THE ECONOMIC AND HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVES OF THE AFGHANISTAN CRISIS AND LESSONS FOR NIGERIA

By

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Introduction

Afghanistan has been in conflict with itself and the outside world for more than forty years and for various reasons. As things stand with the return of the Taliban to power in the country, it looks like Afghanistan will enter another phase of "more-of-the-same". There will be more violence, deaths, poverty, and human rights abuses.

The journey to the perilous state in which Afghanistan is in late 2021 has a fairly long history. Beginning with the long period of feudal rule through several other regime types, to the present era of the return of the Taliban to power, life for the people has so far been nasty, brutish, and uncertain. After all, as Sima Samar has asserted, "Poverty has been prevalent throughout Afghanistan's history…" (Sima Samar 2020). This contribution gives highlights of the rather grim history of Afghanistan, life under Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, the 20 years of "state-building" under the supervision of the Americans and their allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), we project what the future holds for Afghanistan under the Taliban, and we conclude with what lessons Nigeria should draw from the experiences which Afghanistan has gone through.

Some Highlights

The history of political instability in Afghanistan dates back to the 1970s when the Cold War was raging between the United States (and her allies) and the Soviet Union (and hers). In 1973, the long reign on the Afghan Monarch King Zahir Shar was ended by Mohammed Daoud Khan who seized power. Daoud was launched into power with the help of the Soviet-backed *Parcham* faction of the Afghan power groups.

As is so often the case when a protégé tires to act independent of his master, there results a split or falling out. This was the experience of Daoud who tried to be more of a nationalist and fell out with the Soviet Union. The result was a coup d'etat by the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan and the assassination of Daoud with his family. The Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan in turn faced resistance from groups such as the Mujahideen who were opposed to the communist government put in place with the help of the Soviets.

The Mujahideen were groups which emerged to defend their Muslim way of life against

the communist system introduced into Afghanistan with the help of the Soviets. The increasing pressure from the Mujahideen threatened the pro-Soviet regime with defeat, and on 24 December, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to shore up its ally. This development seemed to upset the strategic calculations of the other Super power, the United States, and she took action in response. Other countries in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan also responded in line with their interests.

In the atmosphere of the Cold War, the United States responded to this development with considerable alarm. Within four days after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States approved a broad plan instructing the CIA to provide military supplies and humanitarian aid to the Mujahideen. Thus, the US fought a proxy war against the Soviet Union through the Mujahideen and with the cooperation of Pakistan. Other countries with their own interests in Afghanistan such as Saudi Arabia, also funded the Mujahideen. Egypt trained the Afghans, and Iran trained and sent money to the Mujahideen. It should be noted that Saudi Arabia is Sunni while Iran is Shia, and this gave another dangerous dimension to the situation in Afghanistan. Israel sold hundreds of tons of Soviet-made armaments (captured during its invasion of Southern Lebanon) to the US for shipment to the Mujahideen. China also sold arms to the Mujahideen fighters through Pakistan.

After 10 years of fighting an increasingly unwinnable war and suffering losses of over 14 thousand deaths and the cost of $78-152 billion, the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988. The Soviet withdrawal left Afghanistan in the same unstable state as it met the country in 1979. This resulted in the fall of Dr Najibuttali's regime in 1992, and the Mujahideen took over power at the Centre in Kabul, just as in September 2021.

The First Coming of the Taliban

The Taliban took over the central government in Afghanistan in 1996, and proceeded to a run a most brutal regime which violated human rights of the people through the implementation of the extreme brand of *Wahabism*. This is the puritanical version of Islam practiced and promoted by Saudi Arabia and by extension, Pakistan. The Wahabists sought to spread their brand to other parts of the world through Jihad. The Taliban and the other groups which subscribed to this brand of Islam became the vanguard in the fight for its spread and against countries which were perceived to be enemies of them. The United States, especially, became the main target of attacks by such groups.

