

Scenario 231

THE NEW TALIBAN CABINET

On 7th September 2021; the Taliban announced their interim cabinet comprising of 33 members with Mohammad Hasan Akhund at the head and the groups co-founder Abdul Ghani Baradar in his deputy's role; other political, tribal and ethnic groups were not given place in the governing list.

[.... **Just Hold-On:**

On 24th August 2021; even before the formal cabinet was announced on 7th September 2021 it was a surprise for the whole world when a former Guantanamo detainee named **Abdul Qayyum Zakir** was appointed as Afghanistan's acting Deputy Defence Minister by the Taliban high council; it was first reported by **daily Al Jazeera** next day. Pakistan's PM Imran Khan had, a week earlier, endorsed the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan for breaking the '*shackles of slavery.*'

A legendary battlefield commander, Zakir was seen by the Western agencies, as an ally of the leaders of the *Haqqani* network, a Taliban sub-set. He had aligned reportedly with *Haqqani* leaders in opposing the Taliban major leadership's suggestion for peace talks with the Afghani President Ghani and his government. His motto remained waging *jihad* until victory was won by the Taliban or to become martyrs.

Zakir was well known to Pakistan's ISI, who had arranged for his quick release from custody in Quetta [Pakistan] after being arrested in 2010. Thereafter, 38-years-old Zakir, directed Taliban military operations largely in *Helmand* province, targeting NATO soldiers mostly as per Western security officials version.

Zakir's pick as Deputy Defence Minister was cited as another example of how the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan accounted for Pakistan a geopolitical victory. Pakistan's biggest gain was that India ultimately lost its influence in Afghanistan.]

Nearly all of the key posts announced by the Taliban's spokesman, from the prime minister, deputy prime minister, foreign minister etc, were handed to senior Taliban clerics or leaders of all the Taliban factions. However, it was not immediately apparent whether members of the Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek communities would also be part of the ruling structure later.

Here are some facts about the main appointments.

Mohammad Hasan Akhund, acting Prime Minister: Akhund has been the longtime head of Taliban's powerful decision-making body, Rahbari Shura, or leadership council. He was first the foreign minister and then deputy prime minister during the Taliban's last rule from 1996-2001. Like many others in the Taliban leadership, Akhund derives his prestige from his proximity to the movement's first leader. A UN report described him as a 'close associate and political adviser' to Mulla Omar.

Akhund is highly respected within the movement, especially by its supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. Akhund is believed to be more of a political than a religious figure, with his control over the leadership council also giving him a say in military affairs.

Abdul Ghani Baradar, acting Deputy PM; Baradar was once a close friend of Mullah Omar; served as deputy defence minister during the Taliban's last rule over Afghanistan. Following fall of the Taliban government in 2001, Baradar served as a senior military commander responsible for attacks on coalition forces. He was arrested and imprisoned in Pakistan in 2010. After his release in 2018, he headed the Taliban's political office in Doha, becoming one of the most prominent figures in peace talks with America.

Amir Khan Muttaqi, acting Foreign Minister: Originally from Paktia but then acquired residential status from Helmand. Muttaqi served as minister of Culture & Information during the previous Taliban government, as well as minister of Education. Muttaqi was later sent to Qatar and was appointed a member of the Peace Commission and Negotiation team that held talks with the US.

Neither militant commander nor religious leader, Muttaqi is the Chair of the Invitation and Guidance Commission, which during the insurgency had led efforts to get government officials and other key figures to defect. In statements and speeches while fighting raged for

control of the country, he projected a moderate voice, calling on forces 1 holed
up in provincial capitals to talk to the Taliban to avoid fighting in 2 urban
areas. 3

During the days after the fall of Kabul in August 2021, Muttaqi played 4
a similar role with the lone holdout province of Panjshir, calling for a 5
peaceful settlement to hostilities. 6

Mullah Yaqoob, acting Defence Minister: Son of the Taliban's founder 7
Mullah Omar, Yaqoob had originally sought to succeed his father in 8
2015. He stormed out of the council meeting that appointed his father's 9
successor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, but was eventually reconciled. 10

