

# Postcolonial Critique of Political Instability and Human Rights in Afghanistan

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## Abstract

This paper examines the impact of political instability on human rights in Afghanistan, where decades of conflict, regime changes, and foreign interventions have entrenched systemic violations. Using a postcolonial framework, it analyzes how colonial legacies, global geopolitical agendas, and internal dynamics such as ethnic divisions, tribal politics, and insurgent movements intersect to perpetuate cycles of instability that disproportionately harm women, minorities, and children. The study argues that a postcolonial lens is essential to understanding the structural conditions undermining governance and human rights protection in Afghanistan. It concludes by calling for international strategies that prioritize local agency, inclusive governance, and human rights as prerequisites for sustainable peace and development.

**Keywords:** Political instability, Human rights, Postcolonial analysis, Afghanistan, South Asia

## Introduction

Terrorism and extremism represent some of the most acute security challenges in Afghanistan, deeply rooted in flawed national policies, uneven development, and persistent social inequalities. Regional states often design policies to serve shifting coalitions of classes and ethnic groups, creating exclusionary dynamics that reinforce violence and radicalization. While multiple factors—including ideological polarization, religious radicalism, authoritarian regimes, and foreign interference have shaped extremism, its principal drivers lie in declining socioeconomic conditions, inconsistent governance, and repeated external interventions. These forces have not only destabilized domestic politics but also exacerbated interstate tensions, entrenching regional insecurity.

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Afghanistan, geopolitically located at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, has long served as a strategic crossroads. Its position as the heart of Asia once made it central to economic connectivity along the Silk Road, but this same geography has subjected the country to cycles of external intervention and geopolitical rivalry. From the nineteenth-century “Great Game” between the British and Russian empires to its role in the Cold War and beyond. Afghanistan has persistently been reduced to a battleground for competing global powers.

This paper argues that Afghanistan’s political instability and the resulting human rights violations cannot be understood without situating them within these broader historical and geopolitical trajectories. Employing a postcolonial framework, the study examines how colonial legacies, uneven development, and international rivalries intersect with domestic divisions to perpetuate cycles of conflict and instability. It contends that a postcolonial lens is essential for analyzing how these structural conditions continue to undermine governance, restrict rights, particularly for women and minorities, and shape the regional implications of Afghanistan’s turmoil.

### **Historical Trajectories**

Afghanistan’s geopolitical significance in the nineteenth century cannot be understood without situating it within the broader dynamics of European imperial rivalry in South and Central Asia. The British first entered the Indian subcontinent in 1612 through the East India Company, and by the late eighteenth century, their influence extended northward as they sought to secure India’s frontiers. British anxieties about Afghan power, shaped by memories of Ahmad Shah Durrani’s campaigns in northern India, were less about the declining Afghan empire itself and more about the possibility of rival imperial powers exploiting Afghanistan’s strategic position as a gateway to India.

Initially, the British feared a French advance under Napoleon, particularly after the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit between France and Russia, which envisioned a joint invasion of India through Iran. This led London to strengthen ties with both Persia and Afghan rulers, viewing the Hindu Kush as a critical invasion route to their Indian possessions. However, by the early nineteenth century, the focus of British anxieties shifted from France to Russia, whose steady southward expansion from the Caucasus increasingly threatened the security of British India. This rivalry culminated in what came to be known as the “Great Game.” Through successive Anglo-Afghan wars, Britain sought to transform Afghanistan into a buffer state, ensuring that neither France nor Russia could use it as a staging ground against India. The Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880) ultimately brought Afghanistan under firm British control, even as it retained nominal sovereignty. The subsequent Anglo-Russian Agreement

of 1887 halted Russian expansion southward, while the Durand Line of 1893 and the Wakhan Corridor settlement of 1895 fixed Afghanistan's modern borders.

These developments highlight how Afghanistan's territorial boundaries and political fragility were not organically produced but externally imposed as part of imperial strategies. Designed to protect British colonial interests rather than Afghan sovereignty, these arrangements institutionalized Afghanistan's role as a buffer state, locking it into a geopolitical position that would repeatedly expose it to external manipulation and internal instability throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

### **Geopolitical Rivalries and External Interventions, (1979–2001)**

Afghanistan's modern instability must be situated within its long history of external intervention and imposed geopolitical roles. During the nineteenth century, the country became the centerpiece of the "Great Game" between the British and Russian empires. Successive Anglo-Afghan wars, the imposition of the Durand Line (1893), and Afghanistan's consolidation as a buffer state reflected not Afghan sovereignty but the strategic imperatives of colonial powers seeking to safeguard their interests in India and Central Asia. These externally drawn boundaries and arrangements institutionalized Afghanistan's geopolitical vulnerability, leaving it perpetually exposed to foreign manipulation and internal fragmentation. This legacy of external interference persisted into the twentieth century. While Afghanistan formally asserted independence after the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, its sovereignty remained circumscribed by its geopolitical location between rival powers. With the onset of the Cold War, Afghanistan once again became a theater of great power competition.

A turning point came in December 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan following the assassination of Hafizullah Amin and the installation of Babrak Karmal. Although over 120,000 Soviet troops occupied major urban centers and critical infrastructure, they failed to establish effective control beyond