Afghanistan and Its Challenge to Feminism

written by Frieda Afary | January 23, 2022

The Taliban's takeover of power after the United States' brutal twenty-year imperialist occupation is a catastrophe for women not only in Afghanistan but throughout the world.

It is true that world powers often close their eyes to atrocities against women, including most recently the rape and mass incarceration of Uyghur Muslim women in Xinjiang by the Chinese government, the rape and ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslim women by the Myanmar government, and the rape and assault on women in Congo and Ethiopia's Tigray Region by government forces.

What is different about the case of Afghanistan, however, is that the U.S. government and other occupying NATO allies practically handed over power to the Taliban, a misogynist, racist, and jihadist army that they claimed the occupation had originally sought to uproot. The Taliban is an army that is in many ways similar to ISIS and to the Ku Klux Klan in its extremism and brutality (Achcar 2021, Cole 2021).

Since their takeover, the Taliban have assaulted women's protests, beaten and censored reporters, stopped girls over the age of 12 from attending school or university, forced girls and women to marry Taliban fighters, forced most employed women to stay home, reinstituted complete gender segregation, and replaced the department of women's affairs with their morality police, the Department of Promotion of Virtue and Prohibition of Vice (Nebehay and Farge 2021, Pal 2021, Engelbrecht and Hassan 2021).

In the words of Malalai Joya, an Afghan feminist and former member of the parliament who has survived four assassination attempts and is in hiding inside Afghanistan,

> The Americans replaced the barbaric regime of the Taliban with brutal warlords and then began to negotiate with the Taliban, even though the nature of the Taliban has never changed. The Americans have thrown bombs, polluted the environment, made the system even more corrupt. They have never been interested in the Afghan people (Joya 2021).

In an interview with Los Angeles-based journalist Sonali Kolhatkar, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) stated that the Afghan National Army and the U.S.-backed Afghan government fell apart so quickly just before the U.S. withdrawal because

> [t]he U.S. government negotiating with Pakistan and other regional players had an agreement to form a government mainly composed of Taliban. So the soldiers were not ready to be killed in a war that they knew there was no benefit of the Afghan people in it because finally it is set behind closed doors to bring Taliban to power.

RAWA also emphasized that

> [i]t is human nature to resist, and history bears witness. We have the glorious examples of U.S. struggles [such as] “Occupy Wall Street” and “Black Lives Matter” movements. We have seen that no amount of oppression, tyranny, and violence can stop resistance. … Our women are now politically conscious and no longer want to live under the Burqa, something they easily did 20 years ago. We will continue our struggles. … Now our fear is that the world may forget Afghanistan and Afghan women, like under the Taliban bloody rule in late 90s. Therefore, the U.S. progressive people and institutions should not forget Afghan women (Kolhatkar 2021).

Indeed some progressives and feminists around the world have issued statements. Activists from Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and India to Europe, Canada, the United States, and Hong Kong have organized protest gatherings and meetings in solidarity with Afghan women. Many are actively helping Afghan refugees. A Los Angeles organization of Black women activists for reproductive justice organized a discussion in which they brought together the plight of women in Haiti and Haitian refugees with the plight of women in Afghanistan and Afghan refugees (Black Women for Wellness 2021).

Here I would like to take up three of the attitudes expressed by feminists:

> 1. The concern for and solidarity with Afghan women expressed by liberals who also accept the U.S. deal with the Taliban and seem to think that the only solution for now is to use economic pressure to make the Taliban more inclusive.
>
> 2. The claim by leftists that for the people of Afghanistan, the Taliban are the lesser of the two evils after 20 years of U.S. occupation and should thus be recognized or engaged.
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> 3. Opposition by progressives and socialist feminists to both U.S. imperialism and the Taliban, and support for the struggles of Afghan women against religious fundamentalism and imperialism.

Liberals Who Justify U.S. Imperialism’s Deal with the Taliban

Many liberal feminists, like Michelle Goldberg, columnist for the New York Times, support the U.S. withdrawal and admit that the U.S. occupation was a corrupt effort that led to the deaths and suffering of tens of thousands of Afghan civilians. However, they argue that U.S. President Joseph Biden could not renege on the deal that former President Donald Trump made with the Taliban (Goldberg 2021, Goodwin 2021). They ignore the fact that Biden was not obliged to carry out the deal in order to withdraw U.S. forces. They also ignore the fact that it was the Obama administration that started negotiating with the Taliban. The Obama administration asked the Qatari government to open a diplomatic office for the Taliban in Doha in 2013; the purpose was to facilitate negotiations behind the backs of Washington’s own puppet Afghan government (Whitlock 2021, Tankel 2018).

