

## ***Under Taliban Rule, Life in Kabul Transforms Once Again***

Though the streets are quiet, Kabul residents describe a struggle to make ends meet in a reeling economy where banks and government offices are closed, and uncertainty reigns.

By Norimitsu Onishi and Sharif Hassan

Aug. 24, 2021

The Americans are all but gone, the Afghan government has collapsed, and the Taliban rule the streets of Kabul now. Overnight, millions of Kabul residents have been left to navigate an uncertain transition after 20 years of U.S.-backed rule.

On Tuesday, nine days after the Taliban walked back into power, government services were still largely unavailable. Residents are struggling to lead their daily lives in an economy that, propped up for the past generation by American aid, is now suddenly in free fall.

Banks are closed, and cash is growing scarce even as food prices rise. Gas is becoming harder to find.

With American forces clinging to the international airport to conduct a rushed evacuation, the Taliban continued to tighten their grip in the capital's neighborhoods and streets. While relative calm reigned over the capital, in sharp contrast to the free-for-all at the airport, many residents hid in their homes or ventured out only cautiously to see what life might be like under their new rulers.

Reports varied according to neighborhoods and people, providing an evolving and sometimes contradictory snapshot of life in a city governed, once again, by the Taliban — a movement now promising moderation and inclusiveness but with a history of adherence to a harsh and uncompromising Islamist order of society.

Even residents who said they feared the Taliban were struck by the relative order and quiet on the streets — a sharp contrast with years of rising crime and violence that had become a daily facet of life in the capital.

But for some, the quiet has been ominous.



A member of the Taliban affixing a Taliban flag to his antenna last week. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

A resident named Mohib said that, in his section of the city, streets were deserted, with people hunkering down in their homes “scared and terrorized.”

“People feel the Taliban may come any moment to take away everything from them,” said Mohib, who, like the dozen residents interviewed for this article, is being identified only by his first name for safety concerns.

In central areas with many Taliban, women were few and those venturing out wore burqas, the full-body garment that covers the face, said Sayed, a civil servant.

But elsewhere in the city, with a light Taliban presence, women were going out “with normal clothes as it was before the Taliban,” said Shabaka, adding that she herself had walked outside and met Taliban without incident despite wearing her “usual clothes.”

While she said there was an underlying fear in her neighborhood, she said the situation was also calm.

Others had positive things to say about the arrival of the Taliban, in contrast to their U.S.-backed Afghan predecessors, widely despised for their corruption.

In the Company neighborhood on the western edge of Kabul, even though gas has been getting harder to find, road traffic and business was nearly back to normal.

Truck and bus drivers said that Afghanistan’s highways had become more secure now that the Taliban had consolidated control over the country. Drivers praised the removal of dozens of checkpoints where security forces and militias had previously extorted bribes — replaced with a single toll payment to the Taliban.

“We’re happy with the Islamic Emirate,” said Ruhullah, 34, a resident of Wardak Province who drives a passenger bus along the main highway from Herat to Kabul. “With the Taliban’s arrival, our problems have been solved. There’s no more police harassment and bribery.”



At a market in Kabul. Groceries have generally still been available, but prices are rising, residents say. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

In the vacuum created by the Afghan government's fall, Taliban leaders have reached out to Russia and to the former Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, as they deliberate on the shape of a new government.

**Updates on Afghanistan** Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

But in Kabul, there was little evidence so far of a new authority in government offices.

At a government electronic ID office, Khalid said, there was not a single civil servant, not even "a Talib to answer."

Civil servants were not reporting to work, fearing retribution by the Taliban, Khalid said.

Personnel changes were taking place in other government offices, other residents said.

"Those who had jobs in the government have lost them, and the Taliban are appointing new employees," said Raziq, a travel agent.

The swift takeover by the Taliban has undermined a fragile economy that was largely dependent on foreign aid. As the United States and the International Monetary Fund have shut the flow of money to Afghanistan, the Taliban have been left isolated and are facing a financial crisis.

In addition to banks being closed, so were hawalas, informal money-transfer businesses, residents said. People were hoarding scarce U.S. dollars as the local currency, the afghani, kept reaching new lows.



Money changers with customers on Saturday. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

People were running out of cash because they did not have access to their bank accounts, said Rahmatullah, a journalist.

“And the people can’t borrow because no one has cash,” Rahmatullah said.

Inflation has further complicated people’s daily lives. The price of five liters of cooking oil has surged to 1,200 afghanis, from 500 afghanis before, Rahmatullah added.

Many residents confirmed that, overall, food was more expensive.

But some locally produced fruits and vegetables were cheaper than before because the borders are closed and the traders were unable to export them, said Hassan, an employee at a nongovernmental organization. The price of seven kilograms of apples has dropped from 500 afghanis to 100 afghanis, he added.

#### Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

As money has dried up, joblessness has spiked visibly across the city.

“Hundreds of wage workers and construction workers walk the streets every day and there is no employer to take them,” said Sayed, the civil servant. “Kabul is facing a deep poverty crisis.”

With fuel growing more expensive, even the triumphant Taliban have been affected, residents said.



A fruit vendor on Saturday. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Some were no longer driving the Ford Ranger pickups they had taken from the Afghan police. Or, if they were, as many as 16 Taliban could be seen riding inside a single pickup, said Raziq, the travel agent.

In the 20 years that the United States occupied Afghanistan, residents of Kabul were the most exposed to an alternative vision of society — a counterpoint to that of the Taliban, with their roots in rural areas and in the deeply conservative customs of the ethnic Pashtun who have dominated the movement.

So Afghans in the capital, especially those with no memory of life under the Taliban, seemed the most anxious about the new order.

“People are worried about their lives now,” said Saifullah, who operates an informal money transfer business. “They don’t really care about reopening their businesses. Schools, educational centers are closed, young students are trying to find a way to flee the country right now. They don’t care about going back to school.”

Young Afghans are leaving Kabul every day in an attempt to cross into neighboring countries, residents said. Buses to the border regions are full of youths who are waiting in area hotels for smugglers to take them across borders, said Mohammed, a former government official.

“The buses which leave Kabul to the border provinces are packed, but they are empty when they return,” he said, adding that a bus ticket to the border cost more than twice the price of a return fare.

Raziq, the travel agent, said that after announcing the day before on Facebook that he could process visas to Uzbekistan, he had received 557 text messages and more than 300 calls.



Families hoping to flee the country arrived at the airport at dawn on Tuesday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

For those who had worked alongside Americans and other Westerners, the sudden pullout and the ensuing chaos was a profound betrayal of a life they had believed possible.

Anisa, who worked for several international and Afghan nongovernmental organizations in Kunduz, a city in northern Afghanistan, burned all her documents as the Taliban overran her city and searched through houses of people suspected of working with foreigners.

Now she was marooned in a camp in Kabul “in a bad situation,” she said.

When she sees Taliban, she said, “fear and trembling pervade my whole being.”

Senin, a 22-year-old university student, said Taliban fighters had blocked her from going to her school early this week. Her two brothers, who had worked with the American forces, had been evacuated. But she had been left behind with her parents and a sister — and Taliban officials, knowing the family’s ties to the Americans, had threatened the family and beaten her, she said.

The situation was “unbearable,” Senin said, adding, “All my dreams have been scattered.”

Reporting was contributed by Najim Rahim, Fahim Abed, Jim Huylebroek and Matthieu Aikins.