

GOVERNANCE ISSUES IN AFGHANISTAN: THE FALL OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

After August 15, 2021, Afghans witnessed yet another link in a chain of events that offer no long-term prospects for peace: after twenty years of Islamic Republic, Kabul once again became the capital of an emirate. The Afghan emirate, which had first formed in 1996 and was overthrown in 2001 following the NATO invasion, never entirely lost its grip on the country's most rural and peripheral regions.

From 2002 onward, the presidential government of Hamid Karzai managed to build democratic institutions, transportation and productive infrastructure, relying on international aid and supervision from Western institutions. However, sheltered in the mountains of Pakistan, several Taliban groups—among them the feared Haqqani Network—regrouped and rearmed to overthrow what they described as a corrupt government and restore the theocracy Afghanistan once had.

We all witnessed the Taliban's dizzying rise to power in August 2021, waking up each day to news of a new provincial capital falling to the insurgents. Various theories have emerged to explain the rapid collapse of the Afghan armed forces, the withdrawal of international troops, and the weakening of democratic institutions. In this brief report, I aim to highlight certain governance-related factors essential to understanding the complexity of this democratic failure.

Let us consider the following timeline:

- **2001**: NATO invades the Emirate of Afghanistan (1996–2001), leaving the UN to oversee the formation of a domestic government under Hamid Karzai. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is established.
- **2009**: Taliban groups entrenched in peripheral areas begin forming local governments. Kabul attempts to initiate peace talks with Taliban leaders.
- **2014**: Ashraf Ghani wins the presidential election.
- **2015**: The Taliban establish the Doha Negotiation Office in Qatar.
- **2020**: Doha Agreements are signed, setting a timeline for NATO troop withdrawal.
- **April 2021**: The UN commits to removing all international troops from Afghanistan before May. In parallel, the Taliban launch a nationwide offensive. Afghan troops collapse like dominoes.
- **August 2021**: Fall of Kabul. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan de facto reemerges.

Understanding Governance

Governance is defined by Oxford Languages as:

A mode of governing based on a balanced interaction between the state, civil society, and the market to achieve stable economic, social, and institutional development.

The lack of centralized governance in Afghanistan resulted in the following:

- **Facilitation of drug trafficking**, due to poor border surveillance and a lack of control over poppy fields. This became the primary source of financing for insurgents while simultaneously deepening corruption within official military ranks.¹

- **Widespread corruption among bureaucratic and military elites.** International aid, meant to fund equipment and training for Afghan forces, was siphoned off by high-ranking officials in the absence of auditing systems. Even months before Kabul's fall, many Afghan officers had already cut secret deals with Taliban tribal leaders to surrender their positions at a prearranged time in exchange for large sums of illicit money. According to a senior Afghan officer²: “No region fell due to war, but rather due to psychological warfare.” U.S. military equipment often ended up on the black market or in Taliban hands—either through theft or outright handover.³ The Taliban capitalized on this systemic corruption, shifting in 2014 under Mullah Mansour’s leadership to a dual strategy: military and political. They opened the Doha Office to show willingness to negotiate with Kabul and Western powers, pursued corrupt public officials, and oversaw the fair distribution of goods in occupied territories. They also expanded their tribal representation to avoid limiting power to the Pashtun ethnic majority.

- **Demoralization of outlying troops, who, after losing their salaries, supplies, and central support, turned to looting the areas they were supposed to defend—or simply fled, often with the tacit approval of their commanders.** The NATO-trained Afghan forces followed a U.S. military model, requiring a secure and continuous logistical chain supported by airbases throughout the country. After NATO withdrew aerial support in April 2021, those logistical routes became unusable. Afghan officers had not been trained to maintain these routes. Testimonies⁴ confirm that commanders were literally ordered to flee their posts, a severe breach of military ethics and further evidence that lack of governance was a key—if not the primary—factor in the Republic’s collapse.

- **Obstruction of industrial economic development.** Without control over productive

¹ CISNEROS, J. (2013) - *Afganistán, seguridad y desarrollo. Un modelo de estabilización de estados*. Pág. 77 - 79.

² PAREDES, N. (2021) - *Afganistán, la escalofriante dimensión ilegal de la economía del país*. BBC Mundo. Disponible en: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-58305395>

³ Ídem.

⁴ RIAL, J. (2021) - *Nueva caída de Kabul*. Instituto de Relaciones Internacionales. Universidad Nacional de La Plata. Disponible en: <https://www.iri.edu.ar/index.php/2021/08/16/nueva-caida-de-kabul/>

zones (such as mines and oil fields) or the eastern borders, the Kabul government was unable to maintain regular, stable trade with neighbors like Pakistan and India—despite sending over 40% of its exports to them. From the onset of the conflict, Taliban forces sought to control strategic mineral resources (gold, rare earths, uranium, lithium, etc.). This underdevelopment led many youth to view the Taliban as their only viable source of food, income, and social mobility.⁵

- **Corruption and disconnect between the armed forces and the population.** Civilians, fully aware of the widespread corruption in the military and police, saw these forces not as legitimate tools of the state but as personal enrichment machines. Paradoxically, Taliban “taxation” was often seen as more predictable and transparent. As Ahmad Sayid Azimyan, trade official of Herat, explained ⁶: “*With the Taliban, once you pay the bribe, you get a receipt, and you won’t be asked again. Police don’t issue receipts for their bribes.*” This suggests that in some respects, the Taliban’s bureaucracy was more stable and functional than that of the central government.

- **A state versus a clan society.** Afghanistan is predominantly rural (74%)⁷ and structured around clan-based social organization. These clans revolve around extended families and councils of elders who handle local conflict resolution, marriages, and social affairs. This structure is naturally averse to recognizing the authority of a centralized, unitary, Western-style, quasi-secular state often perceived as corrupt and dysfunctional. Throughout Afghan history, attempts to impose republican governance—starting with British colonial rule—have constituted efforts to forcibly westernize a deeply traditional society accustomed to localized and accessible forms of order. Many soldiers deserted to protect their own villages rather than defend a nation-state they did not identify with.⁸

- **Lack of foundational structures to support a Western democracy.** Afghanistan's population is largely rural, illiterate, and poor—lacking a defined middle class, which has been a backbone of republics since 1789. Educated individuals, often trained in Western values, tend to emigrate, finding no infrastructure to apply their knowledge or earn sustainable incomes. Most higher education is funded by foreign donors, especially from the UK and U.S., weakening the state's capacity to develop a robust, secular public education system.

Conclusion

The lack of governance in Afghanistan was not merely a cause of the democratic regime’s fall,

⁵ Oficina de Información Diplomática del Reino de España – Afganistán. Disponible en: http://www.exteriores.gob.es/documents/fichaspais/afghanistan_ficha%20pais.pdf

⁶ PAREDES, N. (2021) – *op. cit.*

⁷ Data from World Bank. Disponible en <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=AF>

⁸ CISNEROS, J. (2013) - *Afganistán, seguridad y desarrollo. Un modelo de estabilización de estados*. Pág. 39-43.

but also an indirect consequence of attempting to conceive a state, apply a constitution, and govern a population through a Western-democratic lens in a territory (not a state) long ruled by religious codes instead of constitutions, clans instead of state institutions, and local militias instead of regular armies. Throughout history, modern states imposed on Afghan soil have sought to import, force, or impose a modern order on a space that—by our standards—remains trapped in the past. Our Western understanding of governance faces a stark contrast when used to diagnose Afghanistan's internal challenges.