



The West Faces A Big Human Rights Test with The Taliban

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At the moment, Western nations and the global financial institutions over which they hold considerable sway are demanding that the Taliban respect human rights as a condition of receiving the economic aid that Afghanistan so urgently needs – rather than return to the harsh conditions that defined its original time in power, from 1996 to 2001. Global institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as well as foreign governments, have suspended aid and access to cash and credit.

The next big test for the world's major powers may come at the G-20 summit in Rome, which will take place on October 30th and 31st. There, French President Emmanuel Macron has said, the world's big powers "must have a very clear message that we will set conditions for recognition of the Taliban" – conditions that include "the dignity of Afghan women, equality between men and women."

Other Western leaders are voicing similar sentiments. While British officials have met with Taliban leaders, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has insisted that neither his nor any other country should "recognize any new regime in Kabul prematurely or bilaterally." Instead, countries "should work towards common conditions about the conduct of the new regime before deciding, together, whether to recognize it and on what terms."

So far, the Taliban seems unmoved, with evidence mounting that it's re-imposing its rigid reign of years ago. Rather than agree to the conditions of donors, Taliban officials seem to resent them.

"Putting pressure on us is not the right approach....," Taliban spokesman Inamullah Samangani recently told the Washington Post. "We are ready to engage, but the international community should avoid setting preconditions."

Presuming the Taliban remain unmoved, the question is whether foreign donors will hang tough in the defense of human rights, especially as the Afghan people suffer more poverty, hunger, and human rights abuse.

While a donor retreat might seem understandable in the face of such suffering, it would deliver another body blow to human rights around the world, making clear that the West doesn't have the stomach to withstand pressure and stick by its principles.

The choice is a difficult one. Already, the poor and war-torn country of Afghanistan is suffering an economic and social meltdown, prompting fears of a quickly mounting humanitarian catastrophe. Banks are running out of cash, so people can't get access to all of their money. Government offices are closed, and the central bank is only paying part of the salaries owed to teachers, police, and other workers. Inflation is soaring, with food prices up as much as 50 percent since the Taliban gained power. Businesses are struggling, people are selling household furnishings on the street, and families displaced by the final days of war are living in tent camps. Meanwhile, Taliban forces are increasingly meting out justice in ways akin to their rule of a quarter-century ago.

"The Taliban are steadily dismantling the human rights gains of the last twenty years," Amnesty International, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) reported in late September.

The Taliban, these groups said, is engaged in targeted murdering of both civilians and of soldiers who had surrendered, restricting the movement of women, suppressing the media and civil society, cracking down on protests, and even preventing humanitarian supplies from reaching the Panjshir Valley.

Meanwhile, Taliban soldiers were going door to door to search for human rights defenders, many of whom are in hiding. "Their offices and homes have been raided," an official with the World Organisation Against Torture said of human rights defenders. "Their colleagues have been beaten. They are forced into permanent hiding. They live under the constant threat of arrest, torture or worse."

Women, who suffered mightily when the Taliban previously ruled, are once again facing fierce attack. In the western city of Herat, Human Rights Watch and the San Jose State University's Human Rights Institute reported, the Taliban is again denying free movement to women and girls who are not accompanied by a male family member, denying them access to jobs and education, and imposing draconian dress codes.

In other words, despite its assurances to the contrary, the Taliban of today increasingly resembles the Taliban of yesterday, and its rule will bring terror and suffering to the people of Afghanistan, especially its women and girls.

That, in turn, will raise the stakes for Western nations and global institutions to stick to their guns over human rights – both to pressure the Taliban into making concessions as Afghanistan faces an economic collapse and in order to send a larger signal to the world about the West's steadfastness in its commitment to human rights ideals.

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