



QUETTA SHURA: REVIVAL OF TALIBAN IN AFGHANISTAN

Abdul Rehman
MPhil Scholar
Corvinus University of Budapest
Hungary
rehmanbazai@gmail.com

Abstract

Taliban once defeated and perished has now successfully reinstated their Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. After the demise of Taliban's government in 2001, no one anticipated the revival of Taliban, at least not this swiftly. However, against all the odds, the Taliban are back in Kabul with their full-fledged government in all over Afghanistan. After the demise of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), when the world was cherishing the end of Taliban's rule, they were uniting under the Umbrella of Quetta Shura. Much is uncertain about the future of Afghanistan, but the contemporary situations show Quetta Shura as the winner in the twenty years long war in Afghanistan. This paper therefore discusses the Quetta Shura as a motivating factor for the revival and regrouping of Taliban in Afghanistan. The Shura has attracted youth beyond madrassa students and clerics – thereby facilitating shadow government in Afghanistan. The establishment of Quetta Shura and the resilience of the Taliban made it possible for the Taliban to reunite and strike back against the United States led invasion of Afghanistan. It is believed that Quetta Shura-Taliban's council has played an important role in the revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghan Taliban, Quetta Shura, Afghanistan, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

Introduction

The United States (US) twenty years long war in Afghanistan came to end on August 31, 2021, when the last US soldier Major General Chris Donahue departed Afghanistan



(Moore, 2021). With the departure of last US soldier, the Taliban¹ took over the Kabul leading to the completion of their swift takeover of Afghanistan. However, the sudden surrender of Afghan forces and the swift victories of Taliban came as a surprise to many. Nonetheless, the Taliban took over Afghanistan with little resistance and bloodshed, not including Panjshir, unlike the 1990s takeover of Afghanistan (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2021). Historically, Taliban rose to prominence in 1994, when Afghanistan was going through civil war and militancy (Nojumi, 2016). These young Taliban, ex-mujahideen², from religious schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan took up arms against the warlords in Afghanistan and promised to end the anarchy and restore order. During the time of their emergence, Afghanistan was going through a devastating civil war (Zalmay, 1996). Within two years these little-known Taliban captured large part of territories in Afghanistan and established their government in Kabul called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) (Kuehn, 2018). However, The Taliban government only lasted until 2001, when the US forces invaded Afghanistan and dissolved their government. The American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was the result of the 9/11 incident that killed thousands of US citizens. Washington blamed the Taliban for supporting Al Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden, the main culprit behind the 9/11 incident. The American-led forces destroyed Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan and forced them out of the country (Kuehn, 2018).

Revival of Taliban

It seemed impossible to imagine Taliban back in power – after being removed from government in 2001 by the United State led military through Operation Enduring Freedom³. Most of the Taliban seek refuge in Pakistan during heavy military offensive by American forces (Giustozzi, 2019). However, against all the odds, Taliban have regained control of Afghanistan and are committed to impose their conservative interpretation of Shariah. Among many motivating factors for the revival of Taliban - the role of Rabbari Shura commonly known as Quetta Shura has been the centre of attention. The hardliner organization has been overseen by top veteran of Taliban to ensure chain of command (Siddique, 2014). Quetta Shura has acted as a shadow government in most parts of Afghanistan to sustain and expand Taliban's rule in Afghanistan.

Following the Operation Enduring Freedom, the defeated and wounded Taliban were striving to revive their activities in Afghanistan. The central command of IEA established

¹ Taliban refers to the Pashtun dominated, and Islamic fundamentalist group based in Afghanistan.

² Mujahideen refers to Islamist rebel groups that fought against Soviet invasion (1979-1989) of Afghanistan.

³ Operation Enduring Freedom refers to US military operation against Taliban government in response to 9/11 attacks.



