

Taliban 2.0: An Analysis of Taliban's use of Political Communication During the Kabul 'Triumph' and Ensuing Quest for Global Recognition

Abstract: *In an unprecedented turn of events witnessed in August 2021, a vast territory of Afghanistan fell under complete control of the Taliban on 15th August 2021. Despite 300'000 strong force, Afghan National Army (ANA) failed to put up any resistance against the Taliban blitzkrieg. What was more surprising was the apparent change in the political communication strategy of the Taliban during their conquest and after they took control of Kabul. The way Taliban spokespersons used social media, held press conferences, gave assurances to rival factions, and offered amnesties to the Afghan national army and other rivals played a significant role in the conception of 'Taliban 2.0'. This article sheds light on the use of communication by the group in the first public appearance of their spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid in a maiden press conference held on 17th August 2021. This particular press conference defines the road map the Taliban has to walk in their quest for Global recognition.*

Key Words: Taliban, Political Communication, Afghanistan, NATO, Peace

Introduction

Taliban triumphed in Kabul after twenty years of a brutal war that not only affected the country itself but largely impacted the region and global peace and security. Trillions of dollars and thousands of lives later in the 'War on Terror', the Taliban recaptured Kabul in a resounding victory that was largely bloodless and smooth. The twenty-year effort led by the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the form of the International Assistance Force (ISAF) has come to an end. The estimated cost of this longest war in US history is near 2 Trillion dollars, which includes the

development of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), stabilizing the Afghan government, contractor and logistical payments. Three hundred thousand Afghan Army armed with sophisticated machinery provided by the US along with Air support collapsed within a matter of days against the Taliban, who took over provincial capitals faster than anyone expected.

The events that unfolded in July and August were remarkable, especially with reference to the fiasco at Kabul Airport. The sudden escape of Ashraf Ghani and the takeover of Kabul on 15th August 2021

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resulted in people running towards the airport to leave alongside the US and coalition forces. They included US citizens, diplomats, Afghan interlocutors, translators and people who worked for the government and coalition partners in fear of revenge attacks by the Taliban despite repeated amnesty offers. This created a situation where US and Taliban cooperated at the Kabul airport in a secret deal to provide a safe exit for US citizens. The security situation provided an opportunity for ISIS to a merciless attack on people stranded at the airport. 175 people died in the attack, including 13 US soldiers manning the Airport security perimeter. Visuals of people hanging to the landing gear and falling from the sky will continue to haunt US and coalition partners who failed to read the situation resulting in the chaos.

Taliban's victory should be studied in the context of hybrid warfare tactics. The group used multiple tactics to achieve its goals during the final stage of its march toward Kabul. They used coercion, diplomacy, and other political methods, including social media, for their propaganda warfare. They did not rely on violence alone and created incentives through assurances and amnesties. Since and months before the Taliban victory, the use of language is of utmost importance, which has rightly motivated scholars and analysts to see the regime making an effort to transform its global image that was defined by brutality, violence, bloodshed and barbarism. The press conferences, media statements, and interviews of Spokespersons *Zabiullah Mujahid*, *Suhail Shaheen* and others create an interest in understanding this new approach by the group. In this paper, we will analyze the first press conference held by *Zabiullah Mujahid* as the main spokesperson of the group. This particular press conference holds significant value because this was the first time a Taliban spokesperson appeared with many assurances for the world, the future of the Afghan people, world peace,

regional stability and recognition of the Taliban regime two days after Kabul was recaptured by the Taliban on 15th August 2021.

Literature Review

US and Britain acknowledged that the Taliban had provided a safe passage to foreign nationals and those Afghans that worked as contractors with foreign forces. They ensured that Afghan nationals having valid documents would be allowed to leave the country in a safe and orderly manner ([Reuters, 2021](#)). This was a watershed moment during a twenty-year war when the US was dependent upon the safety of its citizens on a group that it declared a terrorist and fought a war for two decades. The most significant element of Taliban triumph lies in the 'Doha Agreement, which provided the basis for the final ground offensive by the Taliban after both US and Taliban agreed on the withdrawal plan. On 29th February 2020, President of the US, Donald Trump, signed an agreement with the Taliban representatives, which stipulated the withdrawal conditions for the US forces. The deal signalled the end of the Ashraf Ghani regime and declared the Taliban as the legitimate stakeholder of Afghanistan. ([Barthwal, 2021](#)). Taliban find their origin in the Soviet war of the 80s and Madrassahs in Pakistan's Pashtun dominant areas. (Armjani, 2021). The peace deal had four main elements, (i) Seizure of attacks against the US forces and personnel, (ii) Complete withdrawal of US officials and troops, (iii) Prisoner Swap, and (iv) Intra-Afghan peace talks. There were other classified clauses which were not revealed, and no mention of stopping attacks against Afghan forces [[Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(2020\)](#)]

William Maley explains how recognition was the broad political objective of the Taliban when they captured Afghanistan first on 26-27th September 1996.

