

Whither Afghanistan

The society of Afghanistan is complex – mainly consisting of several stratified tribes controlling different parts of the country and often in competitive relation with each other. The tribes are themselves patriarchal dominated by clans and families owning large tracts of land or herds of animals. There are conversely a large section of landless families and poor herders working for the richer families or clansmen. There is limited commercial production of fruits, opium and sheep (skin, wool and meat) for the international market mainly in the form of feudal and semi capitalist enterprises, but using tribal and clan labour.

During the last decades following the ‘Soviet’ invasion and persistent warfare there has emerged a strata of warlords drawn from the dominant feudal classes but also successful military formations, who have sought to gain control over land and trade and also impose forced resource collection and conscription. This has contributed to the weakening of tribal and feudal ties and the formation of new ties based on military action. Often we find figures from the rural poor rising to power and rubbing shoulders with the traditional feudal tribal lords.

Some of the key issues to observe in this regard is: i.) land policy – to what extent is the principle of land to the tiller or equitable distribution of land or collectivisation of land is being proposed or policies favouring unequal distribution of land ii) productive infrastructure policy – to what extent is public investment being used for development of productive forces like irrigated land, electricity generation, roads etc. for facilitating commercial and industrial development or conversely if infrastructure is being developed for better exploitation of natural resources like mining for unprocessed export of minerals and for movement of the military machine and iii) policy for development of national capitalism – protecting investment by Afghan nationals, mobilising surplus of Afghans for investment, developing the basis of industrialisation and urbanisation in Afghanistan.

The extent to which the policies enable poor landless and herdless families to acquire resources and to protect the rights of the poor landless workers and urban workers in industries, trade and transport will indicate the social leanings of the Taliban, if it is weighed in favour the labouring poor or in favour of the landed and the rich.

Similarly with the rights of women. The position of women has been used by imperialist powers to legitimise the most brutal intervention in Afghan affairs

supposedly acting as agents of women's emancipation and the Taliban has been portrayed as opposed to it in so far as it adheres to certain provisions of medieval Shariat or Islamic law. While it is important to stay clear of such imperialist rhetoric, it should be recognised that democratic principles require equality of men and women in all walks and stations of life while recognising local cultural practices like wearing distinct headdress etc. or even maintaining social distances in public spaces.

Afghanistan, it should be remembered is essentially a tribal country which still needs to develop into a democratic multinational state. Building the Afghan state can be based on democratic principles of equal incorporation of all tribes respecting their special cultures and languages and welding them as a common democratic state or it can be integrated based on the military might of a few tribes dominating over the others, and uniting all of them based on a particular interpretation of Islamic texts. Building a democratic state, besides, requires ease of transport and communication, building a common market without restrictions over movement of goods and people, universal education through common schooling of children, etc.

A quick review of the signals emanating from the Taliban does not answer any of the above questions with any clarity and we cannot hence define class character of the Taliban movement. It is possible that the movement is still trying to arrive at some consensus on these issues.

Even though the above matters are vital for the long term development of a democratic Afghanistan, the immediate task is quite clearly the establishment of just peace in a severely war ravaged country. Establishing peace not only implies the ousting of imperialist occupation forces but also developing democratic institutions that help to settle inter-tribal or regional disputes in mutually acceptable fashion. This is necessary to end the internecine warfare that has only helped imperialist intervention in the past.

Establishing peace also implies rebuilding infrastructure like roads and waterworks destroyed by war, establishing civic institutions for governance and establishing a regular system of taxation to prevent irregular warlord extractions.

A few aspects of the current events in Afghanistan stand out: Firstly, we find the Taliban appearing as more 'moderate' in its approach whether in terms of amnesty to all those who worked for the previous regime, a more

accommodative stance towards women's rights, a promise of protection of investments of neighbouring countries including India. This is in contrast to the stance of the organisation which was one of extreme religious fanaticism in the pre-USA invasion days. Secondly, the withdrawal of the US from a strategically important location without a guarantee of its role there, indicates a strategic weakening of the USA as an imperialist power policing the entire planet. This also indicates the crisis of US economy which has forced the US government to reduce its international presence and allow new emerging economic and military super powers like China to wrest control and negotiate with arch enemies like the Taliban and allow them to take over power with such ease and rapidity. Thirdly, quite clearly China is stepping into the power vacuum created by the exit of the US as only it may be in a position to bankroll the military and economic projects of the Taliban and in the process establish new forms of control over the country, its people and resources. In other words, the exit of the US armed forces may not signal the end of imperialist control and the establishment of a democratic state.

In sum, it would appear that the withdrawal of the US forces and the establishment of the control of the Taliban over the most of Afghanistan signifies the following:

- i. This is certainly one of the greatest defeats faced by US Imperialism after the Vietnam debacle, this time effected by a combination of the determined resistance of the Afghan people, the leadership of Taliban, the weakening of the US and the rise of China besides other factors.
- ii. In so far as it represents the defeat of US imperialism and the establishment of the rule of a patriotic power block, it can be treated as a part of democratic movement.
- iii. In so far as it represents an alliance of fundamentalist Islamic patriarchal warlords, we need to be wary of the consolidation of the power of such elements which in the long run will stifle any democratic aspirations of the people of Afghanistan.
- iv. At the same time we need to be open to the prospects of radicalisation of the Taliban with the plebeian elements gaining dominance and carrying forward at least some progressive policies and agendas we had hinted above.
- v. We know from the history of the past half a century that the Afghan people will resist tooth and nail any direct colonial type militaristic control by any foreign power. It remains to be seen if they will also

withstand efforts to establish neo-colonial controls through the medium of 'liberal aid' and collaboration by powers like China, Russia, Pakistan, India etc. Otherwise Afghanistan will have to undergo another period of imperialist domination which can only perpetuate the miseries and deprivation of the people of Afghanistan.

- vi. Afghanistan is at the cross roads: with the structures of the previous state power and its institutions smashed or abandoned a factor which opens possibilities for establishing a new popular democracy, and sweeping away not only the remnants of imperialism but also of feudalism, patriarchy and religious fundamentalism, establish a popular nationalist government with a democratic constitution enshrining rights of the labouring people and initiating economic development in the country and also a programme for building a democratic state of Afghan people. This can be possible only if the toiling men and women of Afghanistan organise themselves and assume power under a leadership with clarity of vision.