

Afghanistan: Foreign Occupations, Nation Building and the Sigh of the Oppressed

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In our century, Afghanistan is the country that would turn the most optimist votary of the hope that modernity represents, into an incurable pessimist. More than 10 years ago, the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek had written: “40 years ago, [Afghanistan] was a country with a strong secular tradition... Where did this secular tradition go?”

The Saur Revolution of April 1978, which was an independent effort of communist groups in Afghanistan, and whose slogans on land reforms and abolition of bride price remained a rhetoric, was soon under siege from rural resistance. On the “invitation” of the Afghanistan Government in December, 1979 the Soviet Union intervened, but in less than ten years they had to withdraw. The defeat of the Soviet Union and the victory of Islamist warlords in Afghanistan, continues to be seen as the first domino which led to the eventual collapse and disintegration of the USSR in 1991. The US regarded this as their final victory in the Cold War. But 12 years later, Operation Enduring Freedom saw a US and UK coalition, with committed support from Canada, Australia, Germany and France, attack and take control of Afghanistan. Nearly 20 years later, we are seeing another withdrawal, and another advance of Islamist forces, with a self-proclaimed softer, less vindictive, more human approach.

Known as the graveyard of empires, Afghanistan has also seen the demise of ideologies. The country has seen the failure of communism and liberal democracy, both of which did not endure, and does the repeated rise of theocratic regime truly represent a victory? Do the new rulers of Afghanistan represent the “sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions” – what Karl Marx once described religion to be?

Writing of the 70s, in beautiful article written for the Jacobin Magazine, anthropologist Jonathan Neale, recounts the feudal terrain of Afghanistan, where “power lay not with urban businessmen but with great landowners who lived in the countryside forts. Sometimes there were two great lords, sometimes one, and in other places one man dominated several villages”. Except for a few middle peasants, majority were landless sharecroppers or labour with very high levels of poverty, he goes on to say.

While estimates of death and destruction are seldom accurate anywhere, and more so in Afghanistan, it is estimated that in a population then of 20 million somewhere between 600,000 to a million people were killed and six million driven to refuge during years of Soviet occupation and the resistance to it. Claims of social progress and modern nation state building, could not have more vacuous. Not only was the economy in tatters and food prices rising by a factor of five, the killings of young adults, and fleeing of several million, meant that women were left behind to fend for themselves. This war wreaked havoc on an already precarious existence of the Afghan working classes.

The story of five years of Taliban rule which ensued, is no different. With nearly a third of Afghan

population already in refuge or decimated after years of conflict, the flight of labouring classes, alongside loss of capital and trade, plummeted ordinary Afghans to new lows. Food and basic necessities remained in short supply, and within years Taliban's opposition of opium production, has reversed to them actually taking steps to boost it. By 1999, Afghanistan had become the largest producer of illicit opium. Stories of abuse and killings of any opposition, oppression of women and minority ethnicities abound, in the past of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The last 20 years of US domination have also not inspired much hope, either. Most growth remained focussed on the urban middle and upper classes, and bypassed the traditional subsistence agriculture and nomadic economy. It continues to be a country unchanged, where majorities are landless peasants in sharecropping and agriculture labour. Various researches point to inequality and poverty where resources are held by a very few in a deeply oppressive relationship. While overwhelming majorities are in agriculture the extent of landlessness in rural areas, as some sample researches point, still is between 50-80%, and unemployment high. Some leave to find work, but with the urban economy not growing, these options for most are limited, and risks of migration high. Lives of an estimated 170,000 persons, have been one human cost of the war.

In 2006, I had the opportunity to travel to the Afghanistan countryside, to participate in meetings in villages of several provinces. I was told that endless poverty and wars had been driving children and youth to take up both arms and opium addiction. In the views of several villagers who had gathered to meet during a social audit processes, it did not matter to who ruled Kabul. Their lives had only been spent in endless labour and hunger.

Regarding addiction, by 2015 the Afghan Ministry of Health had put the national figure of drug addicts to 10% of the population, of which 30% were children. Poverty, conflict and lack of hope come together to push people into drug addiction, among them women and children. Obviously, some had preferred opium to religion.

A westernised green zone, with impoverished countryside is what was the outcome of 20 years of US domination. A zone which fell into darkness the moment the diplomats withdrew.

The Taliban rides back into this scenario. Except for their promise of a new autonomous Afghanistan and of nationalism steeped in religion, they have little to show for in the past, except regressions. The "human face" of the Taliban of today rests on the press conference given a few days ago, where they said: "we want to assure the residents of Kabul for full security, for protection of their dignity and security and safety.... The issue of women is very important. The Islamic Emirate is committed to the rights of women within the framework of Sharia.... Impartiality of the media is very important. They can critique our work, so that we can improve." However, such expectations hang by a tenuous thread of hope that Taliban of 2021 is in a world different from 1990s; for in the various pronouncements to date there has been no elaboration of what's the programme of development they have in store.

For the majorities of Afghans, who continue in uncertain existence in rural areas and landless tenants and sharecroppers, or are wage workers in the new urbanization, there remains little hope. The institutions which are expected to work for their welfare do not work or simply do not exist. Some say that the years of occupation and importation of values have taught the young Afghans who constitute over 70% of the population, at least what they can hope for, but truth in Afghanistan, is too often much harsher than hope.

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