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Hopeful Signs for Girls Education in Afghanistan?

Analysis of Recent Events, September 2022





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This is an ESDO Brief Analysis Summary. It is designed to provide a brief analytical overview of a particular issue of relevance to ESDO's missions.

European Sustainable Development Organisation (ESDO)
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info@esdo.io

<https://esdo.io>



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Recent Developments

In the past weeks, a number of seemingly unrelated events have occurred. Firstly, the Taliban have had a minor cabinet reshuffle in some interesting portfolios. Secondly, the US Government has announced their intention to shift \$3.5 billion in frozen Afghan assets into a Swiss trust fund for Afghanistan. And lastly, there has been widespread confirmation of the return of capital punishments under Sharia law. Are these connected and what do they mean against the backdrop of increasing violence in Afghanistan, an imminent famine and distracted world attention? Maybe nothing. Perhaps something.

Girls Education

This week the Taliban have had a minor cabinet reshuffle. One of the changes has been the replacement of the acting Education Minister Noorullah Munir with Maulvi Habibullah Agha who is a close ally of the Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. This is a potentially interesting move. By most accounts, Akhundzada is strictly against girls' education. The logic follows that appointing a close ally could suggest a hardening of the Taliban stance against girls' education. Certainly, many news outlets have taken this view. It is a reasonable view to take given the last-minute backflip of the Taliban in March to not permit girls above year six to return to school – widely and simply reported as a concession to the hardliners in the Taliban.

However, a closer reading of the situation could signal an alternative path. The starting point is that Munir has done a pretty terrible job for the Taliban of late. He is reported to have said words to the effect that the Afghan culture does not want girls to be educated. Cue a campaign of Afghans taking offence to the 'culture' imprimatur he claimed and publicly expressing so. This is an extraordinary event in one of the most repressed countries in the world.

It is therefore possible that firing Munir was a self-preservation exercise for the Taliban, similar to an

incompetent minister being replaced with a 'safe pair of hands' to restore trust and leadership in a western democracy.



Credit: Twitter #LetAfghanGirlsLearn. Sign reads 'Girls too have the right to go to schools and universities.'

Now explore the potential of this alternative path in the broader context. The Taliban have always known that girls' education is a key priority for the international community. It is one of the few real bargaining chips they have with the international community. If someone was holding on to billions of





your dollars, would you give up one of your biggest bargaining chips for nothing in return?

Then if we consider the homogeneity of the Taliban's position on girls' education, we find it is not solid. The Haqqani faction of the Taliban is openly supportive of girls' education. Sirajuddin Haqqani's brother Anas has publicly called for girls to return to school. It is also an open secret amongst the elite in Afghanistan that Taliban leaders are sending their daughters to school in Pakistan and Doha.

Now consider this scenario in the context of the other recent developments explained below.

[Un]Frozen Assets

When the Taliban took power in August 2021, the US froze billions of dollars of Afghanistan Government assets that were stored outside Afghanistan. However, in a major development in mid-September the US State Department announced it will transfer \$3.5 billion of these assets into a new trust fund in Switzerland for 'the benefit of the Afghan people.'

This is an interesting move for several reasons. Firstly, the Taliban are desperate for money to stimulate the Afghan economy. Secondly, many Taliban officials have unofficially made no secret that they are prepared to make concessions in exchange for the frozen funds. Thirdly, the US is only transferring a portion of the frozen Afghan funds into the Swiss trust fund – an indicator that this is a confidence building step.

The initial and still official Taliban reaction to the US announcement was condemnation. The Taliban want the funds returned to the Afghan Central Bank (DAB). However, Taliban sources close to the leadership council believe the US announcement is

still very positive. You can see why, when you look at what the US has said the trust fund will be used for. According to the US Treasury, 'The Afghan Fund will... make targeted disbursements... to help provide greater stability to the Afghan economy.' The Taliban need exactly this kind of economic support to help stabilize their regime, especially in the distant provinces.

The timing of the US move is also interesting. US voters are distracted with Ukraine right now, providing a unique political window to make a substantial compromise. This is not just political pragmatism for the US, it is also a practical response to other developments discussed below.

Another interesting point is that the US announced in mid-February that it would be distributing \$3.5 billion in Afghan assets to 9/11 victims. Just *three weeks later* the Taliban reversed its decision to allow girls to return to school. It is an unlikely coincidence considering the circumstances.

Humanitarian Crisis Increases Sharia Punishments

Meanwhile, the UN estimates that half the Afghan population will face an acute food shortage this year, potentially resulting in more than one million children under the age of five dying of hunger by December. The causes of this crisis include the exclusion of Afghanistan from the international financial system which amongst many other impacts, is starving the Afghan economy of agricultural inputs needed to produce food. This has been exacerbated by one of the worst droughts to ever hit Afghanistan.





One of the many impacts of this food crisis will be an inevitable increase in petty crime. It has been widely reported but not independently verified that corporal punishments under Sharia law had returned to Afghanistan. However, it has only been this week that confirmed cases have emerged.

The specter of a combined famine and Sharia law is almost certain to result in widespread humanitarian violations by the Taliban. Expect to see public ‘amputations’ for stealing food increase.

Inaction by the international community to remove the enablers of the humanitarian crisis will directly drive these humanitarian violations, and most western governments are likely to have made this connection.

Increasing Instability

This is all occurring against a bleak backdrop. Those that hoped the silver lining of the Taliban takeover would be the end of conflict in Afghanistan will be disappointed. Recent Taliban operations in Panjshir show just how tenuous the Taliban’s control is becoming. Key Taliban leadership changes recently in the Panjshir security operation only highlight the seriousness with which the Taliban are taking this.

It is not limited to the Panjshir. Violence, protests and conflict against the Taliban are increasing across almost all provinces. Anger at the loss of basic rights, exclusion of powerful groups from leadership positions and the non-fulfillment of promises agreed during the power transition have the potential to stoke conflagration in many areas. The Taliban strategy seems to be twofold – subdue the population through the ‘rule of law’ and then seek minor compromises to de-escalate where necessary.

What does this all mean?

ESDO’s hope is that recent developments indicate the Taliban will soon announce a clear pathway to reinstating girls’ education. Unfortunately, such a move will almost certainly come with distasteful changes to the curriculum.

Such a decision by the Taliban would alleviate some of the pressure that is beginning to incite provincial conflicts.

Allowing girls to return to school is a reasonable concession for the Taliban – already torn internally on the issue – in return for desperately needed economic stimulus.

It might also explain parts of the US announcement.





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