

## SUNDAY FEATURES

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SUNDAY, MAY 9, 2010

Soldiers from the US Army's 10th Mountain Division fire high-explosive rounds from a 120mm mortar at Taliban positions from forward operating base Orgun in Paktika province, Afghanistan, in July 2006.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG



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THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Eight years after they were overthrown by US air power, a drumbeat is starting to sound across Afghanistan in favor of talking to the Taliban, the country's once-hated former rulers. An idea that used to seem absurd, if not defeatist, is coming to be seen as the only credible way to end an ever-widening war. Moreover, the proposed agenda of negotiations is not a Taliban surrender, but an offer to share power in Kabul.

President Hamid Karzai and other senior Afghan politicians support the idea. So too do a growing number of foreign governments, including the UK's — at least tentatively — now that British troops are being killed at twice the rate they were early last year.

Perhaps most surprisingly, even among Afghanistan's small but determined group of woman professionals, the notion of making a deal with the ultra-conservative men who forced them into burkas and denied them the right to work outside the home is no longer anathema. A desperate desire for peace is trumping concern over human rights.

Given the sense of liberation that accompanied the Taliban's defeat in 2001, the new mood seems barely credible. For five years, the 20th century's most brutal form of male chauvinism had held sway across 90 percent of Afghanistan. It was accompanied by other bizarre efforts to revert to a pre-modern age.

I was one of the few journalists in Kabul as the Taliban swept up from Kandahar to take control of the Afghan capital in 1996, prompting the mujahideen warlords to abandon resistance and flee. The sudden shift left everyone stunned, but the crowds that came out to watch the Taliban's pickup trucks roaring around the streets were mainly supportive. The bearded young Islamists with their promise of social justice seemed to offer an end to the fighting between rival mujahideen leaders that had devastated large parts of the city and forced hundreds of thousands into refugee camps abroad.

We watched in wonder as they ripped cassettes out of cars and hung the tapes from lampposts like brown streamers fluttering in the breeze. Crates of whisky and brandy were dragged out of the cellars of the Intercontinental hotel and dumped into the road for a tank to roll over, a ceremony of fundamentalist solemnity that rapidly became farcical as its Taliban driver, succumbing to the fumes, backed and advanced on an increasingly erratic orbit.

Young Taliban gunmen ran into hospitals, ordering male doctors to grow beards and female doctors to go home. Burkas, once worn only by poorer women in the bazaar, became compulsory for all women. Taliban thugs flayed the ankles of anyone who showed even an inch of bare skin below the regulation new hemlines. But even as repression grew women could still be heard saying that their family's new-found safety from the civil war's shells and rocket-fire made it worth it.

A similar calculus of security-versus-rights is re-emerging now. Three years ago, when I was last in Kabul and the Taliban were only just starting their comeback on the battlefield, defeating them was the watchword of the day. There has been a tectonic shift in Afghanistan's public mood since then. It is prompted by a host of factors: growing disappointment with Western governments and the ineffectiveness of billions of dollars in aid that seems to go nowhere except into the bank accounts of foreign consultants or local politicians; a sense that there can be no military solution to the new civil war and that outsiders are deliberately prolonging it; grief and despair over the mounting toll of civilian casualties, many caused by US air strikes; rising nationalist anger and a feeling of humiliation; and a desire to return to an Afghan consensus in which Afghans create their own space and find their own solutions.

Over two afternoons, I sit down over tea with a group of six women professionals. If anyone should be suspicious of the Taliban, it would be educated women like these. In varying degrees they all favor negotiations. They do not want their names used, so I will identify them by the letters A to F.

A is a Pashtun, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group and the one from which almost all Taliban come. She was already a refugee in Pakistan when the Taliban took over, having fled in 1993 at the height of the civil war. She only returned to Kabul after the Taliban were overthrown.

B, also a Pashtun, lived under Taliban rule. She feels the US, Pakistan and other foreigners are manipulating the war and even have the elusive Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, under their influence. I encounter this sense of the Taliban as puppets, even victims, in numerous conversations with Afghan men as well as women.

"It's an excuse for foreigners to occupy Afghanistan and stay here," says A. "That's why the war continues. It's not a war against the Taliban. It's a war for their own objectives."

B says Taliban rule had positive as well as negative sides. As a woman, you couldn't work, "but if you were walking in the street no one could kidnap you. We felt safer than now, when there are all these security guards and other people with guns who can abduct a woman at any time."

C raises Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader who is as invisible as Mullah Omar in his presumptive hideout over the border in Pakistan. "There is something going on behind the curtain. It's politics. They could find Saddam, but they can't find Bin Laden. When they wanted to find Saddam, they did."

C is a Tajik, one of Afghanistan's three other ethnic groups, along with the Hazara and Uzbek people. She was 13 when the Taliban captured Kabul and sent all schoolgirls back home.

Because of a health emergency her father took the family to Karachi for a year. She recalls her fear when a Taliban militiaman stopped their taxi on the way and found a pinup of a young woman stuck to the back of the mirror. He beat the driver mercilessly. When the family returned to Kabul, she could not go to school for four years. Yet, in spite of these bitter memories she now supports negotiations with the Taliban.

D, another Pashtun, spent the Taliban period as a refugee in Pakistan. "When we were there, we were afraid of the Taliban. I came back here in 2002 and just didn't want the Taliban to exist. Then I began to realize they are also Afghans and Pakistan is using them," she says.

A key question is whether the Taliban leadership's

eight years out of power have changed their thinking. Would they really try to turn the clock back for women a second time? E, a Pashtun, says there were always good and bad Taliban. "Some were educated and religious, but others joined them from Pakistan, and then criminals piled in."