Quetta Shura to coordinate and administer Taliban activities in the Post American invasion Afghanistan. Quetta Shura is a leadership council of the Taliban, which acted as a shadow governing body in Afghanistan. Quetta Shura was established in 2003 by the high-ranking Taliban with the blessings of Mullah Omar (Giustozzi, 2019). Since then, the Quetta Shura has acted as the governing body of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. In the last two decades, Quetta Shura has played an important role in the revival of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

Since its inception, Quetta Shura has frequently issued a document called “Layeha” which contains rules and regulations for Taliban fighters and their followers. The document also highlighted the role of Quetta Shura as central command authority to oversee the military and other issues (Shah, 2012). Over the years, Shura established shadow government composed of active judiciary and executive branches in almost every part of Afghanistan (Siddique, 2014).

This paper seeks to discuss the role of Quetta Shura in the regrouping of the Taliban and building a base for the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The primary focus of the paper is to discuss the role of Quetta Shura in regrouping the scattered Taliban after the US invasion of Afghanistan. The main question of concern in this paper is “How Quetta Shura helped in the revival of Taliban’s movement in Afghanistan?”.

Methodology

The study is aimed to uncover the role of Quetta Shura, also known as Rahbari Shura, in reinstating the Taliban government in Kabul. The Quetta Shura who successfully run shadow government in Afghanistan, during twenty years long war, has evolved into a full-fledged government in the post-US withdrawal of Afghanistan. The paper uses diverse secondary data sources including domestic and international journal articles. Additionally, due to the recent developments and evolving nature of the topic, the paper relies on news stories. The paper also presents some recommendations in the light of new government in Afghanistan. These recommendations include inclusivity of Taliban government, ensuring protection of gender rights and promoting wellbeing of Afghan people.

Quetta Shura- Reviving the Taliban

Rahbari Shura commonly known as Quetta Shura is a council of top Taliban leadership that used to work as a shadow government in Afghanistan during American invasion. Quetta Shura supposedly located in Quetta the capital city of Balochistan province, Pakistan. The name Quetta Shura originates from its location (Khan, 2008). Currently,



Quetta Shura is headed by the Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, supreme leader of the Taliban (BBC, 2021). The members of Quetta Shura are high ranking members of Taliban movement and ex-mujahideen who fought against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980s. The majority of the Shura members are Sunni Islamic clerics from Afghanistan who follow Deobandism- a conservative sect of Islam(Siddique, 2014).

Quetta Shura was established on 14 March 2003 by the top leadership of the former Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The founding members of Quetta Shura were Mullah Ghani Baradar, Mullah Dadullah, Mawlavi Mansur, Mullah Gul Agha Ishaqzai (Giustozzi, 2019). Shura was formed with the approval of Mullah Omar to destabilize the Interim government of Hamid Karzai and revive the activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Rahbari Shura was not the only power centre among the fragmented leadership of the Taliban, but it has by far remained the most resourceful and powerful Shura since the resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan. The alternative power centres are Miran Shah Shura and Peshawar Shura(Franco & Giustozzi, 2016). Since the rise of Quetta Shura, it has undergone many tumultuous situations and institutional reforms. The Shura had met all the requirements to run a government in exile and function as decision making body. The shura justified its fight against American forces in the name of Islam (Siddique, 2014).

After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Taliban were brutally hunted and attacked by the US-led forces. Taliban faced indiscriminate attacks as the US forces rage to revenge the 9/11 attacks which led to the death of 2,977 Americans (CNN, 2021). In the early months of 2002, the Taliban spread the news of tactical retreat. Since the Taliban were not able to continue coordinated activities at large scale, they began to act in small independent groups generally called Mahaz/Shura (Council) (Watkins, 2020). In rural Afghanistan, local Taliban started their activities in small groups generally based on personal contacts. In the first stage of their regrouping, the Taliban began a series of coordinated assassinations of renowned pro-government clerics and political leaders. They also began to warn people of grave consequences if they helped or engaged with the “invaders” (Giustozzi, 2019).

