

How fundamentalists rule a country

Traditionalism and modernity in the Taliban's rule

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Abstract

*Marty & Appleby in their seminal *Fundamentalisms Observed* defined blend of traditionalism and modernity as one of the principal features of pure fundamentalist movement. Taliban offers a unique opportunity to compare this theoretical view with reality. In fact, Taliban's rule reflect many traditional features – traditionalist social background of wider leadership with some religious schooling, traditional power structure of shuras and leadership by a charismatic leader, emphasis on traditional religious values and creating thus a boundary 'we – them'. Yet many features were modern – use of ministries, institutionalization of the leader's position, use of novel means of repression and propaganda. Their legal system, albeit based on religious law, was inherently modern and the same can be said about the external relations. All in all it can be said that in the mixture of modernity and traditionalism in the rule of the Taliban, the modernity has won in this "anti-modern" movement.*

Keywords: Taliban, traditionalism, Afghanistan

Introduction

Even though in contemporary history there has been no scarce of movements which were described as fundamentalist (whether rightly or wrongly is another matter), it is rare to find a fundamentalist movement which grasped control of a state and run it. In this respect, the Taliban is offering an unusual opportunity to scrutinize how a fundamentalist movement uses traditionalist and modern institutions as when ruling a state.

One of the criteria spelled out by Marty & Appleby in their characteristics of a “pure” fundamentalism is selective traditionalism and selective modernity¹. Marty & Appleby also claim that fundamentalists are closer to the modernity than to traditionalism and that they are in fact exploiting Western instruments.

The goal of this paper is to analyze Taliban as one of few fundamentalist movements which grasped power over a sizeable territory and to analyze their rule from position of the traditionalist-modernist dichotomy. As a hypothesis of this paper, I take the statement from Marty & Appleby’s text that “fundamentalists demonstrate *a closer affinity to modernism than to traditionalism*”².

In the following parts of my paper, I will analyze at first traditional and than modern elements of the system applied by Taliban. Bearing in mind that the two cannot be always separated, I will make necessary connections when necessary and needed. In the conclusion of the paper, I will prove or disprove the Marty & Appleby’s hypothesis.

Traditionalist elements

Before we embark on the journey of scrutinizing the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan, one of the very usual (and in a sense traditional) feature of the Afghan political scene needs to be mentioned. As with most of the rulers of Afghanistan throughout the Afghan past, Taliban did not control the whole territory. However, it controlled at least $\frac{2}{3}$ of the country³.

Leaders of the Taliban came from very traditionalist social stratum – they were Qandahari mullahs with connections to very traditionalist Deobandi movement in Pakistan. Those mullahs did not hold highest scholarly credentials in Islam, they were rather of little religious training and they completely lacked any backing from any established institution of Islam⁴. Taliban has adopted traditional structure of shuras⁵ and the whole movement was led by Amir⁶, who was a

¹ Marty, M. E. & R. S. Appleby (1994): *Conclusion: An Interim Report on a Hypothetical Family*. In: Marty, M.E. & R.S. Appleby (eds.) *Fundamentalisms Observed*. London & Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 814 – 842. p.825.

² original emphasis, Marty & Appleby (1994), p.827

³ Rubin, B. R. (1998): *Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*.

⁴ Nojumi, N. (2008): *The Rise and Fall of the Taliban*. In R. D. Crews & A. Tarzi (Eds.), *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (pp. 90 - 118). Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press.

⁵ Rubin, B. R. (1999): *Afghanistan under Taliban*. *Current History*, 98(625), 79 - 91.

charismatic leader. This is however not to say that the power was centralized – on the contrary, Rubin suggests that the power structure became an informal network⁷.

Another traditionalist element is strengthening of the Islamist traditionalism and traditional Islamic values – at least as perceived by the Taliban themselves. The movement was religiously rigid – they claimed that non-Pashtuns cannot be good Muslims and in early stages, only very few non-Pashtuns were included in the movement⁸. This creates a clear boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – distinction between the believers and unbelievers. As Crews & Tarzi claim, their goal was also religious – to purify the religion of Pashtuns.

