

VISUAL INVESTIGATIONS

What Scenes From the Taliban's Victory in Afghanistan Reveal

The fall of Afghanistan's government was captured in hundreds of videos from across the country. We analyzed some of the key moments.

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The Taliban seized power in Afghanistan on Sunday after a rapid advance across the country, overwhelming government forces and sending large swaths of the population into panic.

By Monday, thousands of Afghans in Kabul, the capital, had fled to the main airport. U.S. troops struggled to secure the airport for their own evacuation flights while blocking many Afghan civilians who flooded the tarmac in the hope of escaping.

Much of what we know of how the past few days unfolded comes from footage posted to social media by Afghan civilians, Taliban insurgents, contractors and journalists.

The Times reviewed and verified scores of these videos to see what that frantic takeover of the country looked like on the ground. Here's what we found.

Some resistance, followed by retreat

In several cities, Afghan security forces put up a strong fight to stop the Taliban advance, with videos showing exchanges of gunfire.

But much more prevalent during the Taliban's offensive were the scenes of apparent retreat by government forces left ill-equipped to secure the country after the American withdrawal.

In district after district, videos showed caravans of government military vehicles driving toward borders and airports.

In one video, an escaping Afghan convoy clogged a bridge on the border with Uzbekistan, reminiscent of Soviet soldiers leaving the country decades earlier across the same bridge.

Other videos show multiple Afghan military convoys that had fled across the border into eastern Iran.

Equipment seized

The rapid capitulation of the Afghan security forces came despite the U.S. having spent more than \$83 billion in weapons, equipment and training. As districts fell, so did military air bases.

At the airport in Herat, multiple videos show that the Taliban managed to seize and operate one of the Afghan Air Force's Soviet-era Mi-17 helicopters. It is unclear whether the insurgents knew how to fly the helicopters or were relying on pilots who switched sides.

An analysis of social media footage, corroborated by The Times, shows that since the beginning of the Taliban's offensive in May, they have captured at least 24 of the Afghan Air Force's roughly 200 aircraft, including U.S.-supplied helicopters and a light attack aircraft.

It is unlikely the Taliban will be able to operate these aircraft without an air force of their own. Most of the abandoned helicopters are damaged or mechanically unable to fly. Experts say the ones that can fly require extensive maintenance and skilled pilots.

What may be more advantageous for the Taliban are the hundreds of Humvees and pickup trucks they captured along with countless caches of weapons and ammunition. In social media videos, Taliban insurgents showed off their newly acquired weapons and vehicles.

Triumphant takeovers

In the days leading up to the fall of Afghanistan's capital, the Taliban seized many well-known provincial capitals.

In Herat, Taliban insurgents driving police vehicles they captured surrounded the entrance to the citadel, the historic heart of Afghanistan's third-largest city.

And in Jalalabad — located just east of Kabul along a key route into the capital — a Taliban convoy paraded through the city center.

The insurgents' arrival in Kabul, like elsewhere, seemingly came without a fight.

Videos showed fighters on trucks and motorcycles fanning out through the city, sometimes to cheers and applause.

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They eventually reached the presidential palace, abandoned by President Ashraf Ghani, who fled earlier in the day. An Al Jazeera correspondent accompanied fighters into the palace for a rambling live broadcast.

Taliban commanders said they were now in charge of the capital's security and desired no conflict with the United States.

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Hectic evacuations

American military transport helicopters spent Sunday criss-crossing the sky over Kabul, ferrying personnel from the embassy and other U.S. citizens to Hamid Karzai International Airport, which quickly became the de facto base of operations for many Western governments.

Anthony Mejia, an American helicopter maintenance contractor, filmed his own nighttime evacuation and posted it on Instagram.

U.S. officials said that all of the embassy's roughly 4,000 staffers had made it to the airport by Monday morning in Kabul. But it was unclear what would happen to the thousands of Afghans who had worked for the U.S. government and were applying for

special visas to live in the United States.

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.

At the airport, videos showed Afghans lining up for flights out of the country.

“Every 15 minutes, a U.S. plane flies and a second lands,” a man filming one video said. “There is chaos while people are entering the plane.”

Civilians left behind

But amid these military evacuations, thousands of Afghan civilians flooded Kabul's airport in a desperate effort to flee the country on Sunday and Monday. At multiple points gunfire was heard, but it's not clear who was responsible.

As the Taliban seized the city, commercial flights out were delayed or canceled. The few remaining flights faced a deluge of passengers, sparking conflicts as people tried to board.

On Sunday night, the U.S. troops took control of the airport's security, and commercial flights were canceled as military evacuations continued.

By the next morning, videos and photographs showed American soldiers barring civilians from entering parts of the airport. Meanwhile, crowds scaled walls and swarmed the tarmac hoping to reach departing planes.

In an apparent attempt to clear the runway, two Apache helicopters flew at low altitude over hundreds of civilians surrounding a C-17 transport plane — several clinging to its sides.

Some appear to have held on as the plane gained altitude. A subsequent video shows two people falling from the aircraft after it was well above the runway.

Bracing for the future

Many Afghans in Kabul spent the weekend preparing for life under Taliban control. Some stood in massive lines to withdraw cash from a bank.

Others rushed to buy food and supplies.

By Monday morning, members of the Taliban had set up checkpoints around the capital. Much of Kabul was reported to be quiet, and the Taliban appeared to have exerted control.

Translations by Zia Ur Rehman.