

Changing Roles of Women in Afghanistan:
The Impact of the Rise and the Fall of the Taliban

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The country of Afghanistan has experienced several occurrences of political turmoil during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although the entire country has been deeply impacted by the political regimes and their pursuits, the women of Afghanistan experienced the most devastation. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Afghan women dealt with the continuous cycle of gaining rights and losing rights. However, the most impactful regime that influenced the changing roles of Afghan women was the Islamic fundamentalist political group, known as the Taliban. When the Taliban came into power, women were stripped away of all their rights regarding health care, education, and the ability to have jobs. For eight years, Afghan women lived through inequality and horror. In 2001, the former president of the United States, George W. Bush, decided to go to war with Afghanistan. While fighting the Taliban, Bush also made sure to fight for the equality and freedom of Afghan women.

Background of Afghanistan

Afghanistan was originally a country that survived on an economy based on subsistence agriculture. The country did not have a strong economy because each individual family was providing for themselves through farming. Barely any money was generated through this type of agriculture, and as a result, the government of Afghanistan was just as weak as its economy. The government was comprised of ethno-tribes; within the country, the population was divided into tribes, and each tribe had a leader. Due to several leaders being in power, this caused many conflicts within Afghanistan.

Even though Afghanistan has never been in power due to economics and politics, the population of the country has always prided themselves on their national identity.

Unlike its surrounding neighbors, “Afghanistan has been the only country in the region to survive the political oppression of the colonial powers, secure its independence, and manage its internal affairs.”¹ The basis of Afghanistan’s identity consists of “nationalism, Islam, and modernization”²

The country’s nationalism primarily depends on the religion of Islam. Through this religion the people of Afghanistan form an identity, because a majority of the population identify themselves as being Muslim. In Islam, there are two sects of Islam, Sunni and Shi’i. Sunnis and Shiites both believe in the same god, follow the Quran (the holy book of Islam), and practice the same religious beliefs. Their differences lie in deciding who should be the religious leader of a community; “Sunni Muslims accept the authority of the Prophet’s companions, while Shi’i Muslims believe that members of the Prophet’s family have the sole legitimate claim to leadership.”³ The majority of Afghanistan’s Muslims are Sunni Muslims, but the distinction between Sunni and Shi’i Muslims still causes disputes within the country and with neighboring countries.

The aspects of modernization becoming part of Afghanistan’s identity began when political regimes believed that advancing social and political developments would benefit Afghanistan’s power within the Middle East and Central Asia. To the regimes, modernization began to consist of, “the emergence of governmental bureaucracy, the urbanization of Afghanistan, the rise of the middle class, and the national desire for a

¹ Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil war, and the Future of the Region* (New York: PALGRAVE, 2002), 3.

² Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, 2.

³ Davis-Stofka, Beth. Patheos Library, "Schisms and Sects."

<http://www.patheos.com/Library/Islam/Historical-Development/Schisms-Sects.html>.

more united Afghanistan with a centralized economy and political administration.”⁴ While the political regimes also constructed infrastructure to help develop Afghanistan, the regimes were more focused on developing the country through ways that would ensure Afghanistan’s modernization no matter what circumstances the people may face in the future. After the regimes either abandoned or were forced to leave from Afghanistan, the population realized that the country and the people benefited from modernization. Businesses were formed, trade was enabled, and new ideas from other countries were being brought to Afghanistan due to modernization. Through Afghanistan’s national identity, the people, especially the women, portrayed the country’s values through what they did for the country.

Roles of Women Before the Taliban

Even though Afghanistan experienced many different views from the regimes concerning education, labor, and health care the female population was “protected under law and increasingly afforded rights in Afghan society.”⁵ Because Islam is considered the dominant religion in Afghanistan, the women were also protected by the teachings of the Quran. The Quran states that women are indeed equal to men, and women have rights in marriage, divorce, and property rights. Throughout the twentieth century, the population of Afghanistan continued to achieve their pursuits in nationalism, Islam, and modernization through the advancing rights of women. Since 1920, one year after Afghanistan obtained its independence, women were allowed to vote. Also, “as early as

⁴ Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, 5.

