OPINION

# Myanmar's military regime has nothing left to offer

How much damage will it be allowed to inflict on the country and region?

**Philipp Annawitt**
**July 16, 2021 17:00 JST**

Smoke rises from smoldering houses in Kinma village, central Myanmar's Pauk township, on June 16: the Tatmadaw is burning the last shreds of legitimacy. © AP

*Philipp Annawitt served as an adviser to Myanmar's parliaments and government from 2015 to 2021.*

Days after Myanmar's generals seized power in February, the new government promised to schedule fresh elections within a year -- once the "problems" with the electoral system had been fixed -- then hand over power to whoever wins and retire to their barracks.

This is obviously not the plan: the November 2020 elections had no serious irregularities, the regime is almost universally reviled, and its proxies could never win a democratic election. The military's violent suppression of protests has resulted in the deaths of over 900 civilians and the arrests of many more. In June, the Tatmadaw, as the military is known, burned down an entire village in Myanmar's Bamar heartland, displacing thousands and killing those who could not flee.

The glaring contradiction between professed policy and actions marks the complete erosion of what remains of the Tatmadaw's ideological underpinnings and its self-professed raison d'etre.

Successive military regimes since 1962 have built their legitimacy on being able to hold Myanmar together against various ethnic minority uprisings as well as a strong communist insurgency. Denying the insurgents access to community support has often meant brutal blanket suppression of ethnic minority communities.

This was combined with an attempt to burmanize ethnic minority communities and destroy their distinct identities in order to build a more homogenous country dominated by ethnic Bamars. These ethno-chauvinist policies continued well into the reform era of the early 2010s, when then-President Thein Sein introduced four race and religion laws to suppress interfaith marriages and impose population control measures on minorities.

But by razing Bamar villages, the Tatmadaw are now using the same brutal tactics on their own people in Myanmar's heartland. It is one thing to shoot individual protesters, or "foreign agents" according to the regime's propaganda. It is quite another thing to wipe out a village. With this, the Tatmadaw is burning the last shreds of legitimacy.

Xi Jinping's China is a perfect example of an increasingly personalized regime that draws legitimacy from a stellar economic performance and increasing international clout. Legitimacy may also be of the sinister kind. The Tatmadaw boosted support among ethnic Bamars following the 2017 genocide against the Rohingya. Race and religion was still working for them there.

Tatmadaw apologists argue that, despite all that, Myanmar's military is the only institution that can keep the country together, to ensure the "non-disintegration of the Union," in Tatmadaw-speak. But the fact is they are not keeping the country together.

Wa State has been de facto independent for more than a decade. That may be strategically unimportant hinterland, but now the regime is letting Rakhine State slip away, where Rakhine ethnics are building a parallel administration. Rakhine is the source of most of the country's natural gas and is the endpoint of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor that links China's Yunnan province to the Andaman Sea.

With its seizure of power in February, the Tatmadaw has broken its own semi-democratic constitution. The regime's governance performance has been woeful, as evidenced most recently by its inept handling of the deadly third wave of COVID-19. Burning Bamar villages and letting Rakhine State slip away, the Tatmadaw have no story left to tell.

Ethnic Rakhine villagers arrive at a temporary monastery camp with their belongings on June 29: the regime is letting Rakhine State slip away, © AP

The implication is that, in the longer run, the regime will not last. It will not go easily. It will cling on by defending the remnants of its rentier state until it falls. This could take many months.

In the meantime, the region will be destabilized by cross-border refugee flows -- over 230,000 people have already been internally displaced by the recent violence. The risk of widespread starvation will push many across borders. An uptick in drug and arms trafficking is already being seen as ethnic armed organizations arm themselves, increasing the likelihood of conflict spilling across borders.

The National Unity Government Parliament opposing the regime is backed by the National Parliament, which was elected last year, and which just met for the first time since February. The National Unity Government has formulated an inclusive political vision for the country that is in principle acceptable to the

Having no control over territory other than those border areas in the north and southeast held by its allies, the National Unity Government has been largely snubbed by the international community. The fact that Myanmar's democratic opposition has ties to similar movements across East and Southeast Asia, makes many of its authoritarian neighbors uncomfortable. Slow progress is being made toward establishing ties with foreign governments.