Whole system of the Taliban-rule was based on personal charisma of Mullah Umar. Even though institutionalization *per se* is often understood as a modern element, his traditional position as a strong personal leader has been institutionalized through his requirement of all residents of Afghanistan to obey the Emirate and the orders of the Amir. Failure to perform according to these rules would be considered as rebellious and execution of a rebel was made mandatory⁹.

Establishment of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice¹⁰ can be also seen as a mixture of modern and traditionalist elements. Of course, it is hardly imaginable that back in times of Prophet, there were any ministries. Therefore, we can conclude that the mere establishment of a ministry is a modern element. On the other hand, this modern element was mixed with a traditional one – that of establishment of a ministry which was vested in enforcing traditional values. These values were called by William Maley as “the values of village *as interpreted by refugee camp dwellers or madrassa students most of whom have never known ordinary village life*”¹¹. Taliban has strived, according to Maley, to impose these values on cities like Kabul, which was at the time of emergence of Taliban a sizable urban city.

One of the ‘most famous deeds’ for which the Taliban is known for, is the treatment of women. Application of draconian policies towards women’s clothing, education, public appearances or

⁶ His full title was *Amir al-Muminin* meaning “Commander of the Faithful”. In Nojumi, 2008, p. 107.

⁷ Rubin: *Afghanistan under Taliban*, p. 81

⁸ Crews, R. D., & Tarzi, A. (2008): *Introduction*. In: R. D. Crews & A. Tarzi (Eds.), *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (pp. 1 - 58). Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press. p. 30.

⁹ Nojumi, 2008, p.108.

¹⁰ Rubin: *Afghanistan under Taliban*.

¹¹ Maley, W. (1998): *Interpreting the Taliban*. In: W. Maley (Ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (pp. 1 - 28). New York: New York University Press.p.20

even access to medical services is clearly an extremely traditional element, which stems from a unique interpretation of sharia by the Taliban¹².

Now, although already touched upon, the modern elements of the Taliban will be scrutinized.

Modern elements

It is noteworthy to mention that Taliban as such emerged as a reaction to a modern event – Soviet war and subsequent chaos in Afghanistan. Starting with the Taliban's external relations¹³, we must acknowledge that one of the very modern elements of the international politics is certainly the existence of the United Nations. Before the Taliban begun despising the organization, they were attempting to forge ties to the United Nations and secure their place there. Even though backed by Pakistan, the Taliban was not successful and the result of growing cynicism of the UN and the Taliban towards each other was a growing contempt for the UN on the part of the Taliban¹⁴.

Crews & Tarzi have also argued that the Taliban has combined Islamic legal and court system with the Supreme Court, which is indeed a modern element¹⁵. The legal system was based on limited application of Sharia which led to very limited worldview – seeing only the good and the evil¹⁶. Jürgen Kleiner has argued that the legal system of Taliban as been applying divinely given law, combined with severe punishments and local jirgas (assemblies) active in the judicial process¹⁷. As I have already mentioned, the establishment of ministries is one of the most important modern element of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. The Kabul shura was *de facto* the

¹² Dupree, N. H. (1998): *Afghan Women under the Taliban*. In: W. Maley (Ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (pp. 145 - 166). New York: New York University Press.

¹³ The term 'external relations' is used purposefully. Olivier Roy argued that "[t]he Taliban [had] no foreign policy". Roy, O. (1998). *Has Islamism a future in Afghanistan?* In: W. Maley (Ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (pp. 199 - 211). New York: New York University Press. p.210

¹⁴ Maley, W. (2001): *The Foreign Policy of the Taliban*. Retrieved April 26, 2008, from http://web.archive.org/web/20020629003204/http://www.cfr.org/public/ForeignPolicy_Taliban_Paper.html, part V.

¹⁵ Crews & Tarzi, 2008, p.45.

¹⁶ Nojumi, 2008.

