

Taliban Quash Protests and Seize Enemies, Tightening Grip on Afghanistan

The Taliban's actions and history of brutality cast doubt on their promises of amnesty, and many Afghans are afraid to venture out of their homes.



By Carlotta Gall, Marc Santora and Richard Pérez-Peña

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The Taliban cracked down on protests that erupted in at least four cities in Afghanistan on Thursday and rounded up opponents despite promises of amnesty, even as fearful workers stayed home and thousands of people continued a frenzied rush to leave the country.

Even as the Taliban moved to assert control, hundreds of protesters took to the streets for a second day to rally against their rule, this time marching in Kabul, the capital, as well as other cities. Again, the Taliban met them with force, using gunfire and beatings to disperse crowds. And again the actions of Taliban foot soldiers undermined the leadership's suggestions that, having taken power, they would moderate the brutality they have long been known for.

The police officers who served the old government have melted away, and instead armed Taliban fighters are operating checkpoints and directing traffic, administering their notions of justice as they see fit, with little consistency from one to another.

The Taliban were stepping up an intensive search for people who worked with U.S. and NATO forces, particularly members of the former Afghan security services, according to witnesses and a security assessment prepared for the United Nations. Though the Taliban have said there would be no reprisals, there have been arrests, property seizures and scattered reports of reprisal killings.



A Taliban fighter guarding the Afghanistan Central Bank in Kabul. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Kabul's international airport remained a scene of desperation, as thousands struggled to get in and board flights out.

Millions of other Afghans, including critical workers, particularly women, hid in their homes despite Taliban calls for them to return to work, fearing either retribution or the harsh repression of women that the militants instituted when they ruled from 1996 to 2001. Aid agencies said services like electricity, sanitation, water and health care could soon be affected.

The Taliban seized control of city after city with remarkable speed once most U.S. forces had withdrawn, brushed aside the demoralized and disorganized Afghan security forces, and swept into Kabul on Sunday. Now they are learning that while conquest may have been swift, governing a vibrant, freethinking society is not so easy.

The anti-Taliban protests have been a remarkable display of defiance of a group that has a long history of controlling communities through fear and meeting dissent with lethal force. The protests also offered evidence that while tens of thousands are now seeking escape, some of those left behind would try — for now, at least — to have a voice in the country's direction, despite the growing crackdown.

There were news reports of several people killed in the eastern city of Asadabad when Taliban fighters opened fire Thursday at a rally of people waving the flag of the deposed government, marking Afghanistan's annual celebration of gaining independence from Britain in 1919. It was not clear whether the victims had been shot or had died in a stampede.

There were even demonstrators waving the flag in Kandahar, the southern city that is considered the birthplace of the Taliban. In the southeastern city of Khost, the group imposed a curfew, a day after demonstrations and clashes there. The protests on Thursday in Kabul included one near the presidential palace, and another that drew about 200 people before the Taliban used force to break it up.

The events, led primarily by young men and women, were a wholly new experience for Taliban insurgents who have spent the last 20 years mostly in the mountains and rural districts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.



Shiite Muslims, a minority that had been repressed by the old Taliban government, publicly observed the holiday of Ashura in Kabul on Thursday with ritual bloodletting. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

When the Taliban last held power, before being toppled by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, Kabul was a dingy ruin, the population crushed by poverty and harsh rule and isolated from the world. But even as war dragged on, a new generation of educated, ambitious and media-savvy Afghans grew up in the cities — young people, including women, accustomed to making themselves heard.

Though Taliban leaders are in talks with former leaders of the deposed government about forming an inclusive governing council, on Thursday they declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan — the same name they used a generation ago.

The tricolor flag flown by the collapsed government, taken down by the Taliban and replaced by their own banner, has become a repeated flash point, with people in multiple cities beaten for displaying it. On Wednesday, the Taliban fired on demonstrators waving the flag in the eastern city of Jalalabad, with reports of two or three people killed.

“Salute those who carry the national flag and thus stand for dignity of the nation and the country,” Amrullah Saleh, a vice president in the former government who has declared himself the acting president, wrote on Twitter. Mr. Saleh has holed up with local leaders in the Panjshir Valley in northeastern Afghanistan who control a group of fighters and so far refuse to acknowledge Taliban rule.



Protesters waved the flag of the ousted Afghan government at Pashtunistan Square in Kabul. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

One of the protesters in Kandahar, Noorayel Kaliwal, tweeted on Thursday: “Our demand is that no government, system or group in Afghanistan change the national flag of Afghanistan.” He added that he supported a democratic system in the country, had been detained by the Taliban in July for his activism and was moving around to avoid arrest.

In Kabul, Hasiba Atakpal, a journalist from the Afghan news channel Tolo News, said that Taliban soldiers had stopped her reporting in the street. “They seized the camera from me, hit my colleague and fired in the air,” she said on Twitter.

She added that after the Taliban spokesman's first news briefing, held on Tuesday, when he insisted that the rights of the media and women would be respected, she had not expected much good to come.

