

# Three myths about Taliban

Thursday 30 September 2010, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2010).

**The anti-imperialism currently on display in the Muslim world is symbol rather than substance, signifying a new phase in the relations between two estranged lovers, fundamentalism and imperialism. The anti-imperialism of religious forces thus actually serves imperialism in the current global scenario. It is the anti-imperialism of fools, if at all**

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When in power, Taliban were perhaps relatively popular in Pakistan even if hated in Afghanistan. In the wake of 9/11, Taliban have won an awkward lover in a left-gone-awry. When Pakistan's media, Islamist parties and politicians like Imran Khan glorify Taliban, that is understandable. After all, media in Pakistan are controlled from the same General Headquarters that patronises Taliban and Pakistani Islamists. It is, however, inexplicable when a section of left(ish) intellectuals and activists readily buys the myths peddled by pro-Taliban spin-masters headquartered at Rawalpindi/Islamabad. Let us distil reality from a mass of myth.

## Myth No. 1: Taliban as anti-imperialists

In the first place, anti-imperialism is rendered a disservice by confusing it with mindless puritan violence. Even if anti-imperialism is trivialized to faith-driven 'Jihad' against the West/the USA, the Taliban will have to struggle with their past to qualify as 'anti-imperialists'. In the first place, imperialism is historically the mother of fundamentalism. Taliban were fathered by Afghan 'Jihad'. Everybody knows about the architect of this 'Jihad' in which Israel was playing the side-kick. Hence, no surprise when Taliban came to power, Washington welcomed it. To quote *New York Times*, the "State Department was touting the Taliban as the group that might finally bring stability". A US diplomat, Jon Holtzman, was advised to visit Kabul. Trip was, however, cancelled after media kerfuffle about women rights. Still \$125 million were granted in aid (largest foreign aid). The State Department maintained secret correspondence with Taliban regime. At the time, media were replete with rumours regarding US-backing for Taliban. Unlike the anti-US image Taliban have cultivated in recent years, they were also pretty cozy with infidel Uncle Sam. The US rationale for Taliban support was not merely an over-publicised gas pipeline project that Unocal wanted to pursue. Clinton Administration, it was rumoured, had Iran in mind while welcoming Taliban. Whether these rumours were true or not, Taliban's second major sponsor, Riyadh, definitely wanted to contain Iran through staunchly anti-Shia Taliban. But let us at least define what anti-imperialism is: Anti-imperialism is about liberation: national liberation, women's emancipation, democratisation, political and economic empowerment, respect for the religious minorities, self-determination for oppressed nationalities. Anti-imperialism is freedom, for all oppressed, from all oppression. In contrast, an

Osama bin Laden or Ayatollah Khomeini for that matter offer an anti-imperialism that does not tolerate these values. Their's is an anti-imperialism that chokes minorities and strangles small nationalities.

Anti-imperialism represents liberation. One cannot be a liberator and an oppressor at the same time. The anti-imperialism that upholds Osama as its poster boy does not solve this contradiction. We have seen this anti-imperialism in action in Pakistan's neighbourhood, exemplified by Iran, or Afghanistan under the Taliban where it was reduced to burqa and massacre of minorities. Al-Qaeda is the non-state portrayal of this brand of anti-imperialism: bombings, kidnappings, hijackings. The anti-imperialism currently on display in the Muslim world is symbol rather than substance, signifying a new phase in the relations between two estranged lovers, fundamentalism and imperialism. It symbolises the outcome of the process run by imperialism in collaboration with fundamentalism, to eliminate genuine anti-imperialism in the Muslim world. And what does this quasi anti-imperialist crop have on offer: occupation of a US embassy, an attack on the World Trade Centre, blasts in Madrid and elsewhere, the razing of Buddha's statues... These acts of 'anti-imperialism' might cause a temporary headache for the residents of White House and Empire's satraps in London, Paris and Berlin. But this headache is nothing compared to the frustration of the basileus in Washington caused by Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal, Mossadeq's nationalisation of oil, Saekarno's Bandung summit or Bhutto's nuclear policy. Incidentally, this is true not just for the Muslim world. Castro, Dr Allende, Sandanistas, and now Hugo Chavez in Latin America caused similar disappointments. An anti-imperialism that does not threaten to nationalise oil (Osama declares that oil is an asset owned by Arabs but opposes its common ownership), stand for land distribution or allow the working classes to organise trade unions — such anti-imperialism does not bother Empire. It is an anti-imperialism based on the repression of women, religious minorities, small nationalities, trade unions, peasant organisations, and political parties. Thus it actually performs a function imperialism wants: repression of the masses. It is countries that oppress their masses and lack trade unions and workers' parties that best suit multinationals. The anti-imperialism of these religious forces thus actually serves imperialism in the current global scenario. It is the anti-imperialism of fools, if at all.

## **Myth No. 2: Taliban as peace harbinger**

This myth is laughable in view of the Taliban philosophy. Like any fundamentalist movement in Muslim world, Taliban preach and practice a theory of permanent Jihad. As long as infidel ('ignorant') people live on the face of earth, Taliban will continue waging Jihad ('to spread light'). 'Jihad Qiamat tak jari rahay ga', or Jihad will go on until the Judgment Day, is a graffiti-message stenciled on every other wall across Pakistan. After all, converting infidels to Islam is not enough. A perpetual, permanent Jihad is necessary to ensure faithful live a moral life in line with Sharia even after an Emirate of Taliabn/Ikhwan comes into being!

