(4):21-4.
- Liu J and Hammer J 2001. **Newsweek**, November 26, pp. 26-7.
- Macleod S 1998. Tehran vs. the Taliban. **Time** 40, September 28, p. 40.
- Marsden 2002. **The Taliban. War and religion in Afghanistan**. London: Zed Books.
- Marshall A. Al-Qaeda is dead; long live Al-Qaeda. **The Sunday Independent**, 17 March, p. 5.
- McGeary J 2001. The Taliban troubles. **Time** 158(14):41-3.
- McGeary J. 2001. The war. Hunting Osama. **Time** 158(24):31- 4.
- McRae H 2002. Afghanistan has arduous road to rebirth. **Sunday Business Report**, 27 January, p. 4.
- Pilger J 2003. What good friends left behind? **Mail and Guardian**. 10-16 October, pp. 20-1.
- Quinn-Judge P 2001. A different vantage. **Time** 158(16):41-3.
- Rashid A 2001a. Afghanistan: Ending the policy quagmire. **Journal of International Affairs** 54(2):395-410.
- Rashid A 2001b. **Taliban. The story of the Afghan warlords**. London: Pan Macmillan.
- Ratnesar R 2001. The hunt for Bin Laden. **Time** 158(22):46.
- Saporito B 2001. Melting away. Where did all the Taliban go? **Time** 158(24):34.
- Shah MZ 2002. Time for women's rights to return to Afghanistan. **Spring**, p. 62.
- Shorthose J 2003. Unlawful instruments and goods: Afghanistan, culture and the Taliban. *Capital and Class*, pp. 9-15.

Thomas E and Liu M 2001. Warlords for sale or rent. **Newsweek**. Vol. CXXXVIII, (19) 5 November, pp. 16-22.

Umnov A 2003. The Taliban and terrorists are not the same. **Russian politics and Law** 41(2):55-87.

Wali S 2001. Afghan women: Recovering, rebuilding. **Roundtable** pp. 15-9.

Woodward KL 2001. A peaceful faith, a fanatic few. **Newsweek** Vol. CXXXVIII, (13) , 24 September, pp. 57-8.

Zakaria F 2001. Don't abandon Afghanistan again. **Newsweek**. CXXXVIII. (25) 17 December, p. 7.