# THE TALIBAN REGIME IN AFGHANISTAN: CENTRALIZATION, SOCIAL EXCLUSION, AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract - Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Afghanistan has witnessed sweeping political, social, and economic changes under a centralized, theocratic governance model. This article examines the internal structure of Taliban rule, emphasizing the role of centralized power, the exclusion of women and minorities, and the broader implications of their policies on human rights and socio-political stability. It also evaluates the economic collapse, the humanitarian crisis, and rising security threats such as ISIS-K. Through critical analysis, the article explores how regional dynamics and international responses shape Afghanistan's current and future trajectories. Potential scenarios for Afghanistan's political and social future are proposed, emphasizing the urgent need for global engagement and inclusive strategies.

**Keywords** - Taliban, governance, centralization, human rights, women's rights, ISIS-K, Afghanistan, international relations.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Taliban's return to power on August 15, 2021, marked a seismic shift in Afghanistan's governance and social structures. The collapse of the U.S.-backed government and the subsequent withdrawal of NATO forces left a power vacuum that the Taliban filled by imposing a centralized, authoritarian regime rooted in their strict interpretation of Sharia law. This model has not only marginalized women and ethnic minorities but has also generated internal dissent and regional insecurity.

Afghanistan now faces a confluence of crises: a collapsing economy, an escalating humanitarian emergency, and growing threats from transnational terrorist groups. This paper critically examines the internal dynamics of Taliban rule, the socio-political consequences of their policies, and the role of the international community in addressing these challenges. By analyzing the regime's centralized governance, exclusionary practices, and interactions with global actors, this article sheds light on Afghanistan's precarious position and the potential paths forward.

## II. CENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE UNDER THE TALIBAN

### 2.1. The Structure of Power

The Taliban's governance is centralized, with Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada wielding ultimate authority. The regime has established an interim government dominated by Pashtun elites, excluding women and representatives from Afghanistan's diverse ethnic groups. Decision-making is highly hierarchical, with provincial governors appointed directly by central authorities to enforce Taliban policies.

Unlike the decentralized systems seen in democratic governments, this top-down structure lacks mechanisms for local participation or accountability. According to Human Rights Watch (2022), "The concentration of power in Kabul exacerbates rural marginalization, leaving many regions voiceless and underrepresented."

### 2.2 Role of the Council of Ulema

The Council of Ulema serves as the regime's primary legislative body, issuing edicts based on their strict interpretation of Sharia law. Policies restricting women's education, enforcing gender segregation, and banning entertainment reflect the council's ideological rigidity. While intended to enforce religious discipline, these policies have deepened societal divisions and fueled discontent.

Some factions within the Taliban have expressed concern that these measures alienate northern provinces and undermine the regime's ability to maintain national cohesion. This internal dissent illustrates the challenges of imposing a uniform governance model on a country as diverse as Afghanistan.

## III. SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

### 3.1 Exclusion of Women

Since their return to power, the Taliban have systematically excluded women from public life. Women are barred from attending secondary schools and universities, working in most professional fields, and participating in political decision-making. In December 2022, the Taliban banned women from working with NGOs, severely hampering humanitarian aid delivery in rural areas where female staff were essential.

The United Nations (2023) reports that over 1.2 million Afghan girls have been denied access to

education. The resulting rise in early marriages and poverty highlights the devastating socio-economic impact of these policies. According to UNICEF (2023), "Excluding women from education and work risks creating a generational crisis that Afghanistan cannot afford."

### 3.2 Discrimination Against Minorities

Afghanistan's ethnic diversity includes Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others. However, the Taliban's Pashtun-dominated leadership has sidelined non-Pashtun communities, with the Hazara minority facing particularly severe persecution. ISIS-K's attacks on Hazara neighborhoods have intensified, with many accusing the Taliban of failing to protect these vulnerable communities.

The International Crisis Group (2023) warns that systemic discrimination could fuel ethnic uprisings, further destabilizing the regime. A UN report (2023) emphasizes the Taliban's failure to address interethnic tensions, which risks turning Afghanistan into a patchwork of discontented regions.

### 3.3 Suppression of Freedoms

The Taliban have reinstated severe restrictions on freedom of expression, targeting journalists, activists, and dissenting voices. Over 60% of media outlets have ceased operations, while journalists face detention and harassment. Reporters Without Borders (2023) notes that "Afghanistan's press freedom index has plummeted under the Taliban, reflecting an environment of fear and censorship."

## IV. ECONOMIC COLLAPSE AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

### 4.1 Sanctions and the Freezing of Assets

The Taliban's designation as a terrorist organization has led to the freezing of $7 billion in Afghan central bank reserves, crippling the country's banking sector. International sanctions restrict trade, foreign investment, and financial aid, exacerbating the economic collapse. According to the World Bank (2023), Afghanistan's GDP shrank by 30% in 2022, plunging the nation into its worst economic crisis in decades.

### 4.2 Poverty and Food Insecurity

Nearly 90% of Afghan households now live below the poverty line, with more than 24 million people requiring humanitarian assistance. The World Food Programme (2023) estimates that 50% of the population faces acute food insecurity, making Afghanistan one of the world's worst hunger crises.

Recurring droughts, poor infrastructure, and the Taliban's limited governance capacity have further weakened agricultural output. The FAO (2023) reports that 40% of Afghanistan's agricultural yields have been lost, driving up food prices and forcing many families to rely on aid.