However, when one points out harsh treatment of women, beheadings, amputations, stoning and host of other crimes against humanity the apologists would remind us: Taliban at least brought peace to Afghanistan!

An Afghan comrade often quips when this myth is invoked, "Yes, they brought peace to Afghanistan but plunged the entire world into war."

Even if one exonerates Taliban---blindly assuming Twin Towers were brought down by Bush administration--- in assisting al-Qaida to carry out 9/11 attacks, it will indeed be hard to deny the role Taliban-steered Afghanistan played in stoking sectarian fights in Pakistan (Taliban's connivance

with al-Qaida however did in no way justify US invasion and continuing occupation of Afghanistan). Not merely anti-Shia outfits were harboured and offered safe havens by Taliban, these outfits were even facilitated in running training camps. It was not mere a coincidence that anti-Shia attacks in Pakistan increased in number when Taliban were at the helm of Kabul compared to preceding years. Similarly, Afghanistan became a base camp for training militants that Pakistan military would launch in Kashmir. It was during this period India, ruled by hawkish BJP, decided to embroil itself in Afghanistan. India had historically stayed away from Afghanistan. When an Indian airliner was hijacked by Pakistani militants to 'recover' Maulana Masood Azhar from an Indian jail, the plane was brought to Afghanistan. No doubt the entire adventure was assisted by spy masters in Islamabad. In the wake of 9/11, Musharraf regime's decision to 'ditch' Taliban was also motivated by the strategy to keep India out of Afghanistan. True, Taliban did not cause Indo-Pak rivalry. However, their regime helped exacerbate it.

Similarly, Iran alarmed at the treatment of Shia Muslim in Afghanistan as well as Taliban's support for anti-Shia outfits in Pakistan with bloody consequences, moved its armies on Afghan borders. Both countries narrowly escaped a war. Other neighboring countries were equally incensed by Taliban's provocative support for violent puritan movements in these countries. If peace is about conflicts, Taliban regime would deserve a Hitler Peace Prize (or they could be co-recipient with Obama for discredited Noble Peace Prize).

Pakistan, the only country to patronize Taliban regime, received a peace message from Kabul in an innovative way. Islamabad sent a football squad in a bid to build Taliban's image. The football stars in shorts and sporting long hair (instead of long beards) were an offence against Talibanist decency. At Kabul's crowded Olympic stadium---venue for the match---Pakistani's stars were made to sit in a line. Barbers were called. Heads were shaved as crowd was chanting Allah O Akbar! The news was hushed up in Pakistani media.

Pakistani stars were lucky. They were only insulted. For Afghans, insult was coupled with public thrashings. Women were a particular target. The peace Taliban brought to Afghanistan was not indeed peaceful for Afghan women. They were not raped and killed anymore. But they were lashed, humiliated and insulted publicly. The peace Taliban brought to Afghanistan was mere a lull in the war. An armistice necessitated by objective realities. Even importantly, there was no peace for Hazara (predominantly Shia). They were massacred and their women, according to some claims, taken as concubines. In north, civil war never came to an end. Instead of bringing stability that peace brings, Taliban regime has helped aggravate the instability in the entire region.

### **Myth 3: Taliban as anti-poppy**

In 2000, Taliban imposed a one-year-ban on poppy cultivation. This ban is often cited by apologists to show Taliban were anti-poppy. It is, however, never mentioned that the ban was aimed at driving prices up which had softened up after years of bumper crops. Today, a major source for Taliban insurgency is drug peddling. A central source of their income is Usher, the ten percent tithe, collected from poppy farmers. As a matter of fact, even before Khakis muscled in to patronize Taliban, it was drug barons who financed Taliban initially. Haji Bashar Noorzai, son of a notorious drug baron, raised Rs 8 million to help Taliban's first adventure into Pakistan back in mid-1990s.

He was on the 8-member decision-making Taliban Shura. Another drug baron, Haji Baz Muhammad, was member of the same Shura. Also, Juma Khan who rose to prominence when Taliban regime was already established, was considered one of the movers and shakers in Mullah Omar's Kabul.

In Taliban-controlled area, nowadays, farmers receive threatening letters asking them to grow

poppy. The recent WikiLeaks exposure reveals poppy cultivation is higher in Taliban-controlled regions. Of course, Taliban are not the only players. Even Hamid Karzai's brother has been accused of drug peddling. The warlords allied with the USA are infamous smugglers. But mythifying Taliban as anti-poppy movement is a stark contempt for facts. According to UN estimates, Taliban earn half a billion dollars from drug peddling annually. If, in case, farmers object on religious grounds, Taliban have a good Islamic justification. Farmers are told by Taliban: they smuggle heroin to the West where infidels smoke it. Anti-imperialism puritan-style!

**Farooq Sulehria**

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### **Viewpoint cartoonist's viewpoint**



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### **P.S.**

\* From VIEWPOINT ONLINE ISSUE NO. 20, OCTOBER 01, 2010:

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/three-myths-about-taliban.html>

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