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ANATOMY OF A FAILED STATE: AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Afghanistan has been the centre of conflict and turmoil gaining international significance over several decades. The landlocked country in South Asia has been embroiled in domestic and international disputes which have tangibly impacted several institutional structures concerning development, political participation, economy, and society, among others. Its constant struggle with the Islamic fundamentalist group- Taliban has accelerated the process of reducing democratic structures to mere symbols in Afghanistan. This politically charged state has experienced several debilitating events whose adverse impact on its stability have sparked a conversation about the failure of the state. The complete withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 expedited the collapse of governance structures and eroded institutional legitimacy. During the period of the American exit, the country also witnessed its violent seizure, marked by political upheaval, by the Taliban forces. Alongside a disrupted socio-political fabric, Afghanistan has also earned the title of a 'failed state'. This paper aims to undertake a critical analysis of the anatomy of Afghanistan by providing a brief account of its history and contemporary developments. Further, it assesses the claim of state failure by decoding the fundamental tenets that underpin it and understands it in relevance to the conditions in Afghanistan post-American withdrawal.

Introduction

Afghanistan has been recognized as a 'failed state' due to its turbulent history and a protracted conflict. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during the Cold War had disrupted its political dynamics and limited infrastructure. Its fractured economy could not sustain a reconstruction project, initiated by domestic forces, which made it additionally vulnerable to democratic cessation. During these years, the Mujahadeen had gained momentum as an anti-communist force and threatened the Soviet troops to withdraw from Afghanistan. The political vacuum created in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal combined with civil wars, ethnic tensions and the lack of a central authority created a conducive environment for the rise of the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group (Clements, 2003, 28-30). Considering this, Afghanistan came at the forefront of international politics. The Taliban's ascent to power led to

the complete breakdown of the governance structures in Afghanistan, large scale displacement, human rights violations, the imposition of sanctions by the United Nations and failure of the international community to respond appropriately. It upturned the Afghan society as well as institutions of economics and politics, thereby posing challenges to the remodelling of the country.

In 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan in response to the terrorist attacks on 11th September 2001. They overthrew the Taliban regime and contributed to the process of state-building and revitaliation of democracy in Afghanistan. The Bonn Conference Accords of 2001 marked the genesis of political transition and consequent development in Afghanistan after two decades years of war and violence. Provisions were instituted for Afghanistan to have a democratically elected government in 2004. Further, the agreement also sought to draft a new constitution, rebuild the legal system, and establish a Supreme Court for judicial proceedings. Important measures for rehabilitation and development were being undertaken. However, as notable as these initiatives were, they failed to reflect the state's cultural and political history (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, 30-46). It exacerbated the issues of incompetency, corruption, and internal friction due to the lack of shared powers in the administrative setup. The lack of foreign aid and limited access to resources combined with ineffective state institutions and regional instability impeded developments. These conditions facilitated the rise of the Taliban in rural districts. By mobilising forces, they countered all measures undertaken by the Afghan government to reinstate peace and security in the country. They have challenged the authority and exposed the weaknesses in the administrative and military forces of Afghanistan. The United States had stationed its troops in Afghanistan for over a decade, making it America's longest war, to keep the Taliban forces in check. However, due to the Taliban's large scale backing in rural districts, they enjoyed popular legitimacy. As a result of this, they could not be expunged from the process of rebuilding. Positioning this support to their advantage, they began to undo many of the state-building initiatives under the premise of challenging Western powers on their land. These intentions were expressed through war and violence which fractured the country making it synonymous with that of a failed state. Further, the decreasing military presence of the United States in the last few years has strengthened the position of the Taliban in Afghanistan and primed it for a complete takeover of the country (Their and Worden, 2017, 16).

A Failed State – Case of Afghanistan

The term ‘failed state’ gained momentum after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s when many governments across the world were confronted with new threats and challenges due to the lack of support from one of the two superpowers. This sudden power vacuum coupled with protracted civil wars and the absence of a recognized political authority rendered state operability moot. The disrupted global power dynamic, intra-state conflict, socio-ethnic fractures and political instability challenged the very concept of sovereignty in several developing nations. The amalgamation of these factors resulted in the failure of many states.