Still in his early 30s and without the long combat experience of the 11
Taliban's main battlefield commanders, he commands the loyalty of 12
Taliban group in Kandahar because of the prestige of his father's name. 13
He was named as overall head of the Taliban military commission last 14
year, overseeing all military operations in Afghanistan and was one of 15
the three deputy leaders, along with Baradar and Sirajuddin Haqqani. 16

Still considered relatively moderate by some Western analysts; Taliban 17
commanders hold he was among the key-leaders controlling military 18
campaigns in cities before the fall of Kabul. 19

Sirajuddin Haqqani, acting Interior Minister: Head of the influential 20
Haqqani network, Sirajuddin Haqqani succeeded as its leader following 21
the death of his father, Jalaluddin Haqqani, in 2018 and held respect 22
from his tribe. 23

Initially backed by the US as one of the most effective anti-Soviet militia 24
in the 1980s; his semi-autonomous group was blamed for some of the 25
deadliest attacks on coalition forces. Later he was equally disliked by the 26
US but Taliban continued to own and back the Haqqani group. Haqqani 27
group has been based in the lawless frontier areas between Afghanistan 28
and Pakistan. 29

Zabihullah Mujahid, acting Deputy Information Minister: The long- 30
time spokesman for the Taliban, Mujahid has for more than a decade 31
been the key conduit for information on the group's activities, regularly 32
posting details of suicide attacks through his media accounts. No photo 33
of him existed until he gave his first press conference following the fall 34
of Kabul in August 2021, and for years American military intelligence 35
believed Mujahid was a persona for several individuals running the 36

group's media operations – he has appeared in live media as the best spokesman on behalf of the Taliban government.

The key question confronting the Taliban was that of international recognition; though the Taliban said '*...they want strong and healthy relations*' with other states but no country on the globe recognized their government till ending the year 2021 at least.

On 7th September 2021; Afghan women convened an anti-Pakistan protest rally, near the Pakistan embassy in Kabul. The Taliban fired shots into the air to disperse the crowds; banning any demonstrations that didn't have official approval for both the gathering itself and for any slogans that might be used. It was the first decree issued by Taliban's new interior ministry, [*led by Sirajuddin Haqqani; allegedly wanted by the US on terrorism charges*]. The Taliban warned opponents that '*they must secure permission before any protests or face severe legal consequences*'.

On one pretext or the other, the protests and demonstrations started with the formal announcement of the interim Taliban's government in Afghanistan; in Herat, two people at the demonstration site were shot dead. In another indication of questionable situation for human rights, another senior Taliban figure said **on 8th September 2021** that Afghan women, including the country's women's cricket team, will be banned from playing / sports etc till a formal decision of the *SHURA* appears.

However, the Taliban needed to assure the world that things would be different this time around as compared to their previous stint; most reservations were regarding the fundamental as well as women's rights. Secondly, most countries were looking for their pledge to take action against foreign terrorists based on Afghan soil. In an interview with the **Australian broadcaster SBS**, the deputy head of the Taliban's Cultural Commission, Ahmadullah Wasiq, said:

"I don't think women will be allowed to play cricket because it is not necessary that women should play cricket. In cricket, they might face a situation where their face and body will not be covered. Islam does not allow women to be seen like this.

It is the media era, and there will be photos and videos, and then people watch it. Islam and the Islamic Emirate [Afghanistan] do not allow women to play cricket or play the kind of sports where they get exposed."

[Daily **the Guardian** dated 8th September 2021 is referred]

US WANTED 'INCLUSIVE' CABINET:

The Taliban was cold to the US suggestion to include '*old guards*' in the '**inclusive government**' arguing that ethnic minorities were duly represented in its Cabinet announced a month earlier and that women would be added later.

On 8th October 2021; Suhail Shaheen, ambassador-designate to the UN, told **Al Jazeera** in an exclusive interview that:

'The international community must respect the wishes of the Afghan people....Our [Taliban's] Islamic emirate is ready for inclusively but not selectivity.'

On 8-9th October 2021; the US officials, including intelligence and Department of State, held their first face-to-face meeting with Taliban officials in Doha since American troops pulled out from Afghanistan a month earlier. Taliban delegation was led by acting Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, Spy Chief Mullah Abdul Haq Wasiq, Minister of Information and Culture Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwa and Sheikh Shahabuddin Delawar. On other side of the table, there were Qatari officials and representatives of a number of other countries, including the America.