Another liberal feminist, Farah Stockman, a member of the *New York Times* editorial board, argues that the U.S. government should “leverage money and international recognition to incentivize the Taliban to establish the most inclusive and moderate government possible.” In her view, “even a deeply flawed government in Kabul is preferable to no government at all” (Stockman2021).

Leftists Who Call for Recognizing or Engaging with the Taliban

Nancy Lindisfarne, co-author of *Afghan Village Voices and co-editor of Dislocating Masculinity and Masculinities Under Neoliberalism*, and Jonathan Neale, former abortion and HIV counselor and author of *A People’s History of the Vietnam War*, argue that the Taliban should be viewed as the will of the Afghan people (Lindisfarne and Neale 2021). They emphasize that the Taliban, although “deeply misogynist” and “sometimes racist and sectarian,” have popular support inside Afghanistan because of the cruelty and corruption of the American occupation. “The Taliban have offered two

things across the country: …They are not corrupt … [and] are willing to rule for the poor." They are not the Taliban of 2001 but have now become more inclusive and also have "concerns for the rights of women." They are "an army of poor peasants." They are "anti-imperialist." They "want peace."

Lindisfarne and Neale make a distinction between Afghan women and Afghan feminists. They claim that most Afghan women do not oppose the Taliban. Thus, they suggest that those progressives who want to help Afghan feminists can "organize to buy them airplane tickets and give them refuge in Europe and North America."

While most leftists do not back the above crude and shameful defense of the Taliban, the view of the Taliban as a popular anti-imperialist force with support from women is not uncommon within the left.

Anand Gopal's moving article, "The Other Afghan Women," which tells the life story of a rural Afghan woman named Shakira from her childhood during the Soviet Union's occupation up to now, shows that even when some rural women say they prefer the Taliban forces to the Karzai and Ghani governments and the U.S. occupation, that is not because they admire the Taliban but because they have experienced bombings under U.S. occupation. In fact, rural women too say that they support women's rights and want rights for all women and not only urban women (Gopal 2021).

However, even Gopal, author of *No Good Men Among the Living*, a Pulitzer prize-winning book on the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, calls for engaging with the Taliban. He does not advocate the immediate recognition of the Taliban government, but he does argue that "given that there are different currents within the Taliban, the extent to which the international community tries to engage with the pragmatic current, that could empower that pragmatic current against the hardliners"(Remnick 2021).

Principled Feminist Solidarity

As part of an effort to articulate a principled collective position, a group of Iranian feminist organizations in exile has issued a statement, in which they write,

> We condemn the recognition of the Taliban government by any country under the claim that "the Taliban have changed and have become more moderate." We stand with the women of Afghanistan against the Taliban, who, after reconquering power, have turned women and girls into sexual slaves for their soldiers (Collective Action 2021).

A coalition of Indian women's groups issued a call for Afghan solidarity demonstrations throughout India on August 23. Their demands included the following:

> The UN, the international community, and all countries including India [must] refuse to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and instead support the demand raised by Afghan civil society and women's groups that "any change of political order or the constitution must happen through elections and by the will of the people of Afghanistan, not through the threat of violence, or through war and military intervention," and "drafting, legislating, and implementing the civil and penal laws shall be based on the Constitution of Afghanistan, the national parliament shall be the sole legislating body, and the creation of any non-elected body, including the Supreme Theological Council of the Taliban, and the practicing of any unconstitutional power shall be outlawed."
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> An international tribunal [must be] set up to ensure justice for the war crimes committed by the United States and NATO in the course of the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

> The UN Human Rights Council must initiate a fact-finding mission to identify and bring to justice all perpetrators of atrocities and violence against Afghan civilians—including the occupying armed forces as well as the Taliban and other armed groups. Taliban leaders must also be brought to justice for every atrocity they inflicted on women and minorities in the past.
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> United Nations Secretary General, the UN Human Rights Council, international human rights organizations, and the international community must act to ensure that Afghan women's rights groups are the center of any negotiations and other processes to ensure a just peace and secure the rights of all Afghan people (All India Progressive Women's Association, et al. 2021).

