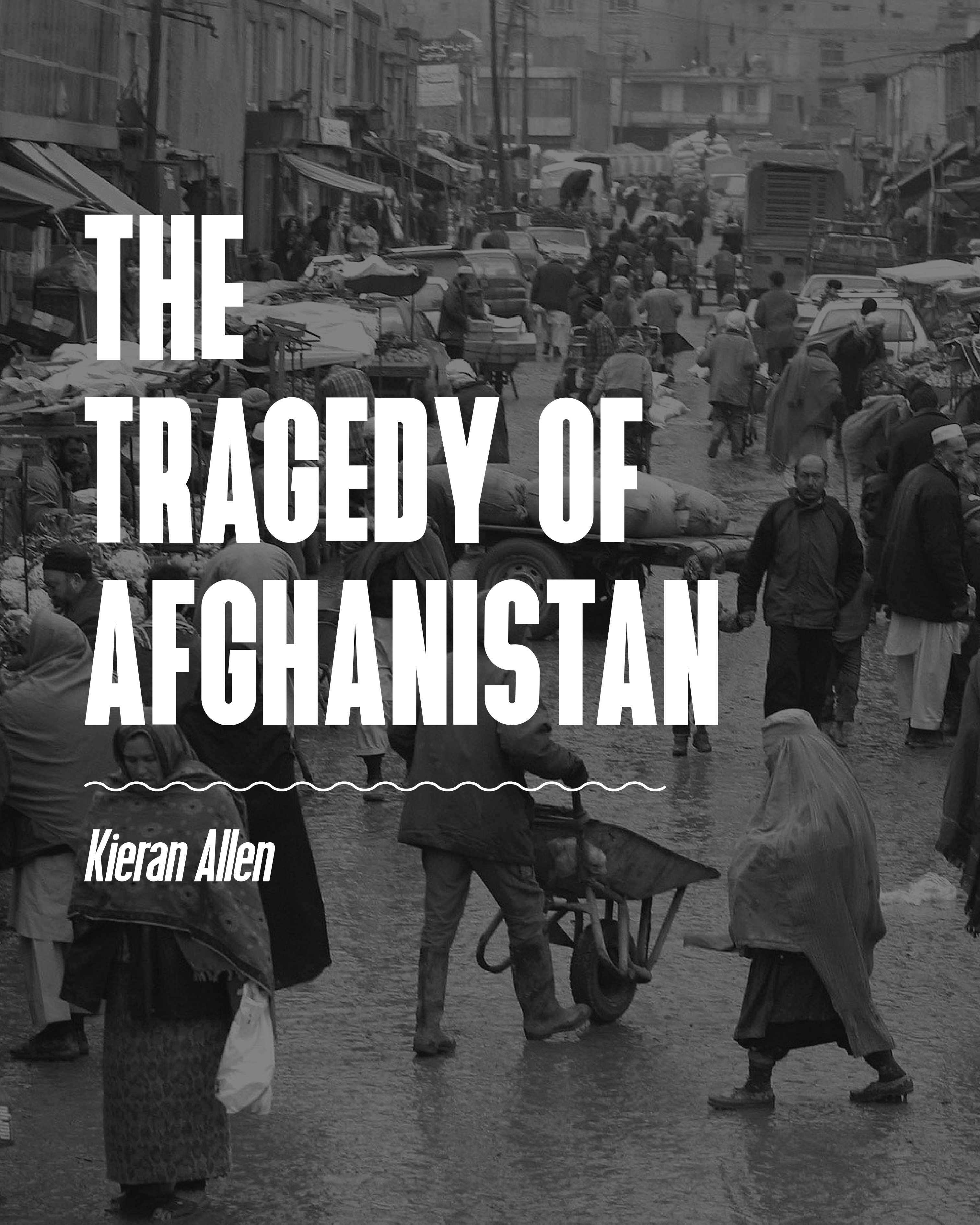

THE TRAGEDY OF AFGHANISTAN

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On 18 September 2001, the US House of Representatives voted by 420–1 and the US Senate by 98–0 to authorise the United States to go to war in Afghanistan. The country was accused of sheltering Osama Bin Laden, and that was deemed sufficient reason for an invasion. It marked the start of a wider "war against terrorism." The US president, George Bush, spelled it out:

> Our war on terror begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated. … Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen.[1]

It was a declaration of permanent war, to be launched at the will of the US whenever it deemed that an enemy could be labelled a terrorist. This hubris reflected overwhelming military power and the need to re-assert it after the 9/11 attacks.

