

## **An Anthropological Perspective on “What’s Next for Afghanistan”?**

*Professor Alessandro Monsutti recently gave an interview to Russian media outlet Lenta.ru, where he discussed the future of Afghanistan, Taliban rule and raises questions as to the international community’s ability to hold the US military accountable for Afghan deaths.*

**Lenta.ru: The Taliban have been in power for more than a month. They have made some peaceful statements, but what is behind these words? How do they correlate with their actions?**

**Alessandro Monsutti:** On the one side, the Taliban is multiplying reassuring statements internationally. And internally and domestically sometimes they are also trying to reassure the population. At the same time, we know that they have started to search houses, arrest people. Apparently, they are very well informed with exactly who’s who: who has worked with the Americans, with the NGOs. Maybe they had some spies in these organisations, but they seem to be extremely informed.

We know that in Kabul they are now targeting especially the Panjshiri. There are videos of arrests; we know that they carry out extrajudicial executions. So we cannot exclude that the level of pressure and repression will progressively increase.

At the same time, they've announced that women will have access to higher education, but separately from men. Okay, let's wait and see. We don't know yet. They were saying that they were thinking about including women in the government. They have not done it so far.

There are also the Shia. I have seen videos of the Taliban visiting Shia mosques and saying some reassuring words. At the same time, in the past, their attitude was that Shia are not true Muslims, they don't consider them as Muslims actually. So now they say things, but they do not always do what they say. So it's difficult to know how they will evolve.

### **How should international community respond?**

The only option we have is to encourage them to be coherent with what they say.

I don't think we have any other choice but to cooperate and negotiate with them because they won the war. And that's something we have to accept, to take acknowledgement. There is no way to take away their power, to get them out of Kabul.

We need to try to bring them towards more moderation by negotiating access to assets of the Afghan state outside Afghanistan and humanitarian assistance. We need to have a kind of critical discussion with them: if we isolate them, if we refuse to talk to them, they will have no incentive to be moderate.

I don't think they're ideologically different from 20 years ago. But I think they have learned a lot about the pragmatic side of politics and that's our only hope now because they want to be recognised internationally.

In a sense, they have recognised the legitimacy or the existence of the international community and the political pluralism internationally. They say: we accept that you, the international

community, exist, but you have to accept that Afghanistan has its own way to participate in international community, that we will organise our country in our way, not your way; we don't believe in democracy, we believe in Sharia. And that's quite an interesting question in terms of political philosophy.

The problem, I would say, is that they don't translate this pluralism domestically. Their discourse is that there is only one way to be Afghan — it's our way; if some Afghans don't agree with us, it's because they are not true Afghans. It's because their mind has been polluted by the foreigners; the UN and the US put some prejudices in their minds and it's our duty to extract these prejudices from the mind of our compatriots and to purify them from the pollution, which came from outside.

So potentially that's a recipe for super repressive policies.

### **Speaking of “not true Afghans” — there are a lot of ethnic and religious groups in Afghanistan? Who is most vulnerable?**

Shia and Hazara's are number one.

Ideologically, the Taliban is related to a school of thought called Deobandi, which was very present in the Indian city of Deoband since the 19th century. It is kind of fundamentalist Sunni Islam. And the Deobandi never fully considered that Shia are true Muslims. Because most of the Shia in Afghanistan are Hazaras, you have a double prejudice: a religious one, Sunni against Shia, and an ethnic one, Pashtuns against Hazaras.

The second group is Panjshiri, people from the Valley of Panjshir because they are the last one to resist. In the last days they have been targeted in Kabul — the Taliban fighters are searching Panjshiri houses and arresting people. So now Panjshiri are at risk.

But it's different from the Hazaras because Hazaras face racism — genuine racism against a group, which is from another branch of Islam and has been subjugated in the past by the Afghan state.

As for the Panjshiri, it's more like political and military competition. The Taliban doesn't want the Panjshiri to be represented because they consider them as a threat.