Under the Taliban, Afghanistan became a haven for terrorist groups like the Al Qaeda to

operate in and project their activities and networks to other part of the world. Al Qaeda under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, was nurtured in Afghanistan and shielded to grow into a global terror organization. The safe environment provided to the Al Qaeda by the Talban regime enabled it to train fighters who were sent to set u networks and carry out violent attacks on selected targets abroad. Some of the violent acts which brought Al Qaeda to the attention of the world included the attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. The most horrendous of these attacks too place on the US mainland on 11th September 2001.

While the Taliban engaged in terrorism outside of Afghanistan, it also its own citizens at home. By insisting on taking its people back to the life practiced many centuries in the face of the advances in human development. The Taliban simply destroyed economic and social life. Such an environment did not promote economic and social development. Instead, the Taliban ran a 'crisis economy' in which only items which killed and destroyed life were traded. Chief among these items were arms and hard drugs, mainly from opium, as trade in heroin from opium flourished. The people suffered grinding poverty resulting from the policies which the Taliban imposed on the country. At the social level, the women and girls of Afghanistan were forced to stay at home. This meant that the women did not participate in production, and girls did not attend school. The Taliban even carried out public executions of women to enforce this policy. Thus, the country was turned into a prison for the female folk, since they were not allowed out in the public.

State-Building in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

The attack on mainland United States in 2001 was the undoing of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. In the aftermath of that attack, the President of the United States, George W. Bush, launched a Global War on Terror with Afghanistan being the immediate target. The Taliban were chased out of power by this American-led war, and a new era of state-building was begun. With the defeat of the Taliban, the United States and her allies set about the task of rebuilding Afghanistan into a liberal democracy. The new country was to be a complete departure from what the Taliban had put in place. The conference convened in Bonn, Germany, led to an agreement to abolish a democratic system which would among other things, protect human rights.

On 25th January, 2004, the new Constitution for the State of Afghanistan containing 162 articles was approved as the fundamental law by President Hamid Karzai. The Constitution made significant provisions for the guarantee and protection of human rights. The second chapter was titled 'Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens', underscoring the new approach to human rights. It guaranteed such rights to property, education, religion, health, work, social security, and family, among others. Legislative measures were also taken to protect human rights. These

included: Campaign against Financing Terrorism Act, 2004; Counter Narcotics Law, 2006; National Action Plan for Women Act, 2009; Minorities Protection Law, 2001; Afghan Freedom Support Act, 2002; Right to Education Act, 2005; Afghan Independent Human Right Commission Act, 2002. These all represent the direction which the post-Taliban state was intended to go.

It must be borne in mind that the state-building project in Afghanistan was encouraged by the United States and her allies in human funding and diplomatic support. The United States in particular, spent 20 years trying to rebuild Afghanistan in its own image and ended up with disastrous results. As the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction reported:

> The US government has now spent 20 years and $145 billion trying to rebuild Afghanistan, its security forces, civilian government institutions, economy, and civil society. The Department of Defense (DOD) has also spent $837 billion on war fighting, during which 2,443 American troops and 1,144 allied troops have been killed and 20,666 US troops injured. Afghans, meanwhile, have faced an even greater toll. At least 66,000 Afghan troops have been killed. More than 48,000 Afghan civilians have been killed, and at least 75,000 have been injured since 2001 – both likely significant underestimations (SIGAR, 2021)

The end of this effort at state-building by the United States and her allies came in an unexpected way, in what amounted to American capitulation to the Taliban. Then in late August 2021, Afghanistan reverted to the control of the Taliban: right back to the era before 2001. The government of President Ashraf Ghani simply melted away, leaving the Taliban to drive into Kabul and take over the country. It was an extraordinary development which left the rest of the world wondering about the future of Afghanistan.

