

## *After 7 years of failing to fix Afghanistan, Ghani made a hasty escape.*



By Matthew Rosenberg and Adam Nossiter

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Western technocrat. Would-be populist. Wartime president. Ashraf Ghani tried to inhabit many roles during his years as Afghanistan's president.

But after fleeing the Taliban's advance into Kabul this weekend, Mr. Ghani — wherever he is — is stepping into a far less welcome role: that of a failed leader whose hasty escape from Kabul scuttled negotiations to ensure a smooth transition of power to the Taliban and left his own people to deal with the deadly chaos and frightening uncertainty under the country's once and future rulers.

It remains unclear where Mr. Ghani is and where he will end up living. Close aides could not be reached by telephone, and some reports suggested that he had gone to neighboring Uzbekistan or Tajikistan or perhaps Oman. There was talk that Saudi Arabia had agreed to give him asylum, and rumors that he had been accompanied by as many as 200 aides, ministers and members of Parliament.

There were also reports that Mr. Ghani had fled with piles of cash, and questions about whether the United States had played any role in his departure.

It was an ignominious turn for Mr. Ghani, a World Bank-trained technocrat who holds a doctorate from Columbia University and, as he often reminds people, wrote a book titled "Fixing Failed States."

Instead of fixing Afghanistan during his nearly seven years in power, Mr. Ghani fled much the way he governed: isolated from all but a handful of advisers who are said to have departed with him.

The fallout was swift as what semblance of civil government that was left in Kabul melted away and thousands of Afghans stormed through Kabul's international airport — the city's sole connection to the outside world — on Monday, desperate to find a way out. Unlike Mr. Ghani, most of them had no chance of getting out, and several people died in the chaos.

Mr. Ghani, 72, defended his decision to bolt in a social media post late on Sunday, writing, "If I had stayed, countless of my countrymen would be martyred and Kabul would face destruction."

Others condemned his flight as a desperate act of self-preservation by a man whose failures paved the way for the Taliban's return nearly 20 years to the month after the American-led invasion that led to their ouster following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"He will be known as the Benedict Arnold of Afghanistan," said Saad Mohseni, who owns Tolo TV, one of Afghanistan's most popular television stations. "People will be spitting on his grave for another 100 years."

Mr. Mohseni was part of a last-ditch effort to save Kabul from a violent and bloody takeover by the Taliban, working with former President Hamid Karzai and others to negotiate an interim arrangement that would give the Taliban a week or two to take the reins of Afghanistan's government.

The effort collapsed once word got out that Mr. Ghani had fled, whereupon the Taliban began moving into Kabul in force. Some were even pictured sitting at the same desk from which Mr. Ghani had only days earlier tried to rally his faltering military to resist the Taliban.

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