### **Who else might be viewed as a threat by the Taliban?**

Another group is the urban population, whatever it might be. Because when they took Kabul in 1996, 25 years ago, Kabul had a population of less than one million people. Now they say it's over 5 million. So the big question is how the Taliban will be able to absorb such a big city. They don't know how to govern the city, even minor urban issues, such as sewage or logistics.

And socially, half of the population in Afghanistan — it's true also for Kabul — is under 25. So, a half of this population of 5 million, 2.5 million are youngsters, who have never known the first Taliban regime and have developed habits of chatting freely on Facebook or Viber and they're with their peers in Australia, Germany, etc. So these people will not resist militarily but they have social and cultural habits. And it will be a challenge for the Taliban.

You can be repressive but you're confronting everyday small habits, which are extremely difficult to monitor, to control and to repress. So the youth in Kabul will have a kind of passive resistance against the Taliban that the Taliban will probably find difficult to contain.

The Taliban have this idea that they represent the true Afghanistan. In that sense the urban people represent the misled Afghanistan. So you can imagine that they will target the urban population too with this idea to purify them.

Also, a woman is not a separate segment of the population, it's half of population, not a social group. But urban women, who had access to higher education, who had some visibility in the public sphere, will be repressed. So a Hazara woman from Kabul meets all criteria to be repressed by the Taliban.

### **May we see ethnic cleansings in Afghanistan?**

It has happened in the past, not only by the Taliban, by the way. The beloved commander Massoud's troops have been very harsh against the Hazara.

But let me explain my concept of the political anthropology of Afghanistan. Afghan factions are always trying to keep a kind of equilibrium. So let's imagine you have three factions — A, B and C. A is the most powerful, so B and C will get allied against A. When A is weakened and B becomes very strong, C gets very worried to see A destroyed and to stay alone in front of B. So before the disappearance or the destruction of A, C will shift alliance — cut its ties with B and become allied with A.

So that's why Afghans are always changing alliances. It's not because they are unstable, it's because they analyse the situation and the idea is always to keep an equilibrium. Your enemy today can always be your ally tomorrow against your ally today.

### **And yet, if we talk about ethnic cleansings, how likely are they?**

If you look at the level of massacres in Afghanistan, during these 40 years of war, there is a very high level of violence, but the country didn't see the kind of massacres or genocide like in Rwanda or in Bosnia Herzegovina. So in a sense you had some examples, some instances of civil population massacred by a faction, but less than in another theatres of conflict.

I don't think we can exclude that it will happen, things can change very quickly. But my first guess would be that the social fabric of Afghanistan is preventing these big blocks of opposition, whose goal is the destruction of the other. It's more subtle in Afghanistan. So there may be some massacres of Shia or Panjshiri, I cannot exclude it. But I don't think it will become the systematic policy.

It's always about diversifying your assets and spreading risks. For instance, I give you one very simple example: there were three Hazara brothers, and they had three factions in their valley, one of which was related to a Pashtun party. And they told me explicitly they discussed the issue and they decided to have one brother in each faction so in any case they would have a brother among the winners and his duty will be to protect the two others. So the idea is splitting somehow their political allegiances in order to be sure to have a winner in the family. It's very difficult to make peace, but normally you don't have a total destructive war.

***So does it mean that a war in Afghanistan may never end?***

Yes, that's a little bit what my theory could imply in a sense, yes. Because making war is a way to keep equilibrium, to keep a balance. So in a sense war is almost a social system, which is reproducing itself. So not total war, but difficult to bring peace.

**The international coalition has evacuated many Afghans who had helped them for 20 years and who were threatened with reprisals. The UN fears that, in spite of this, at least half a million more people may leave Afghanistan. Do you agree with this assessment?**

First, I feel some uneasiness about the aerial evacuations, which occurred in the two weeks that followed August 15. Once a journalist asked me: do you think it's a moral duty of the Western countries to evacuate people who have collaborated with them? And my answer was that it was a moral duty of the Western countries to reconstruct the country since 2001 and they didn't do it. So do you think you can make yourself good by just evacuating a few thousand people after having failed to reconstruct the country and having spent so much money? It's very hypocritical.