In the aftermath of their victory over Kabul, they expected and even demanded that their government must be recognized as legitimate, and a permanent seat at the UN should also be granted to the Taliban officials. It was not accepted, and they waited for the same in their second coming [Maley W. 2000]. Siegfried O. Wolf believes the US was fooled by the image international media created of Taliban 2.0 that they are a moderate and pragmatic force (Wolf, 2021). Antonio Giustozzi, in his report for The Century project, raises pertinent questions on the prospect of promises by Taliban 2.0. How strong the control and unity are among the Taliban ranks. It is to be seen how the Taliban will honour the political settlement that they have agreed to both in written and media appearances. (Giustozzi A, 2021).

Furqan Khan suggests that the Taliban were not prepared for the 'day after, and now this is an opportunity for regional powers and the US to use the leverage for maximum concession in terms of human rights and counter-terrorism commitments against ISIS. The threat of ISK provided a ground for constructive engagement with the Taliban. Taliban, at this point in time, is looking for legitimacy and US, EU along other regional and global powers can use diplomacy to ensure that the Taliban deliver on both issues. (Khan Furqan, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The 'Politeness theory' derives its origin from the framework of linguistics studies and is further explained in the pragmatic approach paradigm. Particular strategies are used by interlocutors in order to achieve fruitful communication. The aim of these strategies is to create a positive environment for communication. P. Brown and S. Levinson are the proponents of the main argument of the Politeness Theory, "Politeness: some universal on language usage". Based on the work of American

sociologist Erving Goffman (Goffman 1967), the notion of "face" was chosen by the authors as the foundation of their theory. The theory explains contradicting human needs. First, the desire to be approved and appreciated, and second, to have an independent point of view and freedom of opinion. Hence, 'Politeness' is seen as the ability of people to use various interactive methods given the evolving nature of communication. It also explains how the person communicating leaves a positive impression on the interlocutor by creating a positive self-image (Holmes J. 2006). However, In public diplomacy, which is our main concern, since we are discussing the issue of the Taliban as the de facto regime in Afghanistan, politeness is a key feature of diplomatic language and obviously guided by action or behaviour as a whole which the Taliban seem to realize this more than ever. Diplomats are often expected to have excellent mannerisms, being entrusted with representation of their own country, culture and national ethos. They are also expected to protect the interest of their country and people by avoiding unnecessary conflicts and maintaining good relations with other countries (Pakzadian, 2012).

Among key components of Diplomacy, Politeness and Competence hold significant value. Politeness. Diplomacy is a phenomenon that is as old as the human race itself. It has continued to evolve as an institution in modern international relations. Diplomacy is very formal; it has a conservative nature, careful and persuasive as well, polite and very tedious even in times of turbulent relations. Indirectness is often used as an important strategy in diplomatic language. The purpose of diplomacy is to reduce the threat to others or one's own self (Pakzadian, 2012). As we know, the significance of "diplomacy" or "diplomatic language strategy" is aimed at the maintenance of healthy relations among nations. Therefore, dialogue and negotiations play a key role in modern

global politics. This leads to further emphasis on the use of careful selections of words and language to convey sentiments, policy goals and national interests to other nations (Pakzadian, 2012).

Research Design

This study will be based on a pragmatic approach which advocates multiple interpretations. (Saunders et al., 2012). The qualitative research method will be used to undertake this study as it deals with interpretation and language specifically. The content analysis technique will be used to analyze the official statements, press conferences, articles and news reports of Taliban leaders and spokesmen along with social media content that is verified. A detailed analysis of the data will be followed likewise. In this specific paper, we will be focusing on the first press conferences held on 17th August 2021 and the themes that have been addressed by the Taliban Spokesperson. The 45-minute press conference followed by a question-answer session was divided into 13 different themes that are also major concerns about the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These themes can be further understood in terms of actions taken by the Taliban on the ground. However, due to the limitation of time, further analysis can be done later during the publication of the paper in a noted journal.