¹⁷ Kleiner, J. (2000): *The Taliban and Islam*. In: *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 11(1), 19 - 32.

government of Afghanistan and the Taliban not only sustained different ministries, but also added new ones¹⁸. The establishment of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice with a very traditional agenda was yet a modern act, when the zealous ministry personnel used whips, antennas or Kalashnikovs to keep the law and order in major cities of Afghanistan¹⁹. This already signals that the draconian legal code based on religion was coupled by the Taliban with the present-day enforcement measures. Without these, whatever legal norms would be only a dead letter.

Taliban used also modern propaganda tools. Traditionally, one of the limited ways how the ruler was 'propagated' across the Islamic empire was the pronouncement of his name in Friday's sermon. However, the Taliban has used radio as the most important propaganda tool²⁰. Radio is important for a variety of reasons – the population in Afghanistan was naturally multilingual yet largely illiterate. Moreover, in times when the TV was banned, visually the government showed its presence in the streets. Print media were developed later and included not only newspapers in different Afghan languages, but also a website.

Bearing in mind that totalitarian strife²¹ to keep itself in power coupled with religious mission of the Taliban, the modern repressive policies emerge as the modern feature of the Taliban. Institutionalized by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, Taliban has used violence in more systematized manner than anybody before. Opposed to mujahedeen who sought profit and power, the Taliban had more 'utopian aspirations' while not losing sight of the drive to control the territory and accrue resources²².

Also their activities in economic realm were modern – not only taxing, but also smuggling were done using the modern-day procedures²³.

Conclusion

¹⁸ Rubin, , *Afghanistan under Taliban*, p.81

¹⁹ Crews & Tarzi, 2008, p.47

²⁰ Crews & Tarzi, 2008, p.46

²¹ Totalitarianism was suggested as one of the ways of looking at the Taliban by Maley, 1998, p.20

²² Crews & Tarzi, 2008, p.48

²³ Rubin, B. R. (2000): *The Political Economy of War and Peace in Afghanistan*. In: *World Development*, 28(10), 1789 - 1803.

In the introduction to the paper, I have stated the thesis of my paper which comes from Marty & Appleby's text that "fundamentalists demonstrate *a closer affinity to modernism than to traditionalism*"²⁴.

After the analysis of both traditionalist and modernist elements of the movement (and elements, where both realms overlap), I came to the agreement with Marty & Appleby. Modern elements not only prevailed over the traditionalist one, Taliban has made also extensive use of Western ideological, political and technical inventions.

There is no way to deny that the Taliban had strong traditionalist elements – application of divine law Sharia, using traditional jirgas and emphasizing the traditional values are certainly the traditionalist elements. Yet I believe that the movement owed much of its success to the modern practices and elements. The adoption of a *de facto* government along with establishment of ministries, systematic use of violence and targeted use of propaganda were definitely crucially important for the success of the movement. The Taliban as a movement would be hardly able to grasp power over $\frac{2}{3}$ of the territory and keep it without using the modern features of politics and policy.

The Taliban, itself a staunch critic of modernity and Western world, can be therefore seen as being as more modern than traditional.

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²⁴ original emphasis, Marty & Appleby (1994), p.827

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Abstrakt:

V definícii "čistého fundamentalizmu" podľa Martyho a Applebyho je jedným z prvkov mix tradicionalizmu a modernity. Taliban ponúka unikátnu možnosť porovnať tento model so skutočnosťou. Je pravdou, že vláda Talibanu mala mnohé tradičné prvky – jeho vodcovia pohádzali z tradičných sociálnych vrstiev, tradičnú štruktúru moci s tzv. radami a vodcovstvo charismatickým lídrom, dôraz kladený na tradičné náboženské hodnoty a vytváranie hranice medzi "nami a nimi." Napriek tomu je mnoho črt moderných – režim mal svoje ministerstvá, úloha lídra bola inštitucionalizovaná, režim využíval moderné metódy represie a propagandy. Právny systém, aj keď náboženský, bol vnútorne moderný a to isté možno povedať aj o zahraničných vzťahoch. Zhrnutím sa dá povedať, že "antimoderné" hnutie Taliban malo viac moderných než tradičných prvkov.