Still, the only route to much-desired stability in Myanmar is for its neighbors and the international community to engage the National Unity Government. They are the only force with enough credibility to claim power. Wait much longer and there will be no good options left as the country descends further into chaos.

The Atlantic

IDEAS

# Americans Never Understood Afghanistan Like the Taliban Did

In the end, few Afghans believed in a central government that they never felt was theirs.

By Shadi Hamid

Thomas Dworzak / Magnum

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***About the author:*** *Shadi Hamid is a contributing writer at* The Atlantic*, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and a founding editor of* Wisdom of Crowds*. He is the author of* Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam Is Reshaping the World *and* Temptations of Power*.*

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THE UNITED STATES never understood Afghanistan. American planners thought they knew what the country needed, which was not quite the same as what its people wanted. American policy was guided by fantasies; chief among them was the idea that the Taliban could be eliminated and that an entire culture could be transformed in the process.

In an ideal world, the Taliban wouldn't exist. But it does exist, and it will exist. Western observers always struggle to understand how groups as ruthless as the Taliban gain legitimacy and popular support. Surely Afghans remember the terror of Taliban rule in the 1990s, when women were whipped if they ventured outside without a burka and adulterers were stoned to death in soccer stadiums. How could those dark days be forgotten?

America saw the Taliban as plainly evil. To deem a group evil is to cast it outside of time and history. But this is a privileged view. Living in a democracy with basic security allows citizens to set their sights higher. They will be disappointed with even a relatively good government precisely because they expect more from it. In failed states and in the midst of civil war, however, the fundamental questions are ones of order and disorder, and how to have more of the former and less of the latter.

The Taliban knew this. After its fall from power in 2001, the group was weak, reeling from devastating air strikes targeting its leaders. But in recent years, it has been gaining ground and establishing deeper roots in local communities. The Taliban was brutal. At the same time, it often provided better governance than the distant and corrupt Afghan central government. Doing a little went a long way.

Afghanistan's U.S.-backed government didn't fail just because of the Taliban. It was hobbled from the start by America's blind spots and biases. The United States saw a strong, centralized authority as the answer to Afghanistan's problems and backed a constitution that invested the president with sweeping powers. That, along with a quirky and confusing electoral system, undermined the development of political parties and the Parliament. A strong state required formal legal institutions—and the United States dutifully supported courts, judges, and other such trappings. Meanwhile, it invited resentment by pushing programs that were meant to reengineer Afghan culture and gender norms.

All of these choices reflected the hubris of Western powers that saw Afghan traditions as an obstacle to be overcome when, it turns out, they were the lifeblood of the country's political culture. In the end, few Afghans believed in a government that they never felt was theirs or wished to wade through its bureaucratic red tape. They kept turning to informal and community-driven dispute resolution, and local figures they trusted. And this left the door open for the slow return of the Taliban.

THE SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL for Afghanistan Reconstruction oversaw how the U.S. disbursed reconstruction funds and assessed their effectiveness. Over the past year, two depressing SIGAR assessments were made available to the public.

One—grandiosely if obsoletely titled "What We Need to Learn: Lessons From Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction"—notes that the United States spent about $900 million helping Afghans develop a formal legal system. Unfortunately, Afghans do not seem to have been impressed.

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One of the first things militant groups like the Taliban do when they enter new territory is provide "rough and ready" dispute resolution. Often, they outperform the local court system. As Vanda Felbab-Brown, Harold Trinkunas, and I noted in our 2017 book on rebel governance, "Afghans report a great degree of satisfaction with Taliban verdicts, unlike those from the official justice system, where petitioners for justice frequently have to pay considerable bribes."

This is one major reason why religion—particularly Islam—matters. It provides an organizing framework for rough justice and a justification for its implementation, and is more likely to be perceived as legitimate by local communities. Secular groups and governments simply have a harder time providing this kind of justice. The Afghan government wasn't necessarily secular, but it had received tens of billions of dollars from governments that certainly were. A Sharia-based, informal dispute system would almost certainly be frowned upon by those Western donors. How likely was it that an Afghan government headed by an Ivy League–educated technocrat could beat the Taliban at its own game?

