

THE INTERPRETER

## How Will the Taliban Govern? A History of Rebel Rule Offers Clues.

Insurgents who seize power tend to be authoritarian but pragmatic, desperate for legitimacy and ruthless toward classes they see as hostile.



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Published Sept. 2, 2021 Updated Sept. 21, 2021

As Taliban commanders exchange their guns for the reins of power, some 38 million Afghans can do little but hold their breath and wait to see how their latest conquerors will rule.

That uncertainty, also palpable in foreign capitals from Washington to Beijing, is compounded by the deep contradiction between the group's record of extremism and brutality during its prior reign, from 1996 to 2001, and its promises of moderation today.

History may offer a few clues. The Taliban are, depending on how one counts, something like the sixth or seventh rebel group to take over a country in the modern era. And while no two are exactly alike, certain patterns have emerged in how rebels rule.

Some learn to govern effectively, even to modernize, while others collapse in chaos or renewed war. Some grow crueler in power, lashing out at their subjects in fear and insecurity. Others moderate, though mostly in search of legitimacy and foreign aid.

But all seem to share a few traits:

A tightly bureaucratic authoritarianism, albeit sometimes allowing a degree of political opening. A focus on controlling or coercing elements of society seen as tied to the old order, sometimes through staggering violence. And a quest for foreign support and recognition as they strain to overcome the pariah status that tends to greet militants who shoot their way into power.

Those habits have a common purpose: consolidating authority. It is almost always the paramount concern for rebel rulers, who tend to understand that seizing a government building is not the same as becoming a government.

That yearslong process, the civil war scholar Terrence Lyons has written, is shaped as much by the victors' need for "postwar legitimacy and power consolidation" as it is by "the nature of victorious insurgent groups": hardened, disciplined and ideological.

### Rebel Governance



A portrait of Mao Zedong and placards hailing the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai, China, in 1971. Vittoriano Rastelli/Corbis, via Getty Images

Insurgents who seize power tend to quickly convert themselves into a very specific kind of government: party-based authoritarianism.

Think of China's Communist Party, a one-time rebellion that took power in 1949. They are tightly unified, with rigid internal hierarchies and a practiced hand at bureaucratic organizing but little tolerance for dissent.

Rebels choose this model for the simple reason that it's how they're already organized.

"A successful rebel group is simultaneously a political party, a military organization and a business," Dr. Lyons wrote in a study on how rebels govern.

In power, the discipline and cohesion of rebel groups often make their governments more stable and pragmatic than other types of authoritarianism, perhaps even longer-lived.

They tend to express "ambivalence, if not hostility, toward democracy," Dr. Lyons found, even as they claim to represent popular liberation. And their experience in the zero-sum contests of war can lead them to see peacetime competition — elections, protests, dissent — as a threat.

After taking power over China, Mao Zedong invited intellectuals, journalists and others to critique the new government. But, apparently taken aback, he jailed or killed many who had taken up his offer.

Still, while rebel governments' capacity for violence can be vast, years of hiding out in villages and mountain passes leaves them keenly aware of the value of cultivating popular support.

Many continue this practice in power, especially those who represent a particular ethnic or religious group, like the Taliban, and may wish to put the others at ease.

on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

The rebels who seized Uganda in 1986 offered amnesty to supporters of the old order. Ethiopian militants who took power in 1991 hosted “peace and stability committees” across the country in an attempt to show that they intended to represent everyone. In 1994, when ethnic Tutsi militias took control of Rwanda amid a genocide of their kin, they promised reconciliation and a pan-ethnic unity government.

All three held elections, albeit mostly for show, and allowed a degree of political freedom, within tightly controlled limits.

But make no mistake: insurgents, as a rule, cling to office with an authoritarian’s iron grip, guarded and perhaps paranoid about losing the power they fought so hard to win.

## Purges and Mass Exodus



Supporters of the Cuban revolution demonstrate in front of the old presidential palace in Havana, Cuba, in 1959. Gilberto Ante/Roger Viollet, via Getty Images

Rebel governments tend to organize much of their early rule around fears of being rejected by the public, undermined by holdovers from the previous government, even confronted by a rebellion of their own.

In response, they will often seek to control, coerce and even violently purge whole social classes seen as aligned to the old order, who may still hold sway over the culture, economy and governing bureaucracy.

One of Mao’s first acts was purging rural landowners, an economically powerful group considered to be right wing.

His forces rounded up thousands, encouraging local villagers to root out any left. Many were sent to forced labor camps or beaten to the death on the spot. Mao estimated the death toll at two million, though some historians put the number at 200,000.

[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.

The violence of Mao's campaign is unusual, but the scale is not.

On taking power in 1959, Cuba's revolutionaries made clear that they saw the middle and upper classes, which had largely backed the old government, as enemies. About 250,000 people fled. Their exodus permanently altered Cuban society.

The Taliban have said that they wish to avoid this in Afghanistan, warning of a "brain drain" if its educated middle class flees. The group did not stand in the way as tens of thousands were evacuated over the past two weeks, but has said it wishes to work with those who remain.

Since the extremes of the Cold War, when insurgents easily won superpower blessing for mass murder, rebels have learned to cater to the expectations of the international community.

Uganda's made a show of moderation and inclusion that, while superficial, averted the worst fears of postwar recrimination.

## Seeking Recognition



A Taliban member speaks to a journalist at the airport in Kabul this week. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The quest for legitimacy, to persuade subjects at home and governments abroad to treat them as a rightful government, typically involves seeking public acknowledgment from social and religious leaders, even the war's losers.

Accounts of the Taliban's advance toward Kabul have included such scenes: local leaders or strongmen greeting the group in a show of acceptance.

But much of rebels' focus is often abroad. Recognition from foreign powers can bring legitimacy and aid — essential for rebuilding after civil war — and stave off the threat of isolation.

Rwandan and Ugandan rebel leaders sat down with Western diplomats even as their forces still fought for control, promising to do as told.

The Taliban's diplomatic outreach has been almost obsequious, praising even long-hostile governments such as India's. For the group that harbored Al Qaeda, international acceptance is unlikely to come easily.

Others have arguably confronted chillier receptions. It took Mao's government 22 years to secure United Nations recognition and several more to win over the Americans.

The episode is instructive. Though Mao oversaw a world power, the weaknesses inherent in rebel rule created a need for recognition deep enough that he radically altered his foreign policy to get it.

Internationally reviled and facing a potentially devastating economic crisis, the Taliban's need may be even greater.

Barnett R. Rubin, an Afghanistan scholar, wrote this spring that the group's "quest for recognition and eventual eligibility for aid provides some of the most important leverage that other actors have over them."

Still, China's government changed only in the ways that the world demanded of it. As Richard Nixon landed in Beijing in 1972, his hosts were overseeing one of the longest-running political purges in modern history. The inclinations and habits of their rebel origins still held.