⁵ U.S. State Department, "The Taliban's War Against Women." Last modified November 17, 2001. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/6185.htm>.

the 1960s, the Afghan constitution provided equality for women.”⁶ Furthermore, “in 1977, women comprised over 15% of Afghanistan’s highest legislative body. It is estimated that by the early 1990s, 70% of schoolteachers, 50% of government workers and university students, and 40% of doctors in Kabul were women.”⁷ Yet, during the twentieth century, two civil wars erupted in Afghanistan. The overall destruction on Afghanistan’s infrastructure, political administration, and economy had an impact on the people’s moral. These wars caused severe damage to Afghanistan’s economy, infrastructure, political administration, and the population’s moral. The people needed to live in a country where they were able to survive. Any sort of political regime would appear suitable to Afghanistan, no matter what consequence they may have to deal with in the future.

The Beginning of the Taliban

In the late 1970s, Afghanistan experienced its first civil war when the prime minister, Hazifullah Amin, wanted to go against Afghanistan’s Muslim traditions by trying to make Afghanistan more westernized. However, these plans did not agree with the ideology of the extremist Islamic group, the Mujahdeen. The Mujahdeen were a “guerilla force on a holy mission for Allah.”⁸ They felt that Westernized ideas were going against the teachings of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad; therefore, the Mujahdeen assassinated the prime minister to “properly” take over Afghanistan. Inevitably, this created a civil war between the Afghanistan population and

⁶ U.S. State Department, "The Taliban's War Against Women."

⁷ U.S. State Department, "The Taliban's War Against Women."

⁸ Trueman, History Learning Site, "Russian Invasion of Afghanistan." Accessed http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/russia_invasion_afghanistan.htm.

the Mujahdeen, which destroyed the relations between the people and the new government. Then, in 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan; however, due to the previous destruction of the first civil war, the Afghans accepted the Soviet Union into their country. The Mujahdeen were furious that they lost their power, and they decided to try and fight off the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, the second civil war against the Soviet Union came to an end. The battle between the Soviets and the Mujahdeen caused southern rural Afghanistan to be destroyed due to napalm and poison gas used by the Russians. This not only caused numerous deaths, but also caused two million Afghanistan refugees to flee to Pakistan and Iran.

Most of Afghanistan's citizens left the country, but one group knew that Afghanistan could not be abandoned forever. The Taliban, a group rooted from the Mujahdeen, wanted to eventually gain authority in Afghanistan. In order to do so, the Taliban needed to prepare for its pursuit. In the refugee camps, the Taliban created religious schools, where only male refugees could attend. At these schools, the Taliban members taught the male refugees that it was their mission to, "free Afghanistan of its existing corrupt leadership and to create a society that accorded to Islam."⁹ The schools were not created in order to properly educate the refugees, they were created to brainwash and prepare the refugees for the Taliban's takeover.

Roles of Afghan Women While Taliban was in Power

In 1994, the Taliban occupied Afghanistan. When they entered the country, they promised the grief-stricken population that the country would prevail against the civil

⁹ Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, 123.

wars, and become a unified country again. However, the Taliban stated that in order to do so, the Afghans must give full power to the Taliban. To seem like a legitimate government, the Taliban created legitimate rules, which primarily affected women. According to the Taliban, women were ordered to “bring up the next generation of Muslims.”¹⁰ To create “good” Muslims, the Taliban said that the women must not work, and that “the education of girls would have to await...until the Taliban had entire control of Afghanistan.”¹¹ Although the Taliban seemed like saviors in the beginning, they completely ruined the basic rights of women. There were not only stripped away of their rights to be educated and to have jobs, but they were also not allowed to have access to health care, not allowed to leave the house without a male relative accompanying them, and were never supposed to look at or speak to a male without permission. If women disobeyed any of these rules, they were publicly killed, beaten, or sexually harassed by the members of the Taliban. Women had no choice but to submit to the rule of the Taliban; “these women did not see Taliban policy as achieving a new, pure Islamic society; instead they saw it as unreasonably restrictive and as stunting their sense of personhood.”¹² They were completely helpless; it would take an external force to rid of this dismay.

¹⁰ Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan*, (London: Zed Books Ltd:1998), 46.

¹¹ Marsden, *The Taliban*, 46.

¹² Robert D. Crews, and Amin Tarzi, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2008), 148.

The Fall of the Taliban

The fall of the Taliban began in 2001 after the United States experienced devastating terrorist attacks from the terrorist group, al-Qaeda, on September 11, 2001. In October of 2001, George W. Bush decided to go to war against Afghanistan to fight against the al-Qaeda. The United States's troops would not only fight off al-Qaeda, they would also be fighting for the freedom of the people who had suffered against the Taliban's authority.

