

Taliban Try to Polish Their Image as They Push for Victory

The insurgents are trying to rebrand themselves as effective governors as they capture new territory. But there is more evidence that they are unreformed.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — In June, when the Taliban took the district of Imam Sahib in Afghanistan's north, the insurgent commander who now ruled the area had a message for his new constituents, including some government employees: Keep working, open your shops and keep the city clean.

The water was turned back on, the power grid was repaired, garbage trucks collected trash and a government vehicle's flat tire was mended — all under the Taliban's direction.

Imam Sahib is one of dozens of districts caught up in a Taliban military offensive that has swiftly captured more than a quarter of Afghanistan's districts, many in the north, since the U.S. withdrawal began in May.

It is all part of the Taliban's broader strategy of trying to rebrand themselves as capable governors while they press a ruthless, land-grabbing offensive across the country. The combination is a stark signal that the insurgents fully intend to try for all-out dominance of Afghanistan once the American pullout is finished.

"The situation is such that it is a testing period for us. Everything done in practice is being watched," Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban deputy commander and the head of the group's most violent wing, said in a recent radio broadcast to Taliban fighters. "Behave in a good way with the general public."

But the signs that the Taliban have not reformed are increasingly clear: An assassination campaign against government workers, civil society leaders and security forces continues on pace. There is little effort to proceed with peace talks with the Afghan government, despite commitments made to the United States. And in areas the insurgents have seized, women are being forced out of public-facing roles, and girls out of schools, undoing many of the gains from the past 20 years of Western presence.

For much of the Afghan public, terrified and exhausted, the Taliban's gains have been panic-inducing. And there is widespread fear that worse is in store, as the Taliban already have several crucial provincial capitals effectively under siege.

Regional groups have begun to muster militias to defend their home turf, skeptical that the Afghan security forces can hold out in the absence of their American backers, in a painful echo of the country's devastating civil war breakdown in the 1990s.



A street market in Kabul last October. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

In places they now rule, the Taliban have imposed their old hard-line Islamist rules, such as forbidding women from working or even going outside their homes unaccompanied, according to residents in recently captured districts. Music is banned. Men are told to stop shaving their beards. Residents are also supposed to provide food for Taliban fighters.

Documents and interviews with insurgent commanders and Taliban officials show that the success of the group's recent surge was not entirely expected, and that Taliban leaders are haphazardly trying to capitalize on their sudden military and political gains.

Districts were not always taken through sheer military force. Some fell because of poor governance, others because of rivalries between local strongmen and low morale among the security forces.



Kowsar, 13, and her sister, Madina, 15, sitting in a tent for internally displaced people in Jowzjan Province in May. They have not been able to continue their education because the Taliban took over their home and banned girls from going to school. Kiana Hayeri for The New York Times

Internally, the message from Taliban leadership to its fighters is that even though they have seen an increase in casualties, they are winning their battle against the Afghan government as international forces depart.

More than 1,000 miles away in Qatar, peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives have made little headway, with the two sides meeting infrequently.

For now, the Taliban are focusing their energy on improving their image in places they have taken control. Success is not a given: The group's governance record during their time in power before 2001 was poor. Services lagged, public displays of brutality were common, and fear was rampant.

In one northern Afghan district, the area's new Taliban ruler went straight to the bottom line, trying to persuade residents they wouldn't be killed out of hand.

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"Everyone's life is safe," Najibullah, a local resident who requested to use only his first name for his protection, recounted the commander saying from the town square. But, Najibullah added, "People are scared, and they are uneasy."

Residents filmed the speech with smartphones — technology banned and destroyed by the Taliban in some districts — with car horns echoing in the background, welcoming the new district leadership. The somewhat warm reception only highlighted the war's enduring complexities.



Villagers arriving from Taliban-controlled areas are searched on the way to the bazaar in the Archi District of Kunduz Province in July 2017. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The district fell because of internal disputes between local politicians and militia commanders that left security weakened and locals open to the idea of new governing powers, circumstances the Taliban readily took advantage of, explained Mohammad Nasim Modaber, a member of parliament from Baghlan Province who went to the front lines to help retake parts of the province.