Twenty years later, the "war on terror" ended in ignominious defeat as the US scrambled to leave Kabul. In scenes reminiscent of the withdrawal of US forces from Saigon in 1971, the greatest military power was forced to run for safety according to a timetable set by the Taliban. If anything, the defeat of the US was even more severe than in Vietnam. The Taliban took its first provincial capital on August 6th, but nine days later, on August 15th, it took the national capital of Kabul. In Vietnam, the North Vietnamese army had to endure heavy fighting as it forced its way into Saigon. Yet in Afghanistan, the national army, which the US had sponsored for over twenty years, just melted away. The former president Ashraf Ghani made a quick getaway to the airport, in a cavalcade of cars loaded with cash. His 300,000-strong army made no attempt to fight but surrendered en masse to the Taliban, handing over their weapons and costly equipment. It is estimated that the Taliban inherited an estimated $83 billion worth of US equipment, including sixty Black Hawk helicopters.

Nothing could symbolise so potently the decline of US power. Yet the mood music of the mainstream media was entirely different. In the seventies, the US defeat demoralised the right all over the world as they watched the "leader of the free world" trying to grapple with "Vietnam syndrome." After the fall of Kabul, however, the mainstream media went into overdrive, criticising Biden's "over-hasty withdrawal" and his retreat before "barbaric groups" such as the Taliban. The main reason for the shift has been the political orientation of many "progressives" or "liberals" who have been calling for "humanitarian" interventions, backed up with US muscle, in a variety of circumstances over the last twenty years. In Britain, Keir Stammer called for an "urgent meeting ofNATO" to discuss the withdrawal, while Tony Blair called for its postponement. The media commentator Stephen Collins thought that the main lesson was that Ireland had to increase its military capacity.[2]

This ideological offensive was designed to cover up the real record of the twenty-year US occupation. It had a certain ambiguous resonance throughout Western society, as the occupation was often presented as an attempt to safeguard women's rights. Rafia Zakaria explains how this came about:

> When the Bush administration was gearing up to invade Afghanistan, they turned to the Feminist Majority Foundation—so much so that when [secretary of state] Colin Powell announced invasion plans, leaders of the Feminist Majority were present at the State Department and at the White House. That was probably one of the first times in modern history that the Western feminist movement, instead of serving as a check on state power—as it had in previous wars like Vietnam—allied itself with a war project. Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright, Laura Bush and Gloria Steinem supported this action, even though at that time there were indigenous Afghan feminists on the ground who were very much opposed to it and were arguing for peace.[3]

Zakaria’s argument also finds some support in a classified CIA document released by WikiLeaks in 2011. The CIA noted that:

> Outreach initiatives that create media opportunities for Afghan women to share their stories with French, German, and other European women could help to overcome pervasive scepticism among women in Western Europe toward the International Security Assistance Force [NATO].[4]

This is one of the most familiar tropes of empires. Historically, these often aim to cover their greed by claiming to champion women’s rights. The West becomes the archetypal male who rescues the colonised woman and makes her a protected but inferior ally. In the words of the post-colonial writer Gayatri Spivak, it is a case of “white men saving brown women from brown men.”[5] The classic example was Lord Cromer, British consul general in Egypt from 1883 to 1907, who promised to challenge Islam’s degradation of women. Yet when he returned to Britain, he set up the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage. Similarly, when Britain was robbing India, they covered their tracks by stating that their goal was to outlaw suttee—widows burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their dead husbands. The extent of the practice was much exaggerated, but it served as good propaganda for Britain’s colonial mission. In more recent times, Laura Bush called for support for the US occupation of Afghanistan to free women from the burka—while her husband George was cutting funding to family planning clinics in the US.

Western intervention brought some changes in the position of women in Afghani society—but it was a by-product of a wider imperial strategy and far more limited than the storyline made out. In 2000, under the rule of the Taliban, women made up 15 per cent of the labour force, but after twenty years of US occupation, this only rose to 20 per cent. In 2018, *Time Magazine* ran an accurate headline: ”Why Afghanistan Is Still the Worst Place in the World to Be a Woman.” After a decade of US effort at “nation building,” two-thirds of Afghani girls did not attend school, 87 per cent of women were illiterate, and 80 per cent of suicides were women.[6] In 2014, an important article of law known as the Prohibition of Questioning an Individual as a Witness was changed to prohibit relatives of an accused person from testifying against them. In practice, this meant that women who were subject to domestic violence could not give evidence against their abuser.