The United States did not know that the Taliban was actually involved with al-Qaeda and their leader, Osama bin Laden. The Taliban was not obtaining the power they desired to have in Afghanistan, because other government did not perceive them as an actual government. Because the Taliban did not have any relations with other governments, they solely relied on al-Qaeda for economic and political power. The Taliban gained its political power within the country through its military: "al-Qaeda contributed to around 30% to 40% of the Taliban's core military forces."¹³ Al-Qaeda provided the Taliban with weapons, troops, and military training. Afghanistan never recovered from the financial devastation due to the civil wars. In order to survive as a country and as a political regime, the Taliban complied with al-Qaeda by trading the surplus of opium that thrived within the country. Al-Qaeda used Afghanistan as the "center bin Laden's personal venture in the transregional trafficking of goods and narcotics."¹⁴ The relationship with al-Qaeda not only brought prosperity for the Taliban, but it also brought the failure of the regime.

¹³ Robert D. Crews, and Amin Tarzi, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, 113.

¹⁴ Robert D. Crews, and Amin Tarzi, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, 113.

In 2003, Bush made it evident to the United States' population that another goal for the "War Against Terror" was to give the people of Afghanistan a chance to live in freedom like Americans do. Bush believed that Afghans should experience democracy because, "no region is more fundamental to the security of America or the peace of the world than the Middle East: a free, peaceful Middle East will represent a source of promise, a home of opportunity, and a vital contributor to the prosperity of the world."¹⁵ In order to pursue his plan, Bush sent Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to Afghanistan; the PRTs would help rebuild Afghanistan. The PRTs leaders "emphasized that strong partnerships between Afghans and the Americans at the local level have led to greater community participation in reconstruction and development efforts, more jobs, and better security."¹⁶ Their main purpose while in Afghanistan was to "provide critical support to the Government of Afghanistan's efforts to improve security and democratic governance, to provide essential services, and to expand economic opportunity."¹⁷ With the help of Bush, the PRTs, and the rest of the American troops, Afghanistan was starting to become the country that suited well with the people's identity.

The Role of Women After the Taliban

On December 12, 2001, Bush agreed to sign the Afghan Women and Child Relief Act. With this act, Bush committed "the United States to providing education and medical assistance to Afghan women and children, and to Afghan refugees in

¹⁵ George W. Bush White House Archives, "Peace in the Middle East." <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/mideast/>.

¹⁶ George W. Bush White House Archives, "Peace in the Middle East."

¹⁷ George W. Bush White House Archives, "Peace in the Middle East."

surrounding countries.”¹⁸ Because of the Afghan Women and Child Relief Act, women were able to begin their new lives living in freedom. Women now had the access to health care, attended schools, started their own businesses, and obtained positions within Afghanistan’s government. The ambition of the United States and Afghanistan enabled “fewer than a million children in schools, one-third of them being female.”¹⁹ Since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan has made several improvements, including the election of the country’s first female governor, Habiba Sarabi. Yet, the United States and Afghanistan wanted to ensure that the women would never have to endure this tyranny ever again.

Laura Bush, George W. Bush’s wife, along with the government of Afghanistan, created the U.S.—Afghan’s Women Council. This council consists of several institutions that specifically deal with financial needs, educational needs, and political support. For example, The Women’s Teacher Training Institute “helps advance opportunities for women and girls in economic empowerment, education and literacy, political leadership and legal awareness, and access to health care.”²⁰ These organizations promote the continuous development that Afghan women have been making since the fall of the Taliban, and they make certain women will continue to grow throughout the future.

The women of Afghanistan experienced years of turmoil by living through a dictatorship where their equality and freedom was nonexistent. Under the rule of the Taliban, women were no longer allowed to receive an education, have a job, or be

¹⁸ George W. Bush White House Archives, "Global Diplomacy." <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/mideast/>.

¹⁹ George W. Bush White House Archives, "Education." <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/firstlady/education.html>.

²⁰ George W. Bush White House Archives, "Education."

granted access to healthcare. Their years of suffering came to an end when former president George W. Bush, along with the help of his wife, decided to have the people of Afghanistan live in a country where the morals of the United States prevailed. Because of Bush's efforts during his eight years of being in office, Afghan women were able to live the life they deserved.

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