

THE TALIBAN, ISLAM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Over the last year, events in Afghanistan have periodically appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world with headlines bemoaning the Taliban militia's enforcement of strict *Shari'a* law in areas under its control. Appropriately, the greatest concern to the foreign correspondents writing these columns seems to be the predicament of women kicked out of schools, forced to cover themselves from head to foot and banned from working. The foreign aid agencies' difficult decision in the fall of 1996 as to whether to withdraw from Afghanistan in protest or remain in the country and operate under the new decrees of the Taliban highlighted the plight of women in regions under Taliban control and sparked renewed interest in the different approaches to Islamic interpretation found throughout the Muslim world.

When the Taliban speak of creating a pure Islamic state based on the Qu'ran and strict *Shari'a* law one wonders to whose interpretation it is referring and if its cited religious authority is somehow more legitimate than others. In Iran, another Islamic state, women work, drive cars and hold seats in Parliament. Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has denounced the Taliban's Islamic interpretation: "The world does not accept what the Taliban are doing in the name of Islam."¹ How is one to understand this stark difference of interpretation between two groups that both claim to be governed by strict adherence to *Shari'a* law, particularly as it affects the situation of women? By examining the specific case of women in Afghanistan under Islamic rule, one can come to a fuller understanding of the general issue of women's human rights in the Muslim world.

At different levels of society, religion plays widely varying roles which need to be recognized and assessed separately. At the political-institutional level, religion is often manipulated and controlled by state policy in an effort to

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consolidate control and gain legitimacy. At the same time, it can also be the sincere faith and moral code of innumerable believers whose religious sincerity is often disregarded by secularists. At the socio-cultural level one must take into consideration such factors as clan and kinship ties and pre-Islamic practices and traditions that can affect religious practice. For example, the impact of patriarchy can be felt in the effort of some men who, in their attempt to maintain the status quo against women, dress their arguments in religious terms. This larger framework leads one to question whether the Taliban are acting out of sincere faith or political-institutional manipulation.

While the core group of the Taliban was formed in the historically conservative *madrassas* (Islamic schools) of Kandahar and in Pakistan during the Soviet occupation, their movement represents no more than another attempt by one of Afghanistan's ethnic groups, in this case the Pashtun, to gain political control. The speed and relative ease with

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which the Taliban brought so much of the country under their control stems from the status of the Pashtun majority in Afghanistan. The Pashtun make up almost half of Afghanistan's population and are the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan. They maintain close ties with the Pakistani Northwest Frontier province which borders Afghanistan and is also majority Pashtun. Pakistan's interests focus on securing a lasting, stable and central authority in Kabul with which Islamabad will have increasing influence and leverage. They are believed to back up these interests with large shipments of arms and supplies to the Taliban.

Since becoming a state, a strong sense of national pride has permeated Afghan culture and, with periodic exceptions, has overridden ethnic and linguistic divisions. But the war against the Soviets that began in 1979 left Afghanistan without a central authority to cope with the competing ethnic warlords and their fiefdoms. The

Taliban jumped in to fill that vacuum but is slowly realizing that its religious conservatism is as foreign to Kabul as it is common to Kandahar. Moreover, pressure from the international community, coupled with the domestic upheaval of the past year, has sharply curtailed Pakistan's support of the Taliban. These situations, together with the ethnic divisions that define modern Afghanistan, the suffering and hardship resulting from lack of foreign aid and the condemnation of the international community, have undermined the temporary peace the Taliban were able to provide.

The dynamic of the relationship between the Taliban and Iran is another political issue couched in religious terms. While some have pointed to the schism between *Sunnis* and *Shi'a* as the basis for the cold reception the Tali-

ban has received from Iran, the reality is that the Taliban's close ethnic, political and military ties to Pakistan have discredited the Taliban in the eyes of the Iranian leadership. Pakistan is seen by Iran as a satellite of the United States and Iranian leaders interpreted early overtures by the United States toward the Taliban as signs of an attempt to further isolate Iran.

Afghanistan is a long way from peace and stability. One might have expected the Taliban to become more flexible in its application of *Shari'a* law in order to garner domestic support, draw international supporters, win the approval of the international community and regain its early image as the only force able to restore peace and stability to Afghanistan under a central authority. The Taliban's attempt to use Islam for national unification seems to be backfiring. As battles north of Kabul intensify and the Taliban suffers its first military setbacks since it gained control of the capital, many in the West have wondered if the Taliban will shift gears and seek legitimacy through relaxation of religious control. However, this train of thought downplays the role of sincere faith in religious activism and assumes the existence of a higher degree of religious manipulation for political-institutional and socio-cultural ends. If the policies and actions of the Taliban militia are indeed rooted in a sincere religious faith, Western hopes for moderation in the Taliban's approach are nothing more than mere illusions.

In the final analysis, the Taliban militia, like all movements, is made up of individuals. Exposing the myth of homogeneity means acknowledging that members have their own reasons for adhering to the group's ideology. There is a fine, indiscernible line between sincere religious observance and the manipulation of religion to serve political, cultural or personal ends. Some fundamentalists are the sincerely faithful who see in their conception of the role of women not subjugation but respect. Others clearly base their approach towards women's human rights on patriarchal attitudes and tribal traditions and simply couch their approach in religious terms for the convenience of the authority and legitimacy religion provides. For these reasons, proponents of women's human rights in the Muslim world should be extremely careful to focus the debate on the issue of human rights alone, and not on the place of religion in modern society.

The focus of proponents of women's human rights should be just that—human rights, not religion. Instead of questioning the place of religion in the debate over women's rights, the debate should center on how groups of believers and non-believers can coordinate their efforts. At the very least this would avoid undercutting each other's work and hopefully would lead to developing increasingly complimentary approaches among groups divided

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on religious issues but united in the campaign to gain respect for women's human rights.

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- ¹ Elaine Sciolino, "The Many Faces of Islamic Law," *The New York Times* October 13, 1996. E