However, as the witch-hunt of the Taliban by the US forces slowed down, they began to carry out comprehensive coordinated activities in some parts of Afghanistan. In the years 2002-2003, the early Shura/Mahaz emerged in eastern Afghanistan mainly in the province of Nangarhar. The Spin Ghar Mahaz with 400 fighters was the first front that emerged in Nangarhar. Ijraya Shura was the second front established by former members of the Taliban. The Ijraya Shura had about 1,300 fighters in Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar and Nuristan provinces. The third front with around 1,500 fighters emerged in the shape of



Tora Bora Mahaz. Khalid bin Walid Mahaz was the fourth and largest group in north-eastern Afghanistan (Wood, 2020) (Giustozzi, 2019).

Although these independent Shura/Mahaz were able to revive the momentum of the defeated Taliban, but they were not able to create impact beyond their designated areas. There was a need to unite all the independent groups and create a chain of central command under single organization. The rise of Quetta Shura provided Taliban fighters with common objectives and aims. One by one, each mahaz began to merge with the Quetta Shura. Spin Ghar mahaz joined the Shura in 2004 followed by many others (Giustozzi, 2019).

From 2005 onwards, the influence of Quetta Shura was at the peak. Field commanders in Afghanistan were mobilizing people and local Mullahs against the Karzai government and foreign troops. Taliban's growing influence was visible in their campaign against the parliamentary elections of 2005 (Jones, 2006). According to an estimation, the Taliban successfully prevented election activities in approximately 10% of the country. By 2009, As noted by Giustozzi, the Taliban began to threaten and penetrate Kandahar city as they were active in all sixteen districts of the Kandahar province (Giustozzi, 2019). In the early phase of insurgency, Quetta Shura was expanding rapidly. The Shura was recruiting not just clerics and madrassa students but also youth from rural areas that were unhappy with the government. Taliban were also recruiting warlords and ethnic elders into the insurgency to expand the Shura's influence.

Amir ul Muminin is the elected top leadership of Quetta Shura. Mullah Omar remained undisputed leader of the Shura until his death in 2013 (Siddique, 2014). Under the leadership of Mullah Omar as Amir ul Muminin, the Shura lacked the role of leadership as Omar was mostly in the hideout. The death of Mullah Omar in 2013, led to division among Taliban leadership (Synovitz, 2021). The rise of Akhtar Muhammad Mansur as Amir ul Muminin in 2015 restored the role of leadership in Quetta Shura. Although Mansur was a controversial leader following the allegations of rigging the council members during his election (Hamdam, 2016). However, he managed to restore the authority of Quetta Shura.

Hibatullah Akhundzada, the current Amir ul Muminin of Taliban was chosen as the supreme commander in May 2016 (BBC, 2021). Mullah Hibatullah Akhund successor of Mullah Mansur has also played an effective role in the unification of Quetta Shura (Giustozzi, 2017). Hibatullah Akhundzada plays the role of political and spiritual leader, unlike his predecessors who ruled more like commanders and operational leaders. Hibatullah Akhundzada has been affiliated with Taliban since the inception of their movement. He also fought against the Soviet troops in the 1980s alongside Mujahideen.



Hibatullah Akhundzada was elected as the head of Shura unanimously by senior Taliban leadership. The supreme leader is accompanied by his deputies, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mullah Yaqoob, son of Mullah Omar, and Jalaluddin Haqqani, son of Sirajuddin Haqqani (Jackson, 2018).

Over the last years, the Taliban has evolved with sophisticated and effective forms of administration and organizational structure. Quetta Shura has emerged with a huge organizational structure and diverse administrative body. The Shura is consisting of several commissions, departments, and offices responsible for day-to-day executive works. Although every Shura of Taliban has its hierarchical decision-making process, in this section, we will deal specifically with the organizational structure of Quetta Shura.

The shadow governing structure of Quetta Shura was based on Shadow provincial governors and district governors. Provincial governors were appointed by Quetta Shura to overlook all the executive works in their respective provinces. These provincial governors were then responsible to appoint district governors as their representatives in every district. The district governors were supported by local clergy and commission of elders.

