

The Fall of Kabul, in Brief



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The speed at which the Taliban have taken control of Afghanistan has surprised Western journalists, and the images of Afghans trying to escape Kabul have shocked people across the world. As sad and unsettling as both things are, they should not be a surprise to anyone who has spent time trying to understand what has happened in Afghanistan since 2001. The gains of the previous twenty years have always been precarious, both because of the presence of the Taliban and the inability of the Afghan state to thrive, and after COVID-19 arrived most of the world started worrying about their home rather than the future of a distant land.

For a few months immediately after the Taliban were ousted from power, Western personnel could move around northern Afghanistan without body armour, obvious security details, and armoured vehicles, but this did not remain the case for very long.

Western forces have always had to be ready for an attack, because being attacked by the Taliban was normal. The Taliban never went away: they just learned that direct assaults on Western forces were very costly.

We should reflect on the fact that, except during photo opportunities, Western personnel could not wonder about safely, or drive from village to village in soft skinned vehicles. Afghanistan has not been anywhere near at peace since the 1970s, and to say that an absence of violence on any given day since 2001 represents a move toward peace in Afghanistan is extremely naïve.

During the 1990s the Taliban took advantage of a power vacuum, chaos, and violence to establish a brutal authoritarian regime. In 2021 the Taliban have taken advantage of a power vacuum, corruption, chaos, and violence to re-establish their brutal authoritarian regime, and this time they will be able to sell Afghanistan's mineral wealth to China, increasing the likelihood of maintaining their hold on power.

The West tried to build a modern liberal democratic state that respected Human rights in Afghanistan, and these ideas took hold in a proportion of the population, but not in the numbers necessary to transform the power vacuum, chaos, and corruption into a new and persuasive vision of what Afghanistan could be.

Afghanistan did not have inclusive institutions or legitimate rule of law under the Taliban, and these circumstances did not markedly improve under any of the Western backed governments since 2001. Western power and cash created enclaves of something new, but without ongoing Western support these enclaves could not hold their ground against the constant pressure of the Taliban. Without the development and consolidation of inclusive institutions and legitimate rule of law, Afghans had nothing to rally around or defend in pursuit of a better future. The Western backed President has fled, because he oversaw a house of cards that could not be held up as an inspiring rallying point or defended on the ground.

The West encouraged Afghans to help us with our declared mission, and we neither understood whether the mission was possible, nor seriously reflected on the fact that we have a responsibility to the Afghans who risked their lives for our dream.

And now the West asks: was it worth it?

Building Liberal Democracy and defeating tyranny have come at a terrible Human cost throughout history. Every step forward toward inclusive institutions and legitimate rule of law has a price that must be paid in blood and treasure. We personally may not have paid the price for the freedom and dignity we enjoy in a place like Australia, but we should never forget that someone paid for it for us, and that we will be judged harshly by future generations if we do not defend and maintain their legacy.

Most Westerners lost interest in what our Defence personnel were doing in Afghanistan, but we should never forget that they fought beside their friends, in the organisations they wanted to be a part of, for the countries that they were proud to serve. Western Defence personnel want to be a part of something bigger than themselves, and to be a part of making history, and they understand that they will often be the ones who sacrifice for what their societies want to achieve.

Western politicians need to improve their understanding of what missions are possible, as well as acknowledging what sacrifices are necessary, and Western populations need to reflect on the fact that the world is what people who are willing to sacrifice make it, rather than what we want it to be.

Many Afghanis have sacrificed to try and create something new, and many Afghanis have sacrificed to bring the Taliban back to power. The lesson that can be drawn from all of this is nothing happens without sacrifice, and that sacrifice does not necessarily lead to the outcome you prefer.

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