The New Afghanistan: Why We’ve Heard It all Before and Again!

During the Christmas and New Year holiday periods, it is generally non-Christian countries which make the news. Everyday life carries on without interruption, so stories which build over a long period can mature without interruption.

It was only a few weeks ago that everybody was talking about Afghanistan. The Taliban (a radical movement banned in Russia) takeover was a foreign policy and public relations disaster for the West, and not a good thing for most Afghans either.

Even though most Afghans understand Sharia Law, and it makes sense to them as a moral code on which to found a state, the Taliban attracts those who use moralism to disguise criminality, as they did last time they were in power. Trump Evangelicals, as it were.

So we should logically be hearing a range of stories about what is happening now under the Taliban. With a global public hungry for anything which validates Islamophobia, news organisations should be undercutsing themselves to produce ever more lurid stories, from a range of perspectives, and through these creating a connected narrative which produces a framework through which subsequent stories can be read.
But what stories are we seeing? Women protesting against their Taliban-imposed status, the scrapping of the electoral commission, alcohol being destroyed, revenge attacks on those who worked for the previous government. Exactly what we would have expected to see, in any classroom model, should the Taliban ever take power again.

That is precisely what is wrong with these stories. They may refer to current events, but they are not about current realities. They rely for their impact on existing perceptions of the Taliban, and Afghanistan itself - they don’t make any attempt to tell us anything we don’t already know, even when it will confirm this narrative.

These stories could easily have been recycled from last time the Taliban were in power. It will not be surprising to find that some of them have been – firstly it will be old photos, then facts presented as contemporary, with only passing mention of their actual provenance - “for twenty years they have been doing this”, with only things that happened twenty years ago offered as evidence of this assertion.

Maybe the Taliban are the same bunch of bloodthirsty psychopaths hiding behind religion that they always were. But the world around doesn’t stand still – so even if they are, the context in which they are doing it is different, and the same actions won’t have the same effect.

Saying how bad the Taliban are, and how much Afghanistan and Afghans will suffer, should be as easy as shooting fish in a barrel. Instead journalists are lining up to point at the fish in the barrel, instead of shooting them.

We are hearing the same things because everyone is scared of saying anything new. If they did, the narratives they created would come back and bite them. Mainstream journalists would end up as the fish in the barrel, and having shot themselves, nobody would miss them.

**Same Story, Opposite Ending**

Many readers will remember, or know about, the day in 1989 when Nicolae Ceausescu gave his final speech in Bucharest to the usual band of paid, cheering acolytes. It was his final speech because the coup which overthrew him was practically at his door, and he ended by fleeing the rebellious crowds who were storming his palace.

Ceausescu thought that he could head off the revolt by appealing directly to the people and demonstrating his continuing power. But he failed utterly, because his words demonstrated exactly the opposite.

Ceausescu was far from stupid. He knew what he had to do to control people. But he used this grand speech, which he was advised against making, to repeat the same old stories he had been telling all his life - how every Romanian was a committed revolutionary and socialist because they knew it was good for them, how he had created freedom and paradise and would raise the minimum wage and pensions to show his continuing socialist credentials.

Romanians had stopped listening to these lies long ago. Now they were prepared to risk everything to get rid of the system which had ruined them, the old leader needed to offer the majority a vision they could at least tolerate, to make the fight not worth that risk.

Instead he told everyone he belonged to the past, and was incapable of moving beyond that. So his people made sure he didn’t, and even though Romania didn’t change much, no one wants to identify themselves as a “Nikolist” anymore.

Why did he do it? Because if he had offered something the people could accept, he would have to implement it. Socialism would have to actually raise living standards, not keep everyone in poverty. It would have to give Romania a genuinely independent future, not the fantasy freedom of mild dissidence within the Eastern Bloc. It would also have be progressive, creating a new future, whatever that consisted of, instead of what everyone had been told since 1945, when it really was a new beginning.

The same old stories were supposed to remind people of the certainties they knew, not the uncertainty they had never experienced, but was soon to engulf them. Exactly as repeating the same old stories about the Taliban, without addressing new horrors, is supposed to evoke the same certainties, so we don’t want to think about the alternative.

As in Ceausescu’s case, if we want to say anything new about the Taliban, we have to deliver on it. What can be delivered? Is the world going to forgive and forget, and treat Taliban government members as legitimate statesmen rather than terrorist thugs with an unacceptable ideology?

The implication of the old stories is that the Taliban, and all they stand for, are not only dangerous to Afghans but everybody else. We are being told to believe, probably correctly, that the Taliban are going to wreak havoc by
But the moment you say that these things are happening now, you have to do something about it now. When these things were said before – when we were all given the impression we have of the Taliban – they were the reason for the US conquest and long occupation and state-building exercise. If you say them again, you will be taken at your word – and be expected to go back in, apologise for pulling out, and this time wipe the Taliban off the face of the earth.