Taliban had developed its shadow courts in almost every province and district of Afghanistan. The justice system of Quetta Shura was based on Ulema councils and trial commissions. The Justice commission was based on three branches, 1) Ulema council 2) Fatwa council, 3) the Courts. Quetta Shura had divided the courts into three separate levels, Supreme Court, provincial courts, and district courts. The Supreme Court was based in Pakistan, while the provincial and district courts are established in almost every province and district (Jackson, 2018).

Under the leadership of Mullah Omar, Quetta Shura was based on 15 members' council. In order to establish a shadow government in Afghanistan, Quetta Shura began to appoint their shadow governors in different parts of the country (Carpenter, 2014). These shadow governors were responsible for all the administrative works in their respective districts and

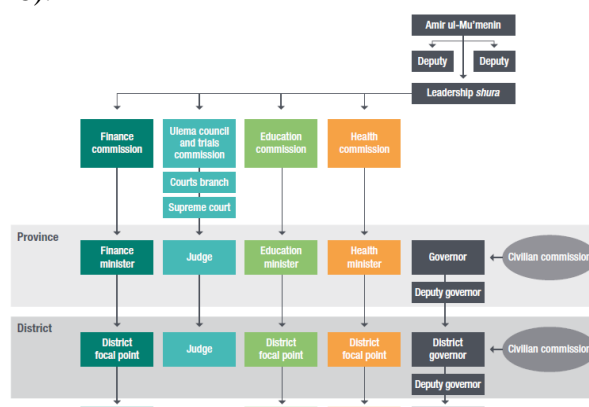


Figure 1. Ashley Jackson



provinces. In the early years, shadow governors were appointed in Kandahar and Helmand in 2003 and 2004 respectively (Farrell, 2018).

In the early years of resurgence, the Taliban were mostly dependent on opium cultivation and smuggling for financial assistance. By 2014, 40% of the revenue of the Quetta Shura was generated by the opium trade. As of 2020, 80% of opium in the global market comes from Afghanistan (Wood, 2020, p. 11). Taliban generate their income from their tax on production and trade of opium to Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian countries.

Emergence of Alternative Shuras

In the early phase of Taliban's insurgency, Quetta shura was not the only power centre among the fragmented Taliban. From 2007 onwards, the issues between Taliban leadership began emerging. The power structure began to evolve as polycentric in nature, where power was divided among Quetta Shura, Peshawar Shura, and Miran Shah Shura. The Quetta Shura was facing a leadership crisis with the rise of Miran Shah Shura and Peshawar Shura as alternative power structures (Farrell, 2018). Following the disagreements on territorial control and fighting tactics against the foreign troops in Afghanistan, Miran Shah Shura and Peshawar Shura split from Quetta Shura. The newly formed Shuras questioned the authority of Quetta Shura and began competing with it.

Miran Shah Shura was established in early 2003 by Jalaluddin Haqqani. Miran Shah fighters were mainly active in Paktia, Khost, and Logar provinces of Afghanistan. Although Miran Shah was active in some parts of Afghanistan, but it was ineffective and lacked financial support. This caused Miran Shah Shura to ally with Quetta Shura. On 7 August 2007, Miran Shah Shura declared its autonomy from Quetta Shura and refused to recognize Rahbari Shura appointed governors (Giustozzi, 2019). The tensions between Quetta Shura and Miran Shah Shura surfaced strongly in 2007 after the rise of Sirajuddin Haqqani as the head of Miran Shah. Sirajuddin Haqqani complained that Miran Shah Shura was not receiving its promised financial assistance. Additionally, Sirajuddin Haqqani also opposed the military strategies of Quetta Shura against the coalition forces in Afghanistan. Sirajuddin believed that the Taliban should adopt guerrilla war tactics, but the idea was rejected by Quetta Shura. Following policies issues and power-sharing disagreements, Sirajuddin Haqqani declared the autonomy of Miran Shah from Quetta Shura on 7 August 2007 (Giustozzi, 2019).

At the same time, Peshawar Shura was emerging as a strong alternative power structure. With the merger of Shamsatoo Mahaz and Toor-e Pagri Mahaz into Peshawar Shura in



2005, it began to challenge the authority of Quetta Shura. Peshawar Shura refused to recognize the authority of shadow governors appointed by Quetta Shura.