Research Findings

In order to understand the main themes on the Taliban agenda and global concerns, they made an attempt to answer in the first press conference after taking over Kabul. [Al Jazeera, 2021] I have analyzed and divided the press conference into 13 sub-themes or questions that the Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid tried to address. They are presented as follows, along with quotes verbatim.

War, Victory, Freedom, Independence

"The Afghans also use their legitimate right after 20 years of struggle for freedom and for emancipating the country from occupation, this was our right, and we achieved this right."

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

The press conference began with the spokesperson sending a congratulatory message to the people of Afghanistan on ending the foreign occupation of their land. Explaining it as a historic victory, he welcomed the people for their glorious day, claiming that seeking independence is the right of every nation. Zabiullah Mujahid said,

He also expressed his gratitude to God for bringing them to this stage where they had achieved a historic win against the US and NATO forces and for giving freedom to the Afghan people.

No Revenge, Amnesty for All, End of War

"I would like to assure all the compatriots, whether they were translators, whether they were with military activities or whether they were civilians, all of them have been important. Nobody is going to be treated with revenge."

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

One of the most significant changes in Taliban behaviour from the past was the announcement of General Amnesty to all people, government employees, interpreters for western forces, Afghan National Army soldiers and intelligence officials included. Zabiullah Mujahid, in his detailed presser, promised that the *Islamic Emirate*, after freedom of this nation, is "not going to [seek] revenge [on] anybody, we don't have any

grudges against anybody.". He admitted that a lot of mistakes were made by the people who helped the occupiers, and it led to challenging times for the resistance forces, but he wanted the conflict in Afghanistan to end, and it does not remain a battlefield anymore.

In another significant statement, the Mujahid said that the Taliban do not want the talented youth to leave the country due to fear, and they are assets of the nation. They could stay in the country and serve the nation. He promised that no one would knock on their doors and interrogate them for their previous roles as interpreters. No harm should come to them if they stay. This was a time when people were lining up at the Kabul airport to be evacuated to safe locations by the US and other countries due to fear and reprisal attacks by the Taliban. Mujahid clarified in the conference, "*We have pardoned anyone, all those who had fought against us*". He was of the view that the Taliban do not want to repeat the conflict anymore or the factors that led to the conflict. He ensured that the Islamic emirate did not hold any animosity against anyone anymore. He said,

"I would like to assure you that in your homes, nobody is going to harm you, no one is going to knock on your door, no one is going to be interrogated or chased ... Those who have knocked on people's doors to inspect their houses, this is abusers, and they will be chased and investigated."

He further clarified that this amnesty includes all soldiers that fought against the Taliban for two decades during the occupation. He invited the people at the airport to return to their homes, and everyone will be safe. As an example of what their words meant, Mujahid claimed that past few days since they took control of Kabul, no lives had been lost, and the city was relatively calm. He promised the security would increase day by day. He proclaimed that Afghanistan is a common

homeland, people share common values and common religion, and this is a nation for all. He believed that we should all come under the umbrella of these commonalities. He said that the Taliban don't seek any internal or external enemies. According to him, this was a historical moment that the people had been waiting for a long time.

Collateral Damage

"A huge occupying force was defeated. This way, it was impossible for us to free the country, and demand the country without injuries, without harms, without being hurt".

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

On a question about the victims of Taliban perpetrated violence, Zabiullah Mujahid, in his historic press conference, empathized with the people who lost lives and saw them as the consequence of war and as collateral damage due to the brutal war of freedom that they had to fight for their country. He explained that they hadn't done any harm to anyone intentionally. If anyone was harmed unintentionally, it was "the side effect of 20-year-old war", according to him.

Security and Protection for all Citizens

"We will bring back complete normalcy and stability ... for Afghanistan, we'll never abuse any assets. Those, for example, that are armed, they have to be disarmed."

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

In the aftermath of the sudden takeover of Kabul city, according to Mujahid, there were rioters and looters who tried to take advantage of the situation and tried to damage life and property of the people. This was the prime reason that they had to take control of the city to ensure the protection and safety of the people. He promised in the

presser that the security and stability for common citizens would improve day by day. He believed that due to the political transition, the crime rate increased, but we took timely action against it.

Women Rights

"The Islamic Emirate is committed to the rights of women within the framework of Sharia. They can have activities in different sectors and different areas on the basis of our rules and regulations: education, health and other areas. They are going to be working with us, shoulder to shoulder with us."