**And yet, returning to the topic of migration, should we prepare for a significant flow of refugees from Afghanistan?**

In spite of what we want to believe, the Taliban are bringing some form of peace. The level of violence in the countryside is lower today than six months ago.

The counterinsurgency war launched by the US and the pro-US government of Kabul has been extremely deadly. Thousands of civilians have been killed by aerial bombings.

The US Army has killed more Afghan women than the Taliban — by far, not by one or two. So we have 2,500 US soldiers who have been killed. But more than 47,000 Afghan civilians have been killed. So we are talking about 1 to 19.

The counterinsurgency has been a source of violence and insecurity in the countryside, which was extremely high. And this source of insecurity is gone now. So for many rural people, objectively, living in Afghanistan now is more peaceful. So that's a factor we have to think beyond disliking and despising the Taliban. We have to accept the fact that it brought more security in the countryside. And we should not just look at Afghanistan through the lens of Kabul.

So that's why if the Taliban are capable to somehow manage this balance between groups and not get into total repression — a hypothesis that we do not exclude — I don't necessarily anticipate a massive wave of emigration. I think you will have urban people, who will try to leave, for sure. But I don't anticipate a repetition of history from the 80s when almost one-third of the Afghan population left.

**But surely there must be other reasons why Afghans may rush abroad?**

Already in 2014, when a part of the US and foreign troops withdrew and some humanitarian and development organisations basically decreased their level of activity in Afghanistan, there was a very big job crisis, especially in the urban centres. A very large part of the youth, educated

people and people who knew English, lost their first job opportunities, which were offered by the foreign troops, UN agencies and NGOs as translators, guards, drivers, etc.

All these job opportunities dried up in 2014 and it was one of the indirect causes of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015. Many Afghans were reacting to this labour crisis. And now this will repeat. I think the withdrawal of both the US and UN is creating a job crisis for the young urbanites and educated people, who now don't have any job opportunities.

Demographically, Afghanistan is a bomb. It has the highest population growth in Asia. 400,000 young people enter the job market every year in Afghanistan. It's a big challenge for any country to absorb such a big population, but even more so for a country like Afghanistan when many job opportunities have disappeared. So, even with peace, the demographic and job market situation in Afghanistan will still force people out. It's not only about insecurity.

### **What has changed in migration from Afghanistan? What are the challenges Afghans may face when leaving the country?**

In the 80s Iran and Pakistan were the two first countries of asylum for different reasons. Today they don't have the same reasons to accept the Afghans, so they will not be as welcoming as 35-40 years ago.

Besides, in the 80s all of the Afghan refugees were going through land routes, they were able to enter very easily, particularly Pakistan. I was very surprised to see how Pakistan was logistically capable of blocking the border. And it's not only difficult to enter Pakistan, but it's even difficult to travel within Pakistan if you don't have necessary documents or a visa.

So in Afghanistan you have two pillars: ongoing mobility between Afghanistan and neighbouring countries (and sometimes even further), and then dispersion of the family units. Just like in this story with the three brothers joining three different factions. In terms with migration, one brother could go to Saudi Arabia, another one could go to Iran to diversify the assets. So that was a super efficient, even if still very painful, strategy to respond to the hardship of their lives.

But now the Afghans are prevented from doing this, they have too many obstacles to circulate. And no humanitarian assistance program, even a massive one, would be able to cover their needs. So I'm very worried. It could get to the scale of a humanitarian disaster, where the international community would have a very heavy responsibility. I could imagine even a famine. In the 80s and the 90s continuous border crossing was how Afghans survived. If you prevent them from doing that, I don't know how they will.

### ***Does it mean that illegal migration will grow?***

"Illegal migration" is a notion I would contest. In international law, if your life is in danger, it's a fundamental right to have refuge. States don't have the right to prevent the entry in their territory by people in danger. That's against international law. There is nothing illegal in trying to save your life.

Sometimes people talk about "illegal migrants", but I think this expression should be banned totally. We can say illegally crossing the border, but no human being is illegal. So saying illegal migrant for me is just a terminological crime. They're just asylum seekers looking for security. I

think when someone is crossing into a country the first presumption should be that they are indeed in danger and should be considered very seriously.