A failed state is defined by the Washington-based **Fund for Peace** as one in which the government cannot physically control its territory; that has only a limited monopoly, or none at all, on the legitimate use of force; is unable to provide basic public services; and cannot represent the whole country in the international community (Del Pinto 2011). Further, it is determined by the state’s inability to perform the two fundamental functions of the sovereign nation-state in the modern world system: it cannot project authority over its territory and peoples, and it cannot protect its national boundaries. The governing capacity of a failed state is attenuated such that it is unable to fulfil the administrative and organisational tasks required to control people and resources and can provide only minimal public services. Domestically and internationally, the state loses its legitimacy. In sum, a failed state is one in which the government has lost political authority and control and thus is unable to fulfil the basic responsibilities of a sovereign state.

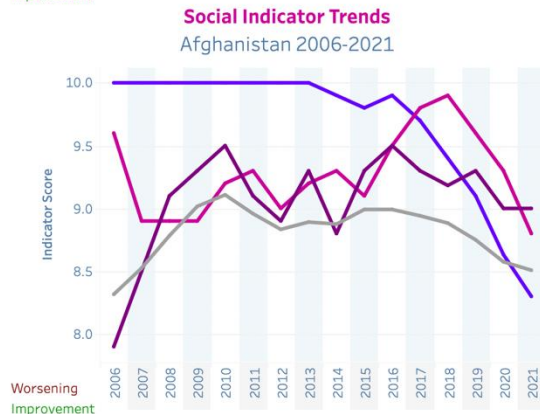
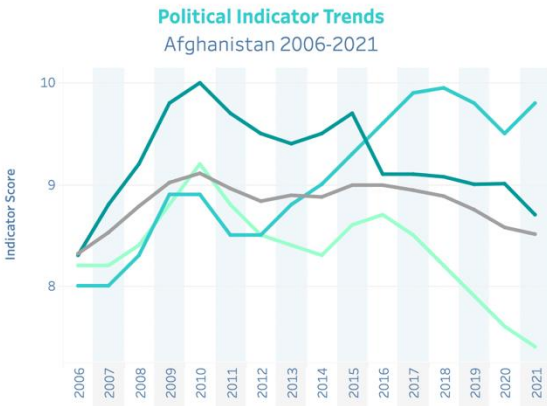
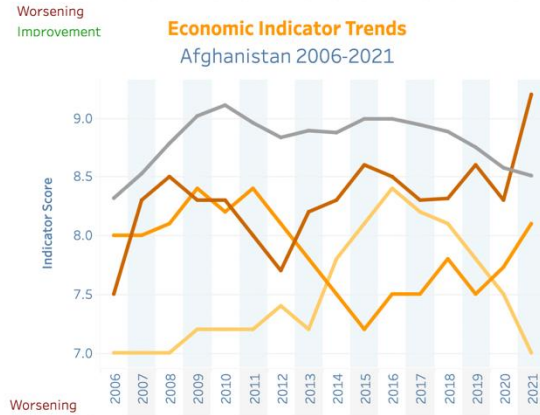
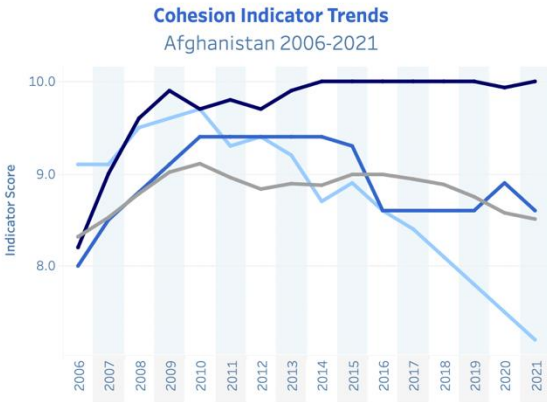
As per the data of 177 countries tabulated annually by the **Fragile States Index** from 2006-2021, Afghanistan has consistently been ranked between the first ten positions based on worsening economic, political, and social indicators (Afghanistan – Fragile State Index 2022). A closer look intimates that the Afghan central government's lack of legitimacy and international recognition, insufficient institutional capacity, rampant corruption, protracted inter-ethnic tensions, frequent insurgencies and drug trafficking are some of the most potent factors contributing to the deteriorating state condition. The coups, invasions, countercoups, and a civil war did not just open a security gap but also emboldened the perpetuation of violence in Afghan society over time (Gaiser 2015).