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

The international community, rights groups and international organizations have shown grave concerns about the safety and rights of women and children under Taliban control. Mujahid addressed these issues in the press conference by assuring the international community about their concerns and promising that there would be no discrimination against women, but at the same time, he also noted that this would be as per the frameworks that they will define. He explained that the Afghan women are also Muslim by faith and they will certainly be *"be happy to be living within our frameworks of Sharia"*. On questions by foreign journalists, Mujahid assured that women are a major part of society and that the Taliban are ready to guarantee all rights for them that are enshrined in Islam. He noted that women have a great to play in the education, health and prosecution sectors.

Media and Press Freedom

"The media should not work against national values, against national unity. When it comes to ethnic differences, religious differences and hostilities, they should not be actually promoted by the

media; they should work on the country for the unity of the nation to have peaceful brotherly living together."

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

Mujahid was very open to questions about media freedom in Afghanistan under Taliban rule; he reiterated that private media is free and independent and have no restrictions in continuing their activities. However, he went on to make certain requests from the media during the conference. He emphasized that Islam is the core value, and the media should not air anything against Islamic values. He further requested the media to remain impartial in their reporting. He claimed that the Taliban are open to critique so that they can improve. He believed this could help them in serving the people in a better way. He wanted the media to give importance to the national values, national unity and national consensus of the Afghan people. On a question about women working in media, he asked the journalists to wait and see how the future government develops a framework for women. "Our laws, when it comes to media and other essentials, are going to be such that everybody should be able to work but within the framework of the Islamic Sharia laws". He was of the view that laws would be promulgated to define boundaries and regulations for women and men in various public sectors, including the media. On the question about media freedom, Mujahid pointed toward social media platforms suppressing the voice of the Taliban and not being open enough for their views despite being torch bearers of 'Freedom of Expression'. He said, *"This question should be asked to those people who are claiming to be promoters of freedom of speech. Do not allow publication of all information and news, and I can ask the Facebook company. This question should be asked to them."* He claimed that country is secure, there hasn't been any

crime reported. He promised to follow up with the abduction of a poet, "our poets, our talented people, should not be harmed, this should be stopped." He also said that soon the situation would be in control.

Economy and Trade

"Islamic Emirate is requesting the whole international community that God willing, we can very soon, actually very quickly can change the situation, the country economically."

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

Speaking about trade and economy, Mujahid noted that as soon as the dust of conflict settled, we would build the infrastructure of our economy. He promised to take action for the economic revival of the country. He hoped that interactions with the global community would continue. He expressed hope that as soon as the conflict ends, they will focus on building infrastructures and strengthening the Afghan economy. He expected the interactions with the international community and with other countries to continue. "We are going to be working on our natural resources and our resources in order to revitalize our economy, for our reconstruction, for our prosperity". He requested the international community to be open toward the Taliban, who he believed would soon change the economic situation of the country. He believed that every Afghan wants to improve his life. He hoped that people, community and nation would collectively and actively participate in the trade and economics, and it is our job to provide them security in order to build the nation.

Border Control, Drugs and Smuggling

"From now on, Afghanistan will be a narcotics-free country, but it needs

international assistance. The international community should help us so that we can have alternative crops".

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

Lawlessness, Unmanned borders and illicit drug and weapon smuggling have been an age-old concern in Afghanistan. Mujahid, in his press briefing, reassured that all border points of entry are in complete Taliban control. He believed that no smuggling of weapons was possible. He promised that all weapons used in fighting left behind by Afghan National Army or coalition forces would be registered. He claimed to assure the people of Afghanistan and the international community that no drugs would be produced in Afghanistan. He reminded the world that due to their previous policies in 2001, they brought drug production to zero per cent, but then the war began and then once again, narcotics production began and even the previous government was deeply involved. He promised that this would not be repeated in their government. He promised that Afghanistan would be a drug-free country, but for that, they needed international assistance to have an alternative crop production for their farmers.

Guarantee for International Peace & Security

"I would like to assure our neighbours, regional countries, we are not going to allow our territory to be used against anybody, any country in the world. So, the whole global community should be assured that we are committed to these pledges that you will not be harmed in any way from our soil".

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

One of the most important concerns of the

global community, especially the US, throughout the Afghan peace deal with the Taliban has been assurances that Afghanistan will not become a safe haven for international terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Zabiullah Mujahid reassured us that Afghan soil would not be used against any country in the region. He promised that no foreign fighter would be allowed to operate from Afghanistan.