The Afghans were, in any case, one of the biggest groups coming to Europe, so I think it will probably still be the case. But as they have more and more obstacles in front of them, I don't know how they will do it. In the past, it was always difficult to reach a refuge destination, but it was never difficult to leave Afghanistan. Now it's as if Afghanistan has become a prison.

### **There are fears that terrorists may infiltrate Europe under the guise of refugees...**

That's very misleading.

I was in Paris on 13 November 2015, when the terrorist attacks happened. Maybe some of these terrorists spent time in Afghanistan, but they are all physically based in the West. They have their own way of circulating, which is different from refugees. They have more means and they have more knowledge and can show a passport. So to prevent Afghan refugees coming to Western countries for that reason is just disgusting. That's a misleading picture of how terrorist groups operate.

Secondly, during the evacuation people, were not brought directly to a Western country. First, they would land in a third country and be scrutinised very, very carefully. So for a terrorist that's probably not the wisest way to arrive to a Western country. I think there are ways which are much more discreet. Afghanistan and Afghan society are not producing terrorists. Terrorists come from the West.

### ***There is growing concern that the Taliban might again join forces with and support Al-Qaeda. How likely is this?***

I don't think the Taliban are ideologically much different from the first Taliban. The leaders are the same, more or less; they were already present 20-25 years ago. But what is different is that they have learned how international politics works. I read them as very pragmatic now.

So in 2001, they were indeed allied with al-Qaeda. The Taliban themselves are not jihadists, they are not internationalists, they don't want to bring their model of society outside of Afghanistan. They wanted to free Afghanistan from the international and foreign presence. They are more like a nationalist movement. So in 2001, they got allied with Al-Qaeda, which had a different project and in a sense they committed political suicide supporting Al-Qaeda and allowing it to launch attacks from the Afghan territory. That was not in their interests, and in doing so, they lost power because they triggered the US-led international intervention.

What we might hope is that they will not repeat the same mistakes and will put their own interests above the interests of Al-Qaeda.

### **What about the Islamic State?**

You have also ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan. While an alliance between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda is always possible because they had it in the past, an alliance between the Taliban and

ISIS is not possible. Because they are fighting on the same ground and in a sense they are competing over Islamic political legitimacy.

ISIS doesn't have the same capacity as the Taliban to occupy the territory so they have to use terrorist attacks. So I may anticipate that ISIS will continue to target, you know, to do terrorist attacks against the Taliban. And I guess the Taliban will continue to compete, to struggle and try to defeat ISIS.

### **To summarize, what are the main conclusions from recent events in Afghanistan?**

What was happening in the last few months is just a demonstration of the total failure of the reconstruction process. 20 years of international presence, 2 trillion dollars spent — it means 2 and 12 zeroes, it's billions of millions — so it's a huge amount spent only by the US Treasury. Keep in mind that one US soldier in Afghanistan is the most expensive soldier ever in human history. A single soldier cost one million US dollars per year. I don't know the cost of a Taliban combatant, but it's obviously much less.

All of these efforts were wiped out in just a few weeks by the Taliban. Large segments of the Afghan population have not been convinced that the model of state and society, which was served by the UN and by the US, was the best. So you have to understand that being a military superpower doesn't help you to win a war.

I think what is going on in Afghanistan, for me, is a kind of sign of how much the claim of moral superiority by the West is now not accepted by the rest. And I think many Westerners don't see it that way.

I was interviewed by the China Global Television Network so I started to look at Chinese media in English, and they had this recurrent claim that the US Army should be put on trial for what they have done in Afghanistan. I think that's right. So now the UN they are talking about putting the Taliban under scrutiny for human rights abuse. They have to do that, but why they don't do that to the US Army? It should be equal: the Taliban are under scrutiny, why not the US Army. The US Army has killed more Afghan civilians than the Taliban.

There is a widespread moral fatigue in front of this pretense by the West to be morally superior, but what they do is totally different. So what is going on in Afghanistan for me is a signal of a rebalance of not only power, but also I would say moral prestige and credibility.