Far from the US promoting women’s rights, the US has supported allies like the Northern Alliance, which has a history of sexual violence and human rights abuses. The Northern Alliance was the first to impose restrictions on women, including making veils compulsory. Many women were forced to become the brides of alliance warriors or functionaries, and some opted for suicide instead. One international NGO worker explained the difference between the early Taliban and the Northern Alliance: "During the Taliban era, if a woman went to market and showed an inch of flesh she would have been flogged; now she's raped."[7] Yet none of this prevented the US supporting this faction of Afghan society.

The rhetoric about championing the rights of Afghani women stood in marked contrast to the violence that Western occupiers imposed on those same women and their husbands, brothers, and male friends. In 2010, WikiLeaks released the Afghan War Diaries, which revealed the brutality of the occupation. They showed that troops shot at unarmed drivers or motorcyclists out of a determination to protect themselves from suicide bombers. They revealed how French troops strafed a bus full of children in 2008, wounding eight. They showed how a US patrol machine-gunned a bus, wounding or killing fifteen of its passengers, and in 2007 Polish troops mortared a village, killing a wedding party, including a pregnant woman, in an apparent revenge attack.[8] Even while the US and its Western allies were proclaiming their support for women’s rights, the main victims of US airstrikes have been women and children, who, it is estimated, account for 70 per cent of those injured or killed. And even while claiming to protect women, the US was arming and supporting Saudi Arabia, which insisted that every adult woman had a male guardian.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) summed up the situation accurately:

> The US "War on terrorism" removed the Taliban regime in October 2001, but it has not removed religious fundamentalism which is the main cause of all our miseries. In fact, by reinstalling the warlords in power in Afghanistan, the US administration is replacing one fundamentalist

> regime with another. The US government and Mr. Karzai mostly rely on Northern Alliance criminal leaders who are as brutal and misogynist as the Taliban….RAWA believes that freedom and democracy can't be donated; it is the duty of the people of a country to fight and achieve these values.[9]

However, even if the US had a hypocritical position on women's right in Afghanistan, the question remains: How could such a conservative, misogynistic force come to power? And more importantly, what are the social forces that can organise for its overthrow?

At one level, the success of the Taliban is easy to explain. The brutality of the US, their support for local warlords, and the overwhelming stink of corruption led to the revival of the Taliban. Since the US invasion, opium growing has increased dramatically, and Afghanistan now accounts for 90 per cent of the global heroin market. One in ten Afghans is an opium addict. The proceeds of this trade have bred violent gangs, and many prefer a Taliban-style order. In addition, Colonel Christopher Kolenda, a US adviser, pointed to another problem with their mission—corruption on a gargantuan scale.

> Petty corruption is like skin cancer: there are ways to deal with it and you'll probably be just fine. Corruption within the ministries, higher level, is like colon cancer; it's worse, but if you catch it in time, you're probably okay. Kleptocracy, however, is like brain cancer; it's fatal.[10]

In 2011, commander of US and NATO forces General David Petraeus estimated that the Taliban had 25,000 members, but at the end of the war this has risen to 70,000. They could not have defeated of the US if they had not gained a level of popular support—no matter how passive—by virtue of opposing a foreign invader.

However, beyond these immediate factors, there are deeper reasons for the growth of a right-wing, conservative force like the Taliban. These lie in the general dynamics of how imperialist rule helps to consolidate the most reactionary aspects of a society over which it rules. This dynamic between "modernity" and tradition runs counter to the general narrative of Western writers. Traditionally, those who do not question the supremacy of "Western civilisation" or "Western liberal values" often regard other parts of the world as stuck in permanent groove of backwardness and conservatism. They assume that colonised countries have no history or development but are static and unchanging. The metropolitan writer then reads off the essence of this unchanging culture from key anthropological or cultural evidence. Modern change apparently only comes from the outside.

A good example of this method of understanding colonies can be found in the work of the German sociologist Max Weber, who wrote two books on the *Religion of India* and the *Religion of China*. His casual racism is evident in absurd claim he makes about the Chinese having an "absolute insensitivity to monotony"[11] or their "slowness in reacting to unusual stimuli, especially in the intellectual sphere."[12] However, in some ways the more interesting aspect of his books is the manner in which the respective populations appear as passive recipients of religious texts, doomed to never develop. Thus, the Indian population have, apparently, always been imprisoned in a caste system, while the Chinese look to the ideal of Confucianism and there are "no disturbances caused by the restless spirits of nature or of men."[13] Even more striking is the manner in which Weber never mentions the activities of marauding agencies like the East India Company, which effectively colonised India, or how Britain dismantled parts of China in the aftermath of its Opium Wars. In brief, he explains the "backwardness" of Indian or Chinese societies by the "inherent weakness" of certain aspects of their culture.