The continued closure of high schools for girls and killing of *Hazara* people had drawn criticism from many states, and caused concerns among the Western nations who were hesitant to recognise the new government in Afghanistan on the said issues.

[Maulvi Delawar is one of the founding members of the Taliban negotiation team based in Doha. He was sent by the group's founding Chief Mullah Omar to establish the Doha political office.]

Here one can recall **DR EJAZ AKRAM AND PEPE ESCOBAR'S 'Letter to the Taliban'** available on all media pages of 22nd September 2021, which asked the US sponsored international community that:

*"On the demand for an '**all inclusive government**' [in Afghanistan]:*

- *Imagine if the **French revolutionaries** were asked to retain the elements of the kingdom of Louis XVI while forming the new republic to keep it all 'inclusive'.*

- *Imagine that the **American revolutionaries** were asked to keep the British loyalists as a part of the new American republic to keep it all inclusive.*
- *Imagine that the **Bolsheviks** were asked to keep the Czarist loyalists in the government to keep it all inclusive.*
- *Imagine that **Chairman Mao** was asked to keep the Kuomintang as a part of his new set up to keep things all inclusive.*
- *Imagine that **Imam Khomeini** was asked to keep the elements of Reza Shah's puppet government to keep the new Iranian government all inclusive.*
- *Imagine that **Erdogan** was asked shortly after the coup to keep the Gulen movement intact to keep the Turkish government all inclusive.*
- *Imagine that the **Saudis** are asked to give due representation to a quarter of its Shi'ite population to keep the Kingdom all inclusive.*
- *Imagine that **India's Modi** is asked to give full citizenship rights to Muslims, Sikhs and other minorities to keep RSS-India all inclusive."*

If all of the above couldn't be, then what logic is the so-called international community practicing when asking the Taliban to keep those who aided and abetted the utterly unjustified foreign occupation as a part of their government to keep things all inclusive?

In Afghanistan it was not a mere change of government; successive puppet governments responsible for killing their own people and spreading subversion in the region were sent to exile. A state is one group that has to have a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. All other groups have to be disarmed and disbanded.

In Afghanistan, the majority population keep Muslim beliefs and values. The Taliban's vast force is *Pashtun*, practicing *Pashtunwali* code - **Hanafi Sunni Shariah**, but *non-Pashtun* Afghans are all Muslims too. Therefore, the Taliban would naturally build their governing structure based on Islamic values; to expect that the Afghans would subscribe to liberalism is simply an opposite fantasy.

The Taliban took control of the entire country without a fight. The Afghan Army dispersed so easily and hugged the Taliban fighters and

many even joined them. Had the public opinion not behind their 1 resistance movement, it could never succeed. AND this is the proof of 2 Taliban's inclusion; they gave general amnesty to all. One could ponder; 3

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"Who had more mercy in their hearts; the progenitors of the modern 5 republics or the Taliban? We have never seen such a spectacle in recent 6 human history. If this is not inclusion, then what is this?" 7

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[In Dr Ejaz and Pepe's essay, their opinion comes up that the 'so-called 9 rogue international community' is screaming over Islamic system for 10 Afghanistan because of their historical prejudice against Islam and 11 Muslims. Edward Said illustrated it quite well in his famous classic, 12 ***Orientalism***. The contemporary ***Islamophobia Trade*** is another proof 13 of the West's unfounded hatred for Islam as religion.] 14

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The Muslim intelligentsia held that the interim set up in Afghanistan 16 must not include elements of the Ancient Regime who were on the 17 payroll of their enemy-states; as they fought for twenty long years 18 against the Taliban cause. Islam is neutral to the form of government; it 19 only insists that regardless of the form of the government, the outcome 20 must be justice. 21

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The Qura'n, the holy book of Muslims, also suggests that justice is not 23 equality. Equality is giving everyone the same; justice is giving whomever 24 their due. Thus honest and competent people from all ethnic backgrounds 25 should be chosen, then trained and then run the government. Of course, 26 the Taliban community which struggled and sacrificed enormously to 27 throw out the foreigners, would have more say in matters of state 28 formation, compared to those who sided with the oppressor to kill their 29 own people and their neighbours. 30