As the SIGAR report noted archly, "The United States misjudged what would constitute an acceptable justice system from the perspective of many Afghans, which ultimately created an opportunity for the Taliban to exert influence." Or, as a former USAID official put it, "We dismissed the traditional justice system because we

thought it didn't have any relevance for what we wanted to see in today's Afghanistan."

What, then, did the United States want to see in today's Afghanistan?

WHEN THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION helped shape the post-Taliban Afghan government, it was still claiming that it had little interest in nation building. Pilfering from Afghanistan's past constitutions was easier than proposing something more appropriate for what had become a very different country. The new constitution created a top-heavy system that gave the president "nearly the same powers that Afghan kings exercised," as Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, a prominent Afghanistan scholar, has written.

Strong presidential systems are appealing because they offer the prospect of determined action. But the concentration of power inevitably alienates other stakeholders, particularly on the local and regional levels.

From the beginning, the Afghan Parliament suffered from a legitimacy deficit. Afghanistan used an electoral system known as single nontransferable vote (SNTV), one of the rarest in the world. There are reasons SNTV is sometimes used in local elections but almost never nationally: Among other things, it allocates votes in a way that depresses the development of political parties. If there's anything Afghanistan needed, it was political parties—and a parliament—that could check the dominance of the president.

The risks of a presidential system are heightened in divided societies, and Afghanistan is divided along ethnic, religious, tribal, linguistic, and ideological lines—in almost every way possible. This raises the stakes of political competition, because what matters most is who ends up at the very top.

Finally, the system works only if the president is competent. The now-exiled president, Ashraf Ghani, managed to be all-powerful in theory but resolutely feckless in practice. Despite having been the chair of the Institute for State Effectiveness, his ineffectiveness—reflected in his mercurial style and penchant for micromanagement

—infected the entire political system, and little could be done to reverse the trend as long as he remained in office.

In addition to fashioning new political institutions, America believed that it could transform the culture of a country. Naturally, most American politicians, nongovernmental organizations, and donors thought that the things that worked in advanced democracies would work in fragile would-be democracies. Liberal values were universal. And because they were universal, they would be, if not embraced, at least appreciated.

Somewhere close to $1 billion was spent on promoting gender equality. But such a focus was too often tantamount to social and cultural engineering in a conservative country that was still struggling to establish basic security. USAID's Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy stated as one of its rather ambitious goals "working with men and boys, women and girls to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviors, roles and responsibilities." This is a worthy objective, but the American approach was heavy-handed and at times counterproductive.

As the second SIGAR report, titled "Support for Gender Equality: Lessons From the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," concluded, U.S. officials need "a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and relations in the Afghan cultural context" and of "how to support women and girls without provoking backlash that might endanger them or stall progress."

These efforts were well-intentioned, but they drew on assumptions about the arc of progress, and the belief that the United States would make progress happen even if Afghans themselves were less sanguine.

If the United States had made other choices, would the outcome have been different? I don't know. Americans believe in certain things. Suspending those beliefs in the name of understanding another society can easily devolve into moral and cultural relativism that many, if not most Americans, would reject. Would a Republican—or, for that matter, a liberal suspicious of religion's role in public life—

have felt comfortable supporting programs in Afghanistan that involved the implementation of a version of Sharia, even if that version wasn't the Taliban's?

But the order and sequence in a transition matter. It's clear now that we got that sequence wrong in Afghanistan, especially considering that women's rights had long been one of the country's most divisive issues. As the experts Rina Amiri, Swanee Hunt, and Jennifer Sova warned in 2004, when the Taliban seemed a relic of the past, "While the situation has markedly improved since the Taliban regime, the stage is set for a struggle between traditionalists and modernists; and once again women's roles and religion are central to the conflict."

Was it America's place to change a culture? Did anyone really expect that the U.S. government would be good at it? If there is any change that should come from within, presumably it's cultural change. But if there's anything that's universal—transcending culture and religion—it is the desire to have a say in one's own government. Instead of telling Afghans how to live, we could have given them the space to make their own decisions about who they wanted to be.

With the Parliament weak, in part because of that bizarre electoral system, all attention was diverted to presidential contests, which were invariably acrimonious. The result was a winner-takes-all system in a country where the winners had long subjugated the losers, or worse. It is little surprise, then, that "every Afghan presidential election has been brokered or mediated by U.S. diplomats," as Jarrett Blanc, one of those diplomats, put it. This was the democracy that America and its allies tried, for years, to build.