### 4.3 Healthcare and Education Collapse

Afghanistan's healthcare system has been devastated. Hospitals face shortages of staff, medicines, and equipment, while bans on female healthcare workers have restricted access for women. The WHO (2023) states that 70% of rural healthcare facilities are either non-functional or operating at reduced capacity.

Similarly, the education sector has collapsed, with bans on girls' schooling and widespread closures of public schools in rural areas. UNESCO (2023) emphasizes that "Afghanistan now ranks among the worst countries for educational access, particularly for women and girls."

## V. SECURITY CHALLENGES

### 5.1 The Rise of ISIS-K

The Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) has emerged as a major threat, directly challenging the Taliban's authority. Unlike the Taliban, ISIS-K seeks to establish a transnational caliphate, targeting civilians, infrastructure, and religious minorities to destabilize the region.

The United Nations (2023) estimates that ISIS-K commands 1,500–2,000 fighters, operating primarily in Nangarhar, Kunar, and Kabul. Their ability to conduct complex attacks, such as the 2022 bombing of a Shia mosque in Kunduz, underscores their growing operational capacity.

### 5.2 Internal Divisions and Resistance Movements

The Taliban are grappling with internal divisions between pragmatic moderates who seek international engagement and ultraconservatives who oppose any compromises. These divisions undermine the regime's cohesion and hinder its ability to respond to emerging threats.

In addition, resistance groups like the National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud, continue to operate in regions such as the Panjshir Valley. While currently limited in strength, these movements symbolize growing discontent with Taliban rule.

### 5.3 Regional Security Implications

Afghanistan's instability poses risks for neighboring countries. Pakistan has faced increased cross-border attacks by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), while

Iran remains concerned about the Taliban's treatment of Shia minorities. China and Russia have also expressed apprehension over the potential for Afghanistan to become a safe haven for extremist groups.

## VI. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY

### 6.1 Diplomatic Engagements

The Taliban have sought international recognition to access frozen assets and secure economic aid. While regional powers like China and Russia have shown interest in Afghanistan's mineral resources, formal recognition remains elusive. China, in particular, has signed mining agreements for lithium and rare earth metals but demands strict security guarantees.

### 6.2 Challenges to Western Engagement

The United States and the European Union have maintained a policy of non-recognition, emphasizing that progress on women's rights and counterterrorism is a prerequisite for engagement. However, humanitarian organizations argue that prolonged isolation only worsens Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis.

### 6.3 Role of Humanitarian Aid

Humanitarian aid remains critical, with organizations such as the World Food Programme, Médecins Sans Frontières, and UNICEF providing essential services. However, Taliban-imposed restrictions, including the ban on female aid workers, have significantly hindered operations, particularly in rural areas.

## VII. FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR AFGHANISTAN

### 7.1 Authoritarian Consolidation

The Taliban may consolidate their power through repression, maintaining strict control over society and eliminating dissent. While this strategy could ensure short-term stability, it risks deepening societal fractures and alienating Afghanistan from the international community. The exclusion of women and minorities, combined with a lack of economic progress, would likely exacerbate poverty and social unrest. This scenario mirrors Afghanistan's isolation during the Taliban's first regime from 1996 to 2001.

### 7.2 Regime Collapse

Internal divisions within the Taliban, combined with economic collapse and growing public dissatisfaction, could lead to the regime's downfall. Resistance movements, such as the National Resistance Front, may capitalize on these weaknesses, although they currently lack the military strength to pose a significant threat. A sudden collapse could create a power vacuum, resulting in political chaos and potentially renewed civil war.

Regional instability would likely follow, with neighboring countries scrambling to secure their borders and deal with waves of refugees. This scenario would worsen Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, making recovery even more challenging.

### 7.3 Negotiated Transition

A more optimistic scenario involves a negotiated political settlement, where the Taliban agree to reforms in exchange for international recognition and economic support. This would require significant pressure from both the international community and internal factions advocating for moderation.

Reforms could include reopening schools for girls, integrating ethnic minorities into governance, and implementing inclusive economic policies. While this approach is complex and unlikely in the short term, it offers the best chance for long-term stability and development.

### 7.4 Prolonged Isolation

If the Taliban refuse to moderate their policies, Afghanistan risks prolonged international isolation. This scenario would see continued economic stagnation, worsening humanitarian conditions, and increased reliance on informal economies, such as opium production.

Afghanistan could also become a breeding ground for transnational terrorism, destabilizing the region further. Without diplomatic engagement, the global community would struggle to influence the regime or address its internal challenges effectively.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Afghanistan under the Taliban faces an uncertain future, with the regime's centralized governance, exclusionary policies, and rigid ideology creating significant socio-political and economic challenges. The systematic exclusion of women and minorities, combined with human rights abuses and economic collapse, has plunged the nation into one of the darkest periods in its history.

The rise of ISIS-K, internal divisions within the Taliban, and resistance movements like the NRF highlight the fragility of the regime's hold on power. Meanwhile, regional and global actors face a dilemma: engage with the Taliban to prevent humanitarian catastrophe or maintain pressure to promote human rights and counterterrorism efforts.The international community must adopt a

balanced approach, combining diplomatic engagement and humanitarian aid with targeted sanctions and incentives. A purely punitive strategy risks worsening the humanitarian crisis, while unchecked engagement could legitimize a repressive regime.

Ultimately, Afghanistan's future will depend on its ability to reconcile internal divisions, address the grievances of marginalized communities, and create an inclusive governance framework. While the path forward is fraught with challenges, sustained international attention and a focus on human rights are essential to prevent the country from descending further into chaos.

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