	Rank	Total												
2006	10th	99.8	8.2	8.0	9.1	7.5	8.0	7.0	8.3	8.0	8.2	7.9	9.6	10.0
2007	8th	102.3	9.0	8.5	9.1	8.3	8.0	7.0	8.8	8.0	8.2	8.5	8.9	10.0
2008	7th	105.4	9.6	8.8	9.5	8.5	8.1	7.0	9.2	8.3	8.4	9.1	8.9	10.0
2009	7th	108.2	9.9	9.1	9.6	8.3	8.4	7.2	9.8	8.9	8.8	9.3	8.9	10.0
2010	6th	109.3	9.7	9.4	9.7	8.3	8.2	7.2	10.0	8.9	9.2	9.5	9.2	10.0
2011	7th	107.5	9.8	9.4	9.3	8.0	8.4	7.2	9.7	8.5	8.8	9.1	9.3	10.0
2012	6th	106.0	9.7	9.4	9.4	7.7	8.1	7.4	9.5	8.5	8.5	8.9	9.0	10.0
2013	7th	106.7	9.9	9.4	9.2	8.2	7.8	7.2	9.4	8.8	8.4	9.3	9.2	10.0
2014	7th	106.5	10.0	9.4	8.7	8.3	7.5	7.8	9.5	9.0	8.3	8.8	9.3	9.9
2015	8th	107.9	10.0	9.3	8.9	8.6	7.2	8.1	9.7	9.3	8.6	9.3	9.1	9.8
2016	9th	107.9	10.0	8.6	8.6	8.5	7.5	8.4	9.1	9.6	8.7	9.5	9.5	9.9
2017	9th	107.3	10.0	8.6	8.4	8.3	7.5	8.2	9.1	9.9	8.5	9.3	9.8	9.7
2018	9th	106.6	10.0	8.6	8.1	8.3	7.8	8.1	9.1	10.0	8.2	9.2	9.9	9.4
2019	9th	105.0	10.0	8.6	7.8	8.6	7.5	7.8	9.0	9.8	7.9	9.3	9.6	9.1
2020	9th	102.9	9.9	8.9	7.5	8.3	7.7	7.5	9.0	9.5	7.6	9.0	9.3	8.6
2021	9th	102.1	10.0	8.6	7.2	9.2	8.1	7.0	8.7	9.8	7.4	9.0	8.8	8.3

Source: Fragile States Index powered by The Fund for Peace

Data from 2006-2021 <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>

These years are reflective of complex ethnic differences, border tensions, social inequality, widespread corruption, and insecurity fostered by the Taliban insurgency. These factors have handicapped the government’s ability to secure a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force within the country’s borders— through instruments such as the police and the army—which are an essential requirement for a state to be considered functional. Thus, these factors explain, in part, why Afghanistan should be considered a failed state (Ungaro 2012). This has been the status quo for several decades, although some measures taken by the government, working in tandem with the international community, to improve the quality of life have had a tangible impact. Notwithstanding, these undertakings were arguably myopic and suffered a lack of focus on medium- to long-term sustainability. Each imitative for improvement was undercut by significant limitations. “Throughout the last decade, such short-sightedness has ranged from an incorrect identification of actors, and their limited vision in the decision-making process and strategy implementation, to a lack of sufficiently deep knowledge of the country, its culture and idiosyncrasies” (Del Pinto 2011). The challenge of combatting insurgency and terrorism, along with overcoming institutional inefficiency and corruption proved to be difficult with the United States gradually rolling back their presence in the country. These became grounds for strengthening the claims of state failure in Afghanistan, and the events of 2021 made it unequivocal.



Source: Fragile States Index powered by The Fund for Peace

Data from 2006-2021 <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>

Afghanistan in 2021

The American decision to withdraw its remaining troops from Afghanistan in 2021, thus marking an end to its longest war, created a conducive environment for the Taliban to re-consolidate its position within the country (Conflict Tracker – CFR 2022). The departure of the United States coincided with the Taliban’s seizure of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and an overhaul of the existing governance mechanism. Despite many symbolic peace agreements with the United States of America, Taliban forces resumed their attacks on Afghan civilians and security forces. In an attempt to advance their territorial gains, the Taliban resorted to the rampant use of violence and coercion. The group that once enjoyed local support now suffers from domestic consternation. The events post American withdrawal have plunged the country into shambles and accentuated concerns about the failure of the state – preliminarily through the lens of legitimacy gap and capacity gap which make it defunct. Some of the major concerns include the looming humanitarian

crisis, economic collapse, non-functional political institutions, and inroads for terrorism in Afghanistan. The following sections examine some of the factors and corroborate the claim of Afghanistan being a failed state.