Security and Protection for Diplomats

“All foreign countries and your representatives, your embassies, your missions, international organizations, aid agencies, I would like to assure you that we will not allow anybody to do anything against you. Your security is assured”

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

In order to have normalcy in Afghanistan and recognition, it was important for the Taliban to assure the world that their diplomats and embassies were safe in Afghanistan through which they could form relations with the world. In order to address these concerns, special emphasis was given by Mujahid on this issue. He acknowledged that the embassies are very important, and after securing Kabul, the security of embassies is a high priority for the Taliban. He assured us that complete protection would be provided to the foreign embassies in Kabul. He claimed that Taliban forces are providing 24-hour security to all embassies.

He explained the reason for entering Kabul, where it created a chaotic situation and fear of the Taliban, leaving all embassies and diplomats to run for safety and evacuation protocol towards Kabul airport. He believed that the previous government was incompetent and that they had to intervene to ensure the safety of Kabul.

Global Recognition

“We would also like to request the international community that we then recognize international boundaries and interactions. We should be treated accordingly. We'd like to act on the basis of the principles of our religion, of our culture, and we have made a lot of sacrifices. We have the right to act on the basis of our religious principles and rules and regulations; it's the right of Afghans.”

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

On the major question of recognizing the Taliban government as legitimate, Zabiullah requested the world to recognize the international boundaries and government of Afghanistan. He emphasized that the Afghan people have a distinct culture, history and values like many other countries of the world that enjoy different rules, policies, viewpoints, approaches, rules and regulations. Similarly, Afghan people have the right to formulate their own laws and policies in the best interest of their people as per their own cultural norms and values. As far as relations with the world are concerned, he claimed that,

“Afghanistan wants to have very good relations with everybody. In order to revive our economy, in order to ensure prosperity, in order to come out of this current crisis that calls for having really good relations with neighbouring countries”. He further claimed that the Taliban regime is communicating with neighbouring countries in the best way possible.

Inclusive Government and Cohesion

“We will do us most to make sure that everybody is included in the country, even those people against us in the past, so we are going to wait until those announcements are made. Government agencies will be able to start working again very soon.”

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a diverse country with many ethnicities; Taliban being Pashtuns, a majority ethnicity in Afghanistan is often questioned about them not being open to other communities. The question of inclusive government is a major concern, and he assured the formation of a strong, inclusive government. He promised that all sides and stakeholders would be taken on board for the better interest of the Afghan people.

The Change

"A huge difference between us, in comparison to 20 years ago. There will be a difference when it comes to the actions we're going to take, this has been like an evolutionary complimentary sort of process."

Zabiullah Mujahid, Spokesperson Islamic Emirate Afghanistan

If the Taliban have actually changed? Answering this important question, Mujahid responded by saying that this question is related to our ideology and values. He reminded them that they are Muslims, and this has nothing to do with the past or present. However, when it comes to their experiences and foresight, they strongly believe that things are improving.

Conclusion

This research term paper was written in the view of necessary ethical considerations such as verification of the statements made in the press conference of Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid held on 17th August 2021 and aired around the world as a major story. The audio, video and

text of the press conference were thoroughly analyzed, and the transcript of the interview was accessed through a credible news outlet for further analysis. As per the findings, the Taliban has clearly made a break from the past in what they claim to be an evolutionary experience of twenty years. They haven't compromised on their ideology and core values and continue to emphasize the Islamic framework, the Shariah, as the guiding principle for their policies. They assured the previous government employees, ex-soldiers, intelligence officials, interpreters and contractors of amnesty and emphasized ending all hostilities and enmity. They encouraged youth to stay in Afghanistan and seek a future by helping to rebuild the country. Taliban promised to include all ethnic factions in the government and make an inclusive government. Women would be given rights and included in the health and education sectors, and the new government will further define a framework for all such areas. It has been a few months since the Taliban took over the country, and they are facing a humanitarian crisis as the US has frozen 10 billion dollars that belong to the Afghan people. Talks have recently taken place in Oslo, Norway, between Taliban leaders and global leaders who consider it to be a serious discussion and hope the Taliban will allow women and girls to be back in school in the summer. Taliban consider this a breakthrough and hope this will further open doors for global recognition. The first press conference of the Taliban sparked a debate within the international community on the potential of the Taliban to run Afghanistan like a normal country that can be recognized by the UN member states, and the world can be reassured of peace and security along with rights of women and children after the twenty-year-old war.

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