The Future of Afghanistan Under the Taliban

Afghanistan was left in dire straits economically, politically, security-wise and with a looming humanitarian disaster. The government of President Ghani simply 'disappeared' from the scene and there was no handing over of power. Therefore, the Taliban took over with no funds to run government but with massive shortages of supplies in all areas of need: food, health, safety, and security. The security situation was made worse by the Taliban when they released from prison terrorists and other criminals. This immediately put the lives of the people at risk, especially people in the criminal justice system who sent the criminals to jail. It was said that the bomb attacks which took place at the Kabul airport, and led to the deaths of 13 American marines

and 170 Afghans was carried out by terrorists recently released from prison by the Taliban.

Yet, Afghanistan needs massive funding and materials which cannot come quickly enough. In the meantime, the United States and her allies have moved to block funding to Afghanistan from the sources under their control, such as the World Bank. This raises the question: who will step into the gap left by the United States and her allies? It would appear that countries like China may step in and expand engagement. The Gulf States like Qatar and especially Saudi Arabia may engage more actively with Afghanistan. After all, the Taliban are enforcing the same Wahabism which is the official policy of Saudi Arabia. Iran and Russia cannot be disinterested in what happens in Afghanistan. India also has interests to look after, and Pakistan is involved.

The Taliban have gone back to their old ways by implementing their Wahabi ideology in governing Afghanistan. This can be seen in their reversal of all the gains made by the people of Afghanistan, especially in human rights, over the last 25 years. The women have been asked to stay home, the girls are not back at school, female judges want to leave the country for fear that the men they jailed might kill them. Rule of Law has broken down and the economy with it. The world might well witness an increase in the production of opium to generate funds for the Taliban to run its government. Furthermore, other terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda now have a favourable environment to regroup and launch attacks at targets outside of Afghanistan. The situation is certainly fluid and no development can take place in such an insecure place. Afghanistan provides lessons for countries which are fighting terrorism, including Nigeria.

Lessons for Nigeria

Nigeria has been fighting terrorism and other violent crimes for over a decade, and has many lessons to learn from what happened in Afghanistan, especially the case with which the Taliban took over the country. The first lesson is that a fractious and predatory political and military elite that is devoid of moral integrity will only plunge its country into disaster. This can be seen from how quickly the Ghani government collapsed. It is clear that there was no unity og purpose among the Afghan elite and they were corrupt in their dealings. They stole the finds brought from outside the country for the development of Afghanistan and kept the people in misery. The level of insincerity was such that the Taliban was able to infiltrate the government at all levels and it became a lame duck that was easily pushed aside in August 2021.

The lesson from the above is that Nigeria also has a fractious and predatory elite that is steeped in corruption. Other vices are cronyism in appointments to important positions in

government institutions. There is lack of decisiveness in addressing grievances that generate violence as has been the case with the way the Boko Haram insurgency and other terrorist acts have been handled. Thus, these security challenges have continued to plague Nigeria for over one decade. The elite mist come together and salvage the country from the current security, economic, political and social challenges that are threatening to overwhelm Nigeria.

Nigeria must be inclusive in the deliberations to address the problems confronting the country. Good governance must be made the central experience of Nigerians wherever they are located in the country. The basic needs of the citizens must be met and the culture of corruption and impunity which has paralyzed public institutions, also jettisoned.

Nigeria must ensure that citizens have fair and equal access to justice, including a functioning rule of law. The justice system is not serving the people as expected, and this contributes to the tendency by people to resort to violent means of addressing their disagreements. Human rights are non-negotiable and must be upheld and promoted at all times.

A further lesson for Nigeria is that relying completely on other countries to fix its own problems will only lead to the Afghanistan experience. All countries come to the 'aid' of others only because they have their own interests to attain, and whenever they think differently, they will leave. This is what happened to Afghanistan which relied completely on the United States and her allies to address its security needs. Nigeria will do well to avoid such a degree of dependence on foreign partners. The recommendations outlined above will go a long way to keep Nigeria from the road to Afghanistan.

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