Many of the political institutions that America helped create have now been washed away. It is almost as if they never existed. By insisting on the primacy of culture over politics, the United States thought it could improve both. Might Afghanistan have been doomed regardless? Perhaps. Now we will never know.

Shadi Hamid is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and a founding editor of *Wisdom of Crowds*. He is the author of *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam Is Reshaping the World* and *Temptations of Power*.

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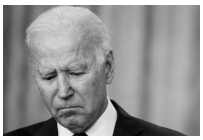

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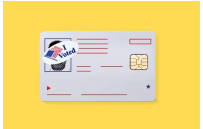

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

# The Taliban wants the world's trust. To achieve this, it will need to make some difficult choices

August 18, 2021 12.53pm AEST

Stringer/EPA

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"We want the world to trust us."

In the Taliban's first press conference since seizing control of Afghanistan, this message was intended to allay fears of what a return to power could mean for the country.

In the wake of the Taliban's stunning sweep across Afghanistan, attention is now focused on whether it can translate its rapid military gains to a political victory. This would require negotiating a governing system that can achieve both domestic and international legitimacy.

The movement's media-savvy leadership has attempted to downplay fears of the return of its former repressive regime. However, the Taliban has not yet spelled out an alternative political system, aside from offering vague promises of pardons for government and military personnel and that women could continue to participate in society in accordance with sharia law.

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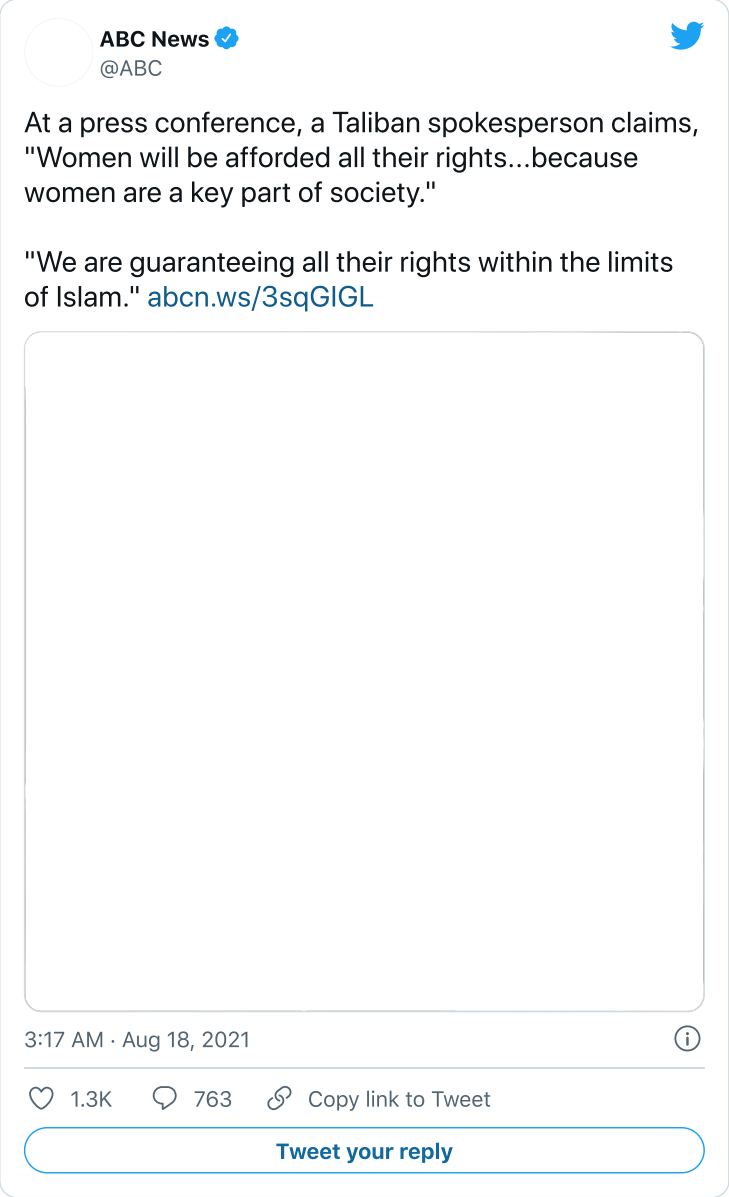
In Kabul, which remains under the watchful eyes of the world, the group has largely shown restraint while pursuing an active media campaign. However, there are reports of summary executions, revenge killings of government officials and soldiers, forced marriages of young girls with Taliban fighters, and communications disruptions coming from other provinces.