Weber's casual racism appears as an anachronism today, but the method of viewing countries like Afghanistan as unchanging entities unaffected by imperialist intervention remains prevalent. Afghanistan is viewed through a lens of "fanatical Islam," and so the misogynistic treatment of women is regarded as the inevitable outcome of that culture. This fails to fully acknowledge the wider impact which colonialism has had on the country.

Take the relatively straight forward issue of religion. The Taliban promote a version of Islam known as Deobandi Islam whose roots can be traced back to nineteenth-century India. But this version of Islam has by no means been historically dominant. Omar Sadr, who writes on cultural diversity in Afghanistan, explains:

> The traditional Islam practiced in Afghanistan was quite different. It is an Islam as a faith for the

> majority of the people and that is different from Islam being as an ideology…Sufi tariqas [schools] were quite moderate, they were tolerant, they were accepting, they established a kind of order which was cosmopolitan and wherein it accepted diversity of the society and mutual coexistence.[14]

Deobandi Islam was shaped by the context in which in developed after the 1857 revolt against British rule in India. The British defined this revolt as primarily a religious uprising and decided to withdraw any interference in worship. This created a space for Deobandi Islam to emerge as a distinct anti-colonial religion which stressed the superiority of Islamic public morality over the decadent British. It emphasised heritage, tradition, and a return to the original teachings of Islam as a response to British rule.[15] Later, when the sub-content was partitioned, the Deobandi movement became more powerful in Pakistan, and it was there that the madrasas (Islamic schools) which gave birth to the Taliban were based. It is through the networks of the Pashtun population that Deobandi Islam has come to replace the more traditional Sufi versions of Islam.

More broadly, imperialism pushes a country backwards in specific ways. First, in order to rule, the imperial power has to accentuate and manipulate pre-existing divisions among those it conquers. Western powers have historically had the military might to overtake the armies of the colonies, but while the initial conquest can be quite rapid, it then faces the problem of rule. How, for example, were the 30,000 British people who resided in India to rule over 300 million Indians? They could only do so by formalising the caste system, embedding it in their administration, and by stoking up divisions between Hindus and Muslims. The Belgians who ruled over Rwanda could only do so by cementing the divisions between Hutus and Tutsis, with tragic consequence into the twentieth century. And that is not even to mention what occurred in Ireland.

The Afghan state was created from rivalries between the British and Russian empires in the nineteenth century, in a conflict often known cynically as the "Great Game." The British conquered Afghanistan and initially used the ruling family of the Pashtuns as their imperial brokers until they turned against them. Pashtun ethnicity was solidified and given a dominant role. Different treatments of the people went along with the forming of ethnic stereotypes: Pashtuns were considered "bellicose," Tajiks were said to be "thrifty," Uzbeks were known as "brutal," and the Hazaras as "illiterate" and "poor." Later, the British forced Afghan rulers to accept the Durand Line, which split the Pashtun population, leaving a significant number living in present-day Pakistan. The weakening of the Pashtun majority within Afghanistan led to greater efforts to centralise control of the country and to settle Pashtuns in the northern provinces. The result has been to make ethnic divisions a central part of the political structure of Afghanistan. Subsequent foreign invaders—such as the Soviet Union and the US—have in turn sought to amplify and exploit those divisions to consolidate their own rule.

Second, imperialism often works by co-opting traditional leaders into their apparatus of power. To do so, the imperial power confers greater powers and legitimacy on such rulers. Thus, in British India the empire encouraged the princes of local states to rule in their interest. It promoted the Brahmins, who represented only 10 per cent of India's population, to occupy 90 per cent of positions in its state apparatus. The US followed a similar strategy in Afghanistan. They first linked up with the Northern Alliance, and after the alliance helped defeat the original Taliban, they were given ministerial positions in the Afghan government. One writer who was sympathetic to the US occupation put it like this:

> Warlord commanders who otherwise might not have posed a significant challenge to the state were strengthened; it has since proven difficult for the centre to marginalize them, given their relationships with coalition forces as part of ongoing counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns.[16]

In Kandahar Province, for example, the US helped a warlord, Gul Agha Sherzai: in return for lucrative contracts with the US military, the Sherzais helped the US to identify local enemies. [17]

Once empires find local allies, they encourage the most hierarchical and conservative culture as a way of pacifying the country. In Afghanistan, the US inaugurated a pretence to democratic decision-making by calling a loya jirga, a traditional assembly, to choose a transitional government. Here is one account by two participants who were there:

> The gathering was teeming with intelligence agents who openly threatened reform-minded delegates, especially women. Access to the microphone was controlled so that supporters of the interim government dominated the proceedings. Fundamentalist leaders branded critics of the warlords as traitors to Islam and circulated a petition denouncing Women's Affairs Minister Samar as "Afghanistan's Salman Rushdie."[18]

While the rhetoric deployed outside Afghanistan for Western ears was about women's rights, inside the country the US was suppressing any talk of rights in order to forge their alliance with fundamentalist leaders.

