

Taliban, 1996–2007

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The Taliban emerged in Pakistan in the spring of 1994 as a movement built on radical Islam and Pashtun nationalism. Essentially, the Taliban accumulated the protests and dissatisfaction raging against the anarchy and violence that plagued Afghanistan under the rule of competing Mujahedeen (holy warrior) factions who had come to power with US assistance against the Soviet Union. With implicit Pakistani sponsorship, the Taliban forces grew rapidly and by fall 1994 had reached 1,500 followers, recruited mostly from among Afghan religious students. Headed by Mullah Muhammad Omar, a Mujahedeen veteran, the Taliban army captured

Qandahar, and by fall 1995 reached Herat. In September 1996 the Taliban seized Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. During the next two years, Taliban rule expanded over 90 percent of the Afghan territory, with small pockets of regional resistance.

Many Afghans welcomed the Taliban as the movement responded to their longstanding hopes for peace and political stability in a country divided on the basis of region, ethnicity, and clan. Others, however, were opposed to the Taliban's strict policy of imposing fundamental Islamic values and its goal to transform Afghanistan into a theocratic state. The most important factor for the Afghani people was not religious fundamentalism, as was demonstrated following the Taliban's fall, but establishing order and honest representative government. The destruction of the country's pre-Islamic cultural heritage contributed to the Taliban's image as fanatics and barbarians, even though for many observers the Taliban's religious fundamentalism was a means to power rather than an essential component of its rule. As a force of resistance, countering the US-imposed government installed in 2002, the Taliban moderated its religious fundamentalism, promising the core goal of establishing order and stability. Nonetheless, while the Taliban were in power, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was ostracized by the international community, with only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognizing the Taliban government. Diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to improve human rights, combat the opium trade, and end support for the Mujahedeen terrorist groups had little effect. International economic assistance to Afghanistan evaporated, leaving it one of the poorest countries in the world.

As the Taliban was welcomed by civilians throughout the country as a force of order, resistance to the new government was concentrated primarily in the north of Afghanistan among the Northern Alliance encompassing Uzbek and Tajik units from the former Mujahedeen forces. Stationed in the mountains, they engaged in intermittent clashes with the Taliban army but were not strong enough to defeat it. In the meantime, Afghanistan became a hub of international jihadist organizations which received a welcome reception from the Taliban government. The most notorious was al-Qaeda, headed by Osama Bin Laden, the likely architect of

the 1998 US embassies bombings and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, DC. Afghanistan became a prime target of the US-led war on terror and in October 2001 an international coalition of forces started military operations against the Taliban. The Taliban regime had fallen by December 2001, although resistance continues unabated as the government of Hamid Karzai, installed by the US, has failed to deliver order, stability, or any measure of prosperity to Afghanistan.

Afghan Resistance to US Invasion (2001–2007)

The displacement of the Taliban posed a problem regarding the composition of a new Afghan government. The US did not want it to be monopolized by the Northern Alliance, which was responsible for the four-year chaos before the coming of the Taliban. Besides, a Pushtun leader would better fit the country's political tradition. As a result, Hamid Karzai, a moderate figure with strong anti-Taliban views, was appointed president of the Afghan Transitional Administration and in 2004 was elected president of Afghanistan. International peacekeeping forces were deployed in Kabul and in some provincial centers. Foreign governments and donor organizations pledged billion of dollars for the Afghan reconstruction.

The peace in Afghanistan has been fragile, and at times appears nonexistent. The resistance to Hamid Karzai's regime has several sources. The first source is Taliban extremists who are dispersed throughout the country and pursue anti-government activity. The second source is international terrorist groups still remaining on Afghan territory. The third threat to Hamid Karzai comes from regional warlords who have lost their influence and revenues. Finally, the most serious resistance force is generated at the grassroots level. It is driven by popular worries that the foreign presence has not led to any improvement in economic conditions, jeopardizes Islamic traditions by bringing in thousands of foreign nationals, and represents a new foreign occupation that thwarts independence.

The prospects for Hamid Karzai's government are difficult to predict: much depends on his ability to achieve a viable compromise with opposition groups rather than quell them by

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force, although rampant patronage and corruption appear to hamper these prospects. American backing adds another pitfall as Hamid Karzai cannot afford to ignore deep-seated xenophobic sentiments in the Afghan society. If, however, Hamid Karzai fails to tame the resistance by peaceful means, a new round of insurgency and violence is likely to engulf the country. In this case the rise of radical or reformist elements, whether Taliban or another faction, is a highly plausible scenario for the future.

SEE ALSO: Afghanistan, 1978 Revolution and Islamic Civil War; Afghanistan, Resistance to 19th-Century British Invasion; Bacha-i Sakkao's Movement; Bin Laden, Osama (b. 1957) and al-Qaeda; Durrani Empire, Popular Protests, 1747–1823; Islamic Political Currents

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