For many Afghans who remember the previous Taliban regime in the late 1990s, trust will need to be earned.




### Who are the Taliban?

The Taliban first emerged in 1994 during the anarchy and civil war that followed the collapse of the pro-Soviet government of President Najibullah in April 1992.

After it took control of Kabul, the movement tortured and killed the president, hanging his body from a pole, and declared a new government, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The group attracted international headlines for its violent suppression of women and minorities like the Shi'a Hazaras, as well as the restriction of all civil and political rights. It banned women and girls from attending school and joining the workforce, and prohibited music and photography.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was led by Mullah Muhammad Omar, a local religious figure with no notable reputation in Islamic law or Afghan politics.

While the Taliban primarily sought to establish its rule over Afghanistan, it also attracted many foreign jihadist groups — most prominently Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, these groups had shifted their focus to the west, particularly the United States, as their main enemy.

The Taliban relied on brutal and excessive force to dominate much of Afghanistan from 1996–2001. The movement did not develop governance institutions that could provide for political representation — such as establishing a parliament — or perform basic state functions such as delivering social services to the people.

As a result of its repressive policies, it turned Afghanistan into a pariah state. It was only recognised by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These countries saw the group as a proxy to limit the increasing influence of India, Iran and Russia, which were providing support to a coalition of anti-Taliban forces.

The rarely photographed Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar. AP

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The Taliban's fundamental weaknesses led to its rapid disintegration following the US-led military intervention in 2001.

The movement's key leaders then fled to Pakistan, where they launched an insurgency against the new Afghan government and US-led NATO forces. After the death of its founder, Muhammad Omar, in 2013, the Taliban selected his deputy, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad, to replace him. He was killed in a US drone attack in 2016.

Since then, Haibatullah Akhunzada has been leading the group, though it has been years since he's been seen in public. (There were even rumours he died last year due to COVID, which the Taliban denied.)

Much of the international focus has instead been on the leaders in the Taliban's political office in Doha. This was set up in 2013 to facilitate direct negotiations between the Taliban, the United States and the Afghan government.

An undated photo of the Taliban's new supreme leader, Haibatullah Akhunzada. AFGHAN TALIBAN/HANDOUT/EPA

The deputy head of the Taliban Political Office, Abdul Salam Hanafi (centre), during peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Doha last September. Hussein Sayed/AP

### Can the Taliban govern with legitimacy?

In its attempts to establish a new government, the Taliban is likely to face some difficult choices.

First, an attempt to restore the Islamic Emirate is likely to cost it international recognition, legitimacy and aid. This will, in turn, weaken its prospect of consolidating its hold internally and limit its capacity to govern.


The challenges facing the group are immense. Afghanistan is on the verge of a humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by COVID-19, a severe drought and a looming hunger emergency. The World Food Program says malnutrition levels are soaring and some 2 million children need nutrition treatment to survive.

The Taliban also needs revenue. The previous Afghan government was heavily reliant on foreign aid. But according to a recent UN report, the Taliban largely finances itself with criminal enterprises, including drug trafficking, opium production, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom. The UN estimates its annual income as anywhere from US$300 million (A$413 million) to US$1.6 billion (A$2.2 billion).

The Taliban spokesperson said in his press conference this week that Afghanistan will no longer be an opium-producing country. Without significant foreign aid, however, the question remains how the

Taliban would sustain its emirate if it abandons its main source of income.


Second, if the Taliban embraces a more pluralistic and inclusive political system with fundamental human rights, especially with respect to women, it may face opposition from its more radical factions and rank-and-file members, who have spent years fighting to restore its emirate.

Another important constituency that the Taliban will risk alienating is its regional and global jihadist allies. These groups are now celebrating its victory, but they may turn against the Tablian if it is seen as compromising on its core ideological principles.

The movement has so far avoided dealing with these questions through vague rhetoric. But now it is in control, these issues are becoming urgent priorities.