How Long Will the Taliban Rule Last?

The Taliban's (a movement banned in the Russian Federation) first political steps are being watched with particular attention by the international community to determine the direction of further contacts and relations with the new Afghan authorities.

Several previous claims against the Taliban have created a bad reputation of this movement that still dominates the determination of the future international position towards the Taliban. Since 2003, the UN and several countries, including Russia, have recognized the Taliban as a terrorist organization, given that the movement has carried out at least 14 acts of terrorism. Between 1996 and 2001, when the Taliban were already leading the government of Afghanistan, they became well known to the world public because of their harsh and discriminatory policies against the country's population. Declaring a return to the roots of medieval Islam in their policies, they demonstrated the encouragement of the slave trade and total discrimination through the practice of trafficking in persons, especially women. In particular, of "alien" ethnicities: Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. There was blatant oppression of religious minorities, with Christians, Sikhs, Shia Muslims, and Hindus being the most persecuted religious groups in Afghanistan. The Taliban forbade non-Muslims to build new religious facilities and criticize Muslims, forcing them to mark their homes with a yellow cloth, and forbade them to live together with Muslims, i.e. practiced openly racist and fascist policies.

Performing blatant cultural vandalism and following one of the main principles, "What is not in the Koran should be banned", in 1998 the Taliban destroyed the Puli Khumri Public Library, containing 55,000 books and ancient manuscripts. In 2001, they destroyed about 3,000 works of art and ancient artifacts in the National Museum of Afghanistan and the Buddhas of Bamiyan monumental statues. During the Taliban rule, all kinds of entertainment
and cultural activities were banned: sports games, music, cinemas, TV shows, etc.

Unfortunately, individual facts from the above aspects have already started to emerge today. For instance, National Resistance Front spokesman Ali Nazari wrote on his Twitter that the Taliban have expelled thousands of people from Panjsher province and are conducting ethnic cleansing.

On September 8, dozens of women took to the streets in Kabul, as well as in the northeastern city of Faizabad, to rally against the composition of Afghanistan’s new all-male government, after which militants beat them with whips. Activists came out with an image of a pregnant police officer killed in the Ghōr Province a few days ago. In addition, it became known about the arrest of five journalists of the Etilaatroz newspaper who covered the protest action. They were detained hours before the new government's announcement, and Zaki Daryabi, said his staff had been severely beaten.

Under the given conditions of uncertainty, even sympathetic countries are not yet in any hurry to recognize the Taliban rule. To make any decisions, external players must imagine what the new regime will be like and who they will have to deal with in government. The current political uncertainty caused severe deterioration of the social and economic situation in the country: about $9.5 billion of Afghanistan's state reserves have been frozen in the U.S. bank accounts, the IMF has closed aid to the Taliban, the World Bank has suspended funding, and the European Union and Germany have also announced their intention to stop financial aid to Afghanistan. In this regard, there is discontent in Kabul and other major cities over the Taliban’s policies amid rising prices of essential commodities, food and fuel.

Under these circumstances, to attract outside investors, the Taliban announced that they were starting to fight corruption under Sharia law, and that they reduced taxes, and the new mayor of Kabul ordered local traders not to pay tribute to anyone for allowing them to operate. In parallel, the Taliban have stepped up discussions with individual countries on joint financial projects. For example, Abdul Salam Hanafi, the deputy head of the Taliban political office in Qatar, held consultations in Doha with the Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister. The Taliban expressed assurance to Beijing that they were ready "to remain committed to developing friendly relations between Afghanistan and China and will never allow any force to use Afghan territory to threaten the interests of China." The Taliban declared they were also ready to cooperate in China's One Belt, One Road Project.

Moreover, the Taliban have turned to New Delhi for help, given that India used to be among Afghanistan's most prominent donors and trading partners, investing about $3 billion in development projects, and the trade between both countries was estimated at $1.4 billion. To this end, the first official meeting between India and the Taliban was held in early September in Qatar at the initiative of the Taliban. However, experts believe it is too early to count on Indian financial aid to the Taliban, as the risks are too great.

There has been a lively discussion of the future policy towards the Taliban in the countries bordering Afghanistan: Pakistan, Iran, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. However, Tajikistan still does not agree to make contact with the Taliban. President Emomali Rahmon, who supported the Tajik resistance in Panjsher, has been more assertive than others: he openly asserts that the Taliban do not respect agreements, and Tajiks are entitled to decent representation in the government.

A high-ranking foreign official's first visit to Afghanistan since the Taliban came to power, by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Director General, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed has drawn attention. ISI is often described as the handler and almost the real leader of the Taliban Faiz Hamid held intensive talks in Kabul with the Taliban on the composition of the country's new government on the eve of its announcement by the Taliban, as well as the fall of the Panjshir resistance.

While the Taliban were busy expelling foreign troops, they proclaimed their non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, positioning themselves as a local religious, national liberation movement concerned only with Afghanistan and not proposing global ideas, such as a global caliphate. But in early September, Taliban’s spokesman Zabuliullah Mujahid called Israel an occupier and compared the country "to a tumor that must be destroyed" in an interview with an Iranian TV channel. Meanwhile, Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen told the BBC in an interview that the Taliban will defend Muslim rights around the world, particularly in Kashmir, India or any other country the way they visualize it.

But don’t consider the current political leadership of the movement is made up of illiterate fanatics and extremists, as it was when the Taliban was founded a quarter of a century ago. Today, the Taliban are led by quite educated people who have graduated from Islamic Universities, and who clearly articulate their goals and suggest effective
ways to achieve them. In that context, the Taliban's congratulatory message on their victory from al-Qaeda (a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation) drew attention. It called on Muslims to "prepare for the next phase" of jihad to establish Islamic rule from Arab North Africa to the Middle East. Also notable was the return to Afghanistan of the close aide to former al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden, Amin-ul-Haq who previously headed bin Laden's security service and was al-Qaeda's main weapons supplier.

These facts and the emergence of new ones undoubtedly exacerbate the already highly complex situation around and within Afghanistan, lead to the growth of anti-Taliban resistance, and strengthen the internal conflict between the Taliban factions. Against this background, foreign powers have so far continued to monitor all Taliban activities with vigilance.

Valery Kulikov, political expert, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.