Furthermore, Indian American scholar and activist Deepa Kumar, author of *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, has warned against the vilification of Muslims. She has urged those who draw connections between the Taliban and the extreme right in the United States to be nuanced in their discourse. She pinpoints the native roots of racism and misogyny in the United States that arose from several hundred years of de jure and de facto slavery preceding Islamic fundamentalism:

> While the Taliban are indeed a retrograde force, it is important to look more deeply at the role the U.S. played in Afghanistan. Indeed, the U.S.'s failure to 'liberate' women is not so much the product of the backward 'culture' of Afghan people, but rather its choice of allies: the very same misogynistic warlords who began the attacks on women's rights in the early 1990s (Kumar 2021).

Perspectives for Socialist Feminist International Solidarity

Given all the above, what conclusions can socialist feminist activists draw as the basis for our solidarity with the Afghan people and Afghan women in particular?

It is critically important not to separate opposition to U.S. imperialism from opposition to the Taliban and solidarity with Afghan women, oppressed minorities, and refugees. Any talk of legitimizing the Taliban as the so-called "will of the Afghan people" should be rejected. If we allow for the legitimization of the Taliban government, we have betrayed Afghan women and we have emboldened the extreme-right racists and misogynists around the world, like those taking away voting rights and abortion rights in the United States. Instead we need to give voice to Afghan women who oppose the Taliban.

We need to continue to put pressure on our governments and the United Nations to deliver humanitarian aid to Afghanistan through reputable humanitarian organizations and independent channels that can be held accountable (Egeland, 2021). Those who wish to send donations to the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan can go to this website: www.afghanwomensmission.org/2010/08/make-a-donation/.

While the effort of Chilean feminist Michele Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights, to install a UN official to monitor human rights in Afghanistan is a step forward, we cannot have any illusions about the United Nations. Among the 47 members of the UN Human Rights Council, 19—including China, Russia, and Pakistan—failed to support Bachelet's proposal to have a human rights watchdog for Afghanistan. Two months earlier, the members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation blocked Bachelet's call for a fact-finding mission (Cumming-Bruce, 2021). Furthermore, the permanent members of the UN Security Council (the United States, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom) each have the power to veto any UN effort—whether resolution or tribunal—to put themselves on trial and hold them accountable for committing war crimes in Afghanistan or elsewhere.

Thus, instead of putting our focus on creating a "feminist foreign policy" within the context of capitalism (Chattopadhyay, 2021), socialist feminists need to challenge the very logic of capitalism that leads to militarism and war. This means recognizing that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan cannot be celebrated as the end of U.S. imperialism. Trump's and then Biden's eagerness to withdraw from Afghanistan is rooted not only in the failure of the twenty-year U.S. occupation but also in U.S. aims to concentrate its military forces in the Pacific to confront China in a potentially much larger and far more destructive war for capitalist single-world domination (Buckley and Myers 2021).

Facing this ominous reality demands that socialist feminists develop a global view that expresses awareness of women's struggles and anti-racist, labor, prison abolitionist, and LGBT struggles in the Middle East region, in South and Southeast Asia, and globally and helps to bring them in contact with each other. For instance while Iran, which is ruled by a religious fundamentalist, misogynist regime, is helping the Taliban, it also has a women's movement for reproductive rights and against rape, femicide, and Shari'a law. The most prominent symbols of Iran's feminist struggles are Nasrin Sotoudeh, a human rights attorney, and Narges Mohammadi, a children's rights activist, both of whom are currently imprisoned. They are both against the prison system and the death penalty. Iranian women are reaching out to Afghan women in solidarity and recently had a demonstration to express that solidarity, after which most of the participants were arrested. Palestinian women are fighting against both Israel's colonial rule and the misogyny of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, the latter of which congratulated the Taliban after its takeover of Kabul. Women in Myanmar have been involved in a popular uprising since February and have been raising feminist demands as more and more are being imprisoned by a brutal military regime.

All of these developments are taking place in the midst of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic that is taking tens of thousands of lives every day due to poverty, lack of sanitary conditions, and lack of personal protective equipment and safe vaccines. The demand of people in Afghanistan and Iran, Myanmar, Haiti, and elsewhere for free and safe vaccines and PPE should be part of the demands of any solidarity movement.

A global socialist feminist view also demands supporting the plight of Afghan refugees and confronting racist forces in our countries who use refugees as scapegoats for the problems caused by capitalism and imperialism.

Ultimately, these challenges cannot be addressed without a new international type of socialist feminist organizing that offers a humanist alternative to capitalism-racism-sexism-heterosexism and alienation. It is toward this aim that we need a deep rethinking and further development of the contributions of socialist feminism.

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