As the Taliban gain ground, fighters have directions to treat captured government soldiers with care and ultimately release them. They have also been told to lay siege to larger provincial capitals on their outskirts, but not enter them. In places like Imam Sahib, some civil servants are being allowed to return to work — except for women — to help keep towns and cities functioning, though it is unclear who is paying them.

These directives are clearly aimed at avoiding bad publicity — destroyed homes, dead civilians and damaged public works — and at least appear to adhere to the U.S.-Taliban agreement made in 2020. The deal outlined certain military tactics that both sides would refrain from, including attacking provincial capitals.



President Biden with President Ashraf Ghani, center, and Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation, at the White House in June. Pete Marovich for The New York Times

But adherence to the deal was seemingly ignored when Taliban fighters entered not one, but several provincial capitals in recent weeks, with fighting reported in the streets and dozens of soldiers and civilians killed and injured, and untold amounts of property destroyed.

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.

Reports of insurgent fighters enacting revenge on the local population have also surfaced, signaling the limited ability of Taliban leaders to control their assortment of ground commanders — all of different ethnicities, diverging loyalties and unclear levels of adherence to the group's command structure.

A Taliban commander who was not authorized to speak to the media told The Times that though he was not cleared to assault Kunduz city, a provincial capital in the north, his forces saw an opportunity and took it — a move senior leaders later endorsed. Now after weeks of fighting, Afghan government forces, propped up by aerial bombardments and an influx of the Afghan military's elite commandos, have pushed the Taliban back to some parts of the city's periphery. But it remains surrounded.

Dozens of civilians and soldiers have been killed, hundreds more wounded and more than 40,000 have been displaced around Kunduz Province, according to a July 1 United Nations report. Some homes there were burned down by the Taliban, residents said.

"The Taliban burned my house while my family was in the house," said Sirajuddin Jamali, a tribal elder. "In 2015, a military base was under siege and we provided food and water for them, but now the Taliban are taking revenge," Mr. Jamali sobbed. "Do they do the same in any area the Taliban take?"



Afghan commandos at a front-line position in a home in Kunduz on Tuesday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Taliban, said the accusations of burning down homes were under investigation.

The group's public responses, though rarely sincere, play directly into a strategy meant to portray the insurgents as a comparable option to the Afghan government. And they ignore the fact that local feuds drive large amounts of the war's violence, outweighing any official orders from the Taliban leadership.

On the battlefield, things are shifting quickly. Thousands of Afghan soldiers and militia members have surrendered in past weeks, forfeiting weapons, ammunition and armored vehicles as the Taliban take district after district. Government forces have counterattacked, recapturing several districts, though not on the scale of the insurgents' recent victories.

But little reported are Taliban losses, aside from the inflated body counts announced by the Afghan government's Ministry of Defense. The Taliban, with their base strength long estimated to be between 50,000 and 100,000 fighters, depending on the time of year, have taken serious casualties in recent months, especially in the country's south.

The casualties are primarily from the Afghan and U.S. air forces, and sometimes from Afghan commando units.



An Afghan commando before a mission behind Taliban lines in Helmand Province in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Mullah Basir Akhund, a former commander and member of the Taliban since 1994, said that cemeteries along the Pakistani border, where Taliban fighters have long been buried, are filling up faster than in years past. Pakistani hospitals, part of the country's unwavering line of support for the insurgents, are running out of bed space. During a recent visit to a hospital in Quetta, a hub for the Taliban in Pakistan, Mr. Akhund said he saw more than 100 people, most of them Taliban fighters, waiting to be treated.

But despite tough battles, the weight of a nearly withdrawn superpower, and the Taliban's own leadership issues, the insurgents continue to adapt.

Even as they seek to conquer the country, the Taliban are aware of their legacy of harsh rule, and do not want to "become the same pariah and isolated state" that Afghanistan was in the 1990s, said Ibraheem Bahiss, an International Crisis Group consultant and an independent research analyst.

"They're playing the long game," Mr. Bahiss said.

Reporting was contributed by Asadullah Timory in Herat, Taimoor Shah in Kandahar, Ruhullah Khapalwak, Farooq Jan Mangal in Khost and Zabihullah Ghazi in Jalalabad.