Third, resistance to imperialism often takes the form of a reassertion of native traditions. If the imperialists define themselves as more modern, "civilised," and cosmopolitan, their opponents will often throw back elements of an "authentic" local culture. Typically, a layer of native intellectuals emerges to assert the value of folklore, language, religion, or whatever cultural element is to hand to strengthen resistance. However, it is only when this layer connects with wider grievances in society—often over land or discrimination—that real anti-imperialist movements are born. Whether they shift left or right often depends on the political context.

In Afghanistan, the political context led to decisive shift to the right. In the 1970s, a significant left emerged in Afghanistan, principally in the universities and in Kabul. The membership was drawn from a social stratum that wanted to see national development and a break from the semi-feudal control of the countryside. Jonathan Neale describes the rivalries in urban politics in the 1970s:

> There were two political wings of this new class. The Communists looked to ideas from the Soviet Union. The Islamists looked to the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and not to the more mystical and laid-back traditions of Afghan Islam. They saw tradition as the problem, education as the answer, and revolutionary change as a necessity. In the early 1970s the Communists and the Islamists fought each other at Kabul University and in the city high schools. The Communists won because they had far more support, and the Islamist student leaders fled to exile in Pakistan.[19]

In 1974, Mohammed Daoud Khan staged a coup against the monarchy. At first, he aligned himself with the Soviet Union, but by 1978 he swung back into supporting the US and had many Communist Party members arrested. In response, the Communist Party used its support base among army officers to stage a coup. Few people supported either the Daoud regime or the older monarchy, but the seizure of power was very much a revolt from above. It had little support in the countryside, which comprised 90 per cent of the population. Within a short period of time, conservative elements were able to whip up a rebellion, denouncing the atheistic government in Kabul. Faced with this opposition, the Communist Party split in two, and in 1979 Soviet tanks rolled into the country to support one of the factions. Thereafter, the Afghani left became associated with another colonial occupation, this time one that used napalm and aircraft to terrorise. This created a space for the Islamic fundamentalists to emerge as the main fighters against foreign occupation. They were ably assisted by the US, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan in a jihad to create an Islamic emirate.

Imperialism in whatever form, therefore, has a detrimental effect on countries that it occupies. It survives by encouraging ethnic and sectarian conflict as a way of styling any national movements. Despite all its talk of modernity, it elevates the most traditional elements as its principle mechanism for co-opting and controlling a country. Invariably, opposition to its rule will include veneration of older traditions and aspects of culture from before the imperialists arrived. Whether these themes are connected to a left or right framework will depend on political contexts and strategies of individual parties. The left will link a fight against imperialism to the redistribution of land or to the promotion of workers' rights. The right will seek to immerse that opposition in a revival of "pure" culture and religion. Whatever the outcome, however, imperialism blocks both the economic and political development of a country, helping to freeze many social questions. This is why every socialist should welcome the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan.

The victory of the Taliban, however, is by no means the end of the story. Like all nationalists, they will make their peace with the leaders of global capitalism. Already, the international press is talking about how the Taliban could do deals with either China or the US or both to sell off the country's vast mineral resources. One Pentagon memo, for example, has called Afghanistan the Saudi Arabia of lithium and projected that the country's lithium deposits could equal Bolivia's—one of the world's largest deposits. Despite all their talk about the social justice ethos of Islam, the Taliban will do little to alleviate the conditions of millions of poor people in this unfortunate country. Resistance to their rule will grow—just as it has grown in other countries which have achieved an Islamic revolution.

Within that resistance, a key issue will become the question of women's rights. The world has changed dramatically since the last time the Taliban were able to enforce their rule over Afghanistan. The country is no longer so isolated from global movements that highlight the bodily autonomy and equal rights of women. The mere fact that more women, modest as the number is, have joined the workforce outside the home will create the conditions for resistance to the Taliban's attempt to drive them back into the home. The shifting and hypocritical rhetoric that the Taliban now deploys indicates that they are nervous about imposing the restrictions of the past. Even in the immediate days after their victory, small numbers of women were protesting against any attempts to dismiss them from work or make them dress in a manner that suits a particular version of Islam. The experience of the last twenty years has shown decisively that women's liberation can never be handed down by the muscle of an imperialist army—it must be won by the struggles of people in Afghanistan themselves.

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