F, a Tajik, says she has noticed Taliban members presenting themselves as nationalists more than Islamists these days. "There are two kinds of Taliban: those who want a strict implementation of sharia law, and those who want to get rid of US forces. I'm not very hopeful that the Taliban leaders who want to negotiate won't be killed by our neighbors," she says. She points out that Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the Taliban's top commanders, was recently captured in Pakistan. Now being held incommunicado, he had helped to initiate preliminary talks between Taliban representatives and intermediaries of the Karzai government in Saudi Arabia.

Some Western experts on Afghanistan also claim to detect a difference between the old Taliban and the "neo-Taliban." The movement has certainly changed its position on communication technology. Where it used to ban TV, it now has a sophisticated propaganda machine regularly commenting on the latest developments, as well as a Web site that offers statements, interviews and DVDs. The Taliban are also more diverse and fragmented. In some areas commanders ban music at weddings; in others they permit it.

Anders Fange, the country director of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, a large aid agency, has spent around 20 years in the country, also working as a journalist and a UN official. The Taliban should never have been portrayed in the black-and-white terms that Bush and Blair used, he says. During their period in power they often turned a blind eye to the discreet "home schools" where teachers taught girls in people's flats or family compounds. "In 1998 the Taliban governor of [the central Afghan city] Ghazni told me, 'We know you have these girls' schools, but just don't tell me about them.' A Taliban minister even approached me and said, 'I have two daughters. Can you get them in?'" he recalls.

Similar attitudes exist today, he says. In Wardak, a province close to Kabul that is heavily contested by Taliban and NATO forces, "we don't have much problem with the Taliban," says Fange. "They accept girls' schools and women doctors. They just ask for two hours of Islamic education in schools, that teachers grow beards and not spread propaganda against the Taliban."

The difficulty comes from foreign Taliban, the Pakistanis and Arabs, or Taliban from other provinces. "At the local level, it's a patchwork, a mosaic of local commanders, who may recognize Mullah Omar as their spiritual leader but are not under his control," he adds.

Fange's points support the case, rarely mentioned by Western politicians, that Taliban conservatism differs from the rest of the country in degree, not in kind. Afghanistan is a largely rural society where the oppression of women runs deep. Even in villages populated by Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek, Afghan women are routinely banned by husbands or fathers from leaving the family compounds, and girls are kept out of school, according to Afghan women reporters.

One morning I drive to a marble-fronted two-story house in a Kabul suburb that was ruined in the mid-1990s fighting but is now reviving as a favored address

for Afghanistan's nouveaux riches. Wearing tinted glasses and a long green-and-purple-striped *chapan* (the signature garb of the elderly that President Karzai has made famous) a tall dignified man greets me. Arsalan Rahmani was deputy minister of higher education and later minister of Islamic affairs in the Taliban government. Four years ago Karzai invited him back to Kabul and made him a senator. He accepts the Taliban made a string of mistakes. "They didn't have good management, they were young, they had no experts, doctors, and couldn't run ministries. My boss was a boy of 25, who couldn't even sign an official letter."

He describes reports of restrictions on girls' education and women being denied the chance to work as false. "That wasn't their idea, then or now. We didn't let girls go to school because of lack of security. There was a war on. But now in Pakistan, Taliban girls go to school and university. My son is a doctor and I want him to marry a lady doctor. I've got three daughters.

During the Taliban time they were in Pakistan and all studied there."

He goes on to tell an incredible story. "When I was deputy minister of higher education, people came to me and said they had girls who had finished school and wanted to study medicine. I consulted Mullah Omar and he authorized us to set up rooms in a central Kabul hospital, now called Daoud Khan hospital, where women could study to become doctors. Around 1,200 graduated, and if you track them down you'll see my signature on their degree certificates," he says.

I have no time to follow his advice but I do locate Shukria Barakzai, an independent woman MP who stayed in Afghanistan throughout the Soviet occupation, the four-year rule by mujahideen warlords, and the Taliban period. She confirms the senator's story.

Like many educated Kabulis, she criticizes the warlords as strongly as the Taliban. She too favors talks with the Taliban. "I changed my view three years ago when I realized Afghanistan is on its own. It's not that the international community doesn't support us. They just don't understand us. Everybody has been trying to kill the Taliban but they're still there, stronger than ever. They are part of our population. They have different ideas but as democrats we have to accept that. Every war has to end with talks and negotiations. Afghans need peace like oxygen. People want to keep their villages free of violence and suicide bombers."

Her relaxed attitude to the Taliban stems, in part, from confidence that they cannot win again. "They no longer have the support and reputation they had back then. Taliban is an ideology. It's no longer a united force," she says.

If Afghan women now overwhelmingly want talks with the Taliban, the same is true of many of the country's male politicians, particularly the Pashtun. They want "a rebalancing of forces" in Afghan society, as a former minister who wanted to remain anonymous put it. The US invasion in 2001 put the warlords of the so-called Northern Alliance in power, but failed to produce stability. "In October 2001 the Taliban controlled 90 percent of Afghanistan, while the Northern Alliance had 10 percent. After December 2001 the Northern Alliance had 70 percent and the country's majority group, the Pashtun, were marginalized. Now this needs to change. There's an Afghan consensus on that," he says.

## Time to talk to the Taliban?

*Until recently it seemed an absurd idea. But now, eight years after its overthrow, is negotiating with the Taliban the only realistic way forward?*

A boy views a destroyed site in central Kabul on Feb. 27, a day after Taliban fighters opened fire, hurled grenades and staged suicide bombings in the area, killing 16 people in a show of defiance against Afghanistan's Western-backed government and NATO.

PHOTO: REUTERS