Human rights have remained an unfulfilled promise in Afghanistan for the better part of the last decade and the Taliban's ascent to power has further accelerated their steady decline. Some of the most prominent developments were the rolling back of women's rights, restrictions on freedom of the press and scarce access to resources – which were some of the most important advances of the 2001 reconstruction efforts (Amnesty International 2021). The political, economic, and infrastructural gains of the past decade have been undone. The country has been marred by desecration and the fear of violence is being used as a tool of suppression. Internal displacement and civilian casualties depict that the state of affairs in Afghanistan has been far from optimal. This period has also witnessed the birth of terrorist offshoots like the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) that have the potential to drive greater violence and instability. The group presents a significant security threat and could seek to take advantage of the shift in power and other crises in the country to foster greater insecurity and intensify their attacks. It remains unclear how well the new government will be able to address these kinds of security threats and mitigate the harm to Afghan civilians (International Rescue Committee 2022). This exemplifies that the state has relinquished its ability to exercise a monopoly over the legitimate use of force – one of the fundamental tenets of an enduring state.

The Taliban's control of Afghanistan and its use of violence and terror coupled with wide-ranging restrictions on media, mobility and masses has invited international concern. This power shift has led many global partners – notably the United States of America – to suspend non-humanitarian funding, freeze billions of dollars worth of assets and restrict foreign direct investment (Mohsin 2021). Along with this, many countries have withdrawn their diplomatic missions from Kabul – expressing their wide discontentment with the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan. This is indicative of the failure of the Taliban regime to generate international recognition or legitimacy. Thus, it has failed to satisfy another one of the core requirements articulated for state functionality and validity.

Without funding from foreign powers, the economy has plummeted, and healthcare systems have collapsed – thus depriving Afghani citizens of basic resources and support. Further, the well-being of millions of Afghans has been jeopardized with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such extenuating circumstances have weakened healthcare infrastructure and created a major risk of disease outbreaks, malnutrition, and preventable death. Along with these challenges, the food insecurity and an ongoing drought have displaced many – leading to an unprecedented crisis. The progressively worsening conditions are reflected in the data reported by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) which states that 24.4 million of the 41.7 million people require humanitarian aid, 2.6 million of them have been displaced across the border, an alarming 97% of its population is at the risk of sinking into poverty and over 50% of them are experiencing an increasing level of food insecurity (International Rescue Committee 2022). Fundamental provisions have collapsed due to the erosion of public services and loss of governance capacity. This is an alarming illustration of the state’s inability to provide necessities and resources – a prerequisite for an operational state.

The worsening condition of women and children also needs to be accounted for in assessing the validity, or the lack thereof, of the Afghan government (Afghanistan – UNHRC). Gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse have figured in Afghanistan ranking - 170th of 170 countries – for women’s rights. Women are treated as subordinates, made vulnerable and subjected to violence and exploitation (International Rescue Committee 2022). The radical interpretation of the Sharia law brutally imposed restrictions on the conduct of women, disenfranchised them, caused them to be deprived of formal education, and diminished their participation and representation in civil society and the political sphere. Their agency is curbed, and their mobility is tightly controlled (Afghanistan – Human Rights Watch 2022). The governing body does not represent women or minority groups – it is not a coalition of the different factions of society. This makeshift governance framework does not account for all stakeholders within the society leading to only partial representation of the country in the international community. Such a model of governance, where inclusion is not a priority, is projected to affect the socio-political fabric of the country and negatively impact its domestic legitimacy (Brown 2021). The lack of broad-based legitimacy in the emerging political system could once again, fail to produce lasting institutions, and perpetuate the cycle of destruction in Afghanistan (Rahimi 2021).

Conclusion

The least coveted accolade in geopolitics – failed state – has been used to describe Afghanistan for several years. Witnessing the conditions of the governance structures, or the lack thereof, economic crisis, societal fragmentation and backtracking of human rights has created a compelling case for the applicability of such a term to recount Afghanistan. The state of the country has actively worsened with the withdrawal of the American troops from Afghanistan in 2021, leading it to become synonymous with that of a failed state. The inability of the newly formed government to exercise a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, provide access to basic public services, strengthen the political institutions, and adequately represent the country satisfies the criteria for a failed state. There is an urgent need to prioritise inclusion and good governance, strengthen economic and security measures, and build political legitimacy to prevent the destruction of Afghanistan.

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