

Taliban inspire fear, hope, and doubt as they transition from insurgency to governance.

A field-based commentary from Afghanistan showcasing how the hard-line Islamist group, which took over ministries and local administrations following its crushing victory, is raising scepticism, fears - and sometimes cautious optimism – among the people they now have to rule.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

By Wilson Fache – BIC Middle East Consultant

While many mourn the end of an era, others have sensed an opportunity. A crowd of dozens gathered at the gate of the governor office in the northern city of Mazar-I-Sharif to look for a job. Mohammed, perhaps keener than the others, successfully made his way into the reception hall with a handwritten application letter.

"I would never have been able to enter this building before," the 31-year-old told the BIC, standing in front of an organisational chart pinned on the wall that depicts an administration now gutted of many of its employees. Shortly after conquering the city mid-August, the Taliban called on civil servants to return to work. Few answered the call.

"Most of the officials have fled, so there are vacancies. I have been unemployed for three years but now I have a real chance to find a job. Before, you had to pay a bribe or know someone personally, but the Taliban will never do that. Besides, the Taliban leadership needs us because most of its members are uneducated and without degrees," concluded this economics graduate who hopes to find a position at the customs of the Heratan border crossing.

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The new governor has agreed to an interview. But first, his secretary, armed with a rifle and a notebook, would like to know the questions ahead of time. The office is still decorated with the taste of the previous tenant: mouldings, floral carpets, and golden statues now stand side by side with a white and black flag planted next to a lacquered desk.



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When Malawi Qudratullah Hamza finally entered, he was closely followed by two bodyguards wearing a camouflage traditional dress. "Going from insurgency to governance is very different," the Taliban governor told the BIC. "We want to ensure more safety and peace for the people, to make sure that they can drive expensive cars at night if they wish and walk alone on the streets with their phones."

"The changes are underway. Police officials [from the previous government] are working with us," claimed this veteran of the war against the USSR, wearing a dark turban and a black beard.

"After the Soviets were defeated, we ruled the country peacefully, but the world could not tolerate an Islamic regime in Afghanistan, so they started a war against us again. Unfortunately, we lost but after just three months we resumed our activities in the country. We fought against American colonization and after 20 years of

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combat, thank God, we won," he said with satisfaction before excusing himself and exiting the office.

Once the Taliban had gone, a civil servant who was also in the room finally exploded: "My God, I'm shaking! I don't want to be here, but they know where I live so when they called to tell me to come back to work, I didn't dare refuse." He suddenly fell silent and looked discreetly from left to right. "I hope there are no microphones and cameras," he whispered, visibly nervous.

With the Taliban now in power following a 20-year-long, bloody insurgency, the group has the titanic task of running a country of 38 million. On September 7, they announced an interim government and declared the country an "Islamic Emirate".

The new cabinet, entirely male and almost exclusively Pashtun, is made up of senior Taliban figures with little to no experience in public policy.



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"You see that the mullahs and Taliban that are in the power, have no PhD, MA or even a high school degree, but are the greatest of all," Taliban leader Sheikh Molvi Noorullah Munir was quoted as saying, reigniting a debate on the group's perceived inability to govern.

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"Ideology will not feed the people. 99% of Afghans are Muslims, that's nothing new. The question is: can they successfully govern?" asked a former senior official of the fallen Republic. "They don't have the skills to rule the country and I am not sure they are aware of that. You cannot work in a 21st century office with ideas from the Middle Age," he told the BIC, asking for his name to be withheld for security reasons.

A cause of great concern among the population was the reestablishment of the "Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice". During the first Taliban regime (1996-2001), its morality police roamed the streets to implement an austere interpretation of Islamic law, banning kite-flying and chess, whipping women deemed immodestly dressed, stoning adulterers, and amputating thieves.

Mohammad Yousuf, 32, presents himself to the BIC as the "director for the central zone" at the newly restored ministry of vice and virtue. While most Taliban officials attempt to present a more palatable face to the rest of the world with polished speeches, Mr Yousuf bluntly confided that he aims to reinstate corporal punishment and stoning for Afghans who dare to break the group's vision of Sharia.

"When someone has sex outside of marriage, they will be sentenced in court with the help of four witnesses, according to Islamic regulations. But only if the witnesses have the same version of events," he told the BIC from inside his office in Kabul's 10th district.

"If the accused is married, the judge will decide on a stoning to death. If that person is single, then they will be whipped," he added. "The sentence will be carried out in public so that it serves as a lesson to the rest of the population."

As acting minister, the Taliban appointed a little-known cleric named Mohammad Khalid who has yet to publicly comment on his new endeavour. Speaking in an official capacity, Mohammad Yousuf said no sentence had yet been implemented because the new government is not yet in place.

Another brake on Mr Yousuf's deadly obsessions is the international community. "For now, we may not apply these rules because otherwise the rest of the world will not accept the Islamic emirate of Afghanistan," he regretted.

"My mother told me terrifying stories about how this ministry operated back then," a 24-year-old feminist activist told the BIC. "It's very scary for everyone. Perhaps the Taliban are as powerful and dangerous as they were twenty years ago."

Residents of Kabul old enough to have borne the brunt of the turbaned patrols watch the ministry's return with apprehension. "Islam is a religion of moderation. I hope that at least part of the Taliban leadership understands that" an employee of the Finance ministry told the BIC. "Either way, if they get too extremist, they will never get the support they need from the international community."

Abdoul Ghafor is "maybe" 58 years old. On the side of the road, a stone's throw from the ministry of vice and virtue, this father of six sells for 50 cents per plate some "Kabuli Palaw" (seasoned rice) that passers-by eat while leaning on the edge of his cart. "I think they're not the same Taliban they were twenty years ago," he told the BIC. "Anyway, for poor people like me, it doesn't matter who rules as long as we can feed our families."

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"



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