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"I had low expectations but now it has become clear that there is a gap between action and words," Ms. Atakpal said.

Residents of Kabul were feeling their way under the new regime gingerly. The streets were quiet, largely empty of traffic, interrupted by occasional bursts of gunfire and the roar of American military planes patrolling and conducting the round-the-clock evacuation.



Ashura commemorations in Kabul on Thursday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

With long experience of war and upheaval, most people stayed home. In particular, few women were on the street, though some ventured out without wearing the head-to-toe burqa once mandated under the Taliban, which forbid women from holding jobs or even venturing out of their homes without a male relative.

Schools were closed in Kabul on Thursday, as were most offices and banks. Electricity had been out for two days, one resident said.

The caution that has touched every household is the dread inspired by the Taliban soldiers who brandish their assault rifles and rockets with a calculated carelessness.

"They look very scary, as they have long hair and are very heavily armed," said Masoom Shesta, 38, a trader in downtown Kabul.



A Taliban fighter in front of a camera shop in Kabul. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Another resident said he had been forced to make a rapid U-turn when shooting broke out as he drove through the city.

Many Kabulis were already changing their ways to comply with the strict social regulations expected to come into force.

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.

One woman complained that popular Turkish television serials were no longer airing, after cable companies closed down their services. The Taliban, which banned all television during their previous time in power, have since embraced media as a propaganda tool, and cable companies were already anticipating new rules on morally acceptable content in accordance with the militants' strict interpretation of Islamic law.

Mr. Shesta said he was deleting photos from his cellphone of him meeting with the former president, Ashraf Ghani, and other government officials, many of whom have fled the country. Mr. Ghani left the capital on Sunday, and several of his senior officials traveled to Turkey on Monday.

At the Kabul airport, which is still controlled by U.S. troops, the Taliban are in charge outside its blast walls and used force and intimidation to control access, beating people back and firing their rifles.



Afghans trying to enter the military side of the airport in Kabul on Thursday, hoping to flee the country. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Individuals and families, some having waited for days, stood or sat amid pieces of former lives discarded by others in their haste to flee — shoes, scarves, whole suitcases. Some families waited in taxis. Others got out to walk. Parents carried small children.

On Thursday morning, a Taliban fighter stood on a concrete barricade, holding a radio and a pistol and shouting. Taxis inched forward along a road lined with abandoned cars.

"The Taliban are beating people," said Hayatullah, a resident of Kabul, who asked that only his first name be published to avoid problems with the Taliban. "They use lashes to disperse the people and sometimes fire into the air."

His son had tried most of the day to gain access to the airport, without success, and would have to try again tomorrow, he said.

In a video obtained by The New York Times on Wednesday, men in uniform fired their rifles — whether into the crowd or above it was not entirely clear — as some people screamed and others crouched. A man pounded on the back of a van to keep it from backing into his mother, whom he pushed in a wheelchair.

The Pentagon said Thursday that some 7,000 Americans and other evacuees, including Afghan allies of the United States, had been airlifted out of the airport. That is still well short of the 5,000 to 9,000 passengers a day that the military said it can fly out once the evacuation process is at full throttle.

The State Department said that 6,000 people were at the Kabul airport fully processed and waiting to board planes. There have been reports of non-American evacuation flights leaving with many empty seats, a sign of the difficulties facing people trying to make their way to the airport.



A Soviet-era tank captured by the Taliban parked in the street in Kabul on Thursday. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

U.S. commanders said the 5,000 troops deployed to Kabul to secure the airport could not ensure anyone's safe passage to the airport. President Biden said Wednesday in an ABC interview that U.S. troops might stay past the Aug. 31 withdrawal date he has set if they are needed to get all Americans out.

The Taliban have said they are not keeping people from the airport who have valid visas and tickets. One commander said they were limiting access to help the international evacuation effort, to avoid the kind of overcrowding and chaos that occurred on Monday, when people swarmed onto the runway and several were killed.

But there have also been reports of Taliban fighters turning away people with proper documentation, and scanning the crowds for former officials to detain.

The threat assessment drafted for the U.N. by an intelligence consulting group, the Norwegian Center for Global Analyses, cited multiple reports that the Taliban had a list of people to question and punish, as well as their locations. Military and police personnel and people who worked for investigative units of the toppled government were particularly at risk, according to the document, which was dated Wednesday.

Already, the Taliban were going door to door and "arresting and/or threatening to kill or arrest family members of target individuals unless they surrender themselves to the Taliban," said the document, which was seen by The New York Times.

It contained a reproduced letter dated Aug. 16 from the Taliban to an unnamed counterterrorism official in Afghanistan who had worked with U.S. and British officials and then gone into hiding.

The letter instructed the official to report to the Military and Intelligence Commission of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in Kabul. If not, it warned, the official's family members "will be treated based on Shariah law."

Victor J. Blue, Helene Cooper and Jim Huylebroek contributed reporting.