**Everything Except the Subject**

Repeating the same old stories makes people feel good about the past. They feel they were justified in previous actions, no matter what their consequences, if they can be reminded of how right they were then by what is happening now.

But now is now, and reportage of the current facts cannot be the same because the world isn’t the same. Repeating these stories is designed to keep them in the past, frozen, so no one addresses the actual crimes of the present day.

The rights of Afghan women, or lack of them, were a big international issue last time the Taliban were in power. The latest reports convey a genuine fear that not only will those days return, but they are already being imposed, even though Taliban claims otherwise.

All Westerners are well aware of woman’s rights issues – words and actions once considered acceptable are entirely unacceptable today, and rightly so. Supporting gender equality is public policy in the Western world, and this policy is worn as a badge of pride – such progressive ideas are believed by the West to distinguish it from other political blocs, in particular Third World and Muslim countries.

If the Taliban won’t treat women as equals, as the West understands this, it means they are backward and dangerous. But shouldn’t it also mean you should help those women who want to escape this regime, if the alternatives they seek are superior?

If the West believes its own rhetoric about gender equality it should evacuate every Afghan girl or woman who wants it, and resettle them in Western countries to preserve this fundamental human right. That will never happen, because the West wants to keep those same women in subjection to show the world how bad the Taliban are, to justify previous actions, rather than give them the rights they are striving for because it is the right thing to do.

The scrapping of the electoral commission is another action which would naturally cause concern. In every country, elections are monitored both internally and by outside agencies, such as the EU and UN, to ensure basic standards are met. So if Afghanistan wants to abolish its electoral commission, what does it have to hide?

Every Third World country has well documented evidence that “observing elections” means nothing more than ensuring the result foreign sponsors want, and turning a blind eye to abuses of the democratic process if committed by their chosen friends. Amongst many examples which can be cited is the Zimbabwe-Rhodesia election of 1978, declared “reasonably free and fair” by international observers, despite the fact there was no voter registration and the official turnout in some districts was over 100%.

The Taliban maintains that each Afghan election under the US-sponsored regime was rigged, and this view is widely accepted. So much for electoral commissions. But what does protesting against the Taliban disbandment of it actually mean?

If the Taliban are denying Afghans democratic rights they are also denying them human rights, in Western thinking. Wasn’t that why the Western occupation took the course it did? Wasn’t introducing pseudo-democracy supposed to make the country less likely to sponsor terrorism, the ostensible reason for invading it?

If you went in once to protect Western ideals of humanity, which most Afghans also share, surely you now have to do it again? But that won’t happen, because questions will be asked about why it doesn’t happen elsewhere - not least by former Soviet Bloc nationals, who are sick and tired of hearing Westerners pontificate on how bad Communism was, and how much better freedom is, when they did nothing then to rescue them from Communism and do everything now to prevent them enjoying freedom.

**Put Up or Shut Up?**

Afghanistan repels every invader in time. It does things the Afghan way, always has, always will.
The Taliban may not represent that Afghan way, but they are closer to it than the West is capable of being. This is why the latest Western intervention has gone so horribly wrong. It never delivered for most Afghans because it was nothing to do with them. But the West can’t face the fact that it doesn’t have all the answers, and that some people, somewhere, might not want the Western alternative, or think it superior.

We are told the Taliban is the same demonic monstrosity of old, and that is probably true. Few Afghans who fled the country before - they formed for many years the world’s largest refugee population - want to return now. But if you went in the first time because their ideology and actions led them to sponsor and commit terrorism, shouldn’t you do it again if they haven’t changed?

Everything which happens under the Taliban this time round will be referred to its previous period of rule. A story will only be interesting if it reminds people of the past. If Taliban commits some new atrocity, no one will be interested in reporting it, or helping the victims, because they don’t want the responsibility which goes with that.

The Western attitude towards the Taliban now is that of a doctor who only knows six diseases. In order to keep practising, he has to pretend that every ailment his patients suffer from is one of the six diseases he knows, even if it patently isn’t.

If he has to admit he doesn’t know what to do in most cases, he will lose his authority, and the power that comes with it. Maintaining that is more important than learning enough to treat the patients, and more important still than caring about their welfare.

Afghans are only allowed to suffer the way the West wants them to - and then for as long as it salves Western consciences. They will never be free of the Taliban if no one will engage with the reality of it, rather than the convenient cartoon. But those who do will be condemned as dangerous radicals with no voice, until the military-industrial complex needs different fantasies to keep its gravy train running.

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