Antonio Giustozzi believes that due to the change in the international politics and the political interests of Pakistan, in 2014 Quetta Shura once again emerged as the powerful leadership structure. Since Quetta Shura was considered less aggressive and Pro-negotiation, Pakistan began to push Quetta Shura for dialogues with Kabul. In 2015 Quetta Shura received a larger share of foreign funding, as the funding increased up to 35 percent. Meanwhile, Peshawar Shura experienced a 40 percent decline in foreign funding (Giustozzi, 2019, p. 120).

Taliban government: Future recommendations

With the completion of their takeover of Afghanistan, on September 7, 2021, the Taliban announced their caretaker setup to run the affairs of the country. Taliban promised to form an inclusive government with the inclusion of representative from every ethnic and religious groups. However, the so-called inclusive government is in no sense inclusive at all. With the exclusion of women and members of non-Pashtun ethnic groups, the caretaker government was criticized for its exclusiveness. With the 33 members, the caretaker government included only two Tajiks and one Uzbek with no female representation at all (Ahmad, 2021).

Taliban are criticized for their exclusiveness and strict interpretation of Islam. In order to smoothly run the affairs of the country, Taliban should give up their hardline policies and ensure the access of basic human rights to all Afghans most importantly to women.

Conclusion

Today's Taliban are politically mature and active to engage with the international community. Their political office in Doha which was established in 2013 has allowed them to engage with states through negotiations and diplomacy. The international community has recognized Quetta Shura as legitimate representative of the Taliban. Quetta Shura was solely responsible for the peace process with the United States under the leadership of Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada.

As of now, Quetta Shura is the most important and powerful Shura which holds control over almost the entire Afghanistan. Both Miran Shah Shura and Peshawar Shura are subordinate groups that operate under the Quetta Shura. Quetta Shura has also been recognized as the legitimate representative of the Taliban by the international community.



Quetta Shura was leading the peace process with the United States, under the leadership of Hibatullah Akhundzada.

The ongoing civil war in Afghanistan has destroyed almost entire country. The foreign invasions and proxy wars have devastated every sector of Afghanistan. In the last four decades, more than one million people have died while millions of Afghans are living as refugees mostly in Pakistan and Iran. The American led forces in Afghanistan have failed to eliminate the Taliban and bring peace to the country. Meanwhile, the United States-led forces have also failed to achieve their goals and to eliminate terrorists from Afghanistan. It was almost impossible to imagine Taliban revival in the early years of the US-Afghan war. In the early years of war in Afghanistan, when the United States was enjoying the defeat of the Taliban, the Bush administration cornered the Taliban from every platform. Taliban were not included as a party to any of the platforms that were to decide the future of Afghanistan. Taliban were not included in the Bonn conference on the future government in Afghanistan in 2001.

The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan changed the traditional political status quo in Afghanistan. Taliban emerged as a cruel and fanatical force to wipe out every opposition in the country. After the fall of Mujahideen, the Taliban established their government with their conservative interpretation of Islamic Shariah. Women were ignored of their rights and human rights were gravely violated. The Taliban's government in Afghanistan was based not on consensus but fear.

However, the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the victory of NATO forces produced some hopes for the people of Afghanistan. The civilian government in Kabul stand victorious and the United States vowed to uplift Afghanistan and its people. Unfortunately, the changing prospects in international politics changed the American focus from Afghanistan to the Middle East. The American-led coalition failed to emphasize state-building in Afghanistan while focusing just only on the military aspects. The brutalities of the Afghan and American soldiers forced Afghan youth to join the Taliban for protection. Quetta Shura has played an important role in the revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Quetta Shura had successfully established a parallel Judicial, executive, and military system in Afghanistan during their fight against US forces. Unlike in the past, when the Taliban were just using fear and terror to spread its influence, Quetta Shura had adopted the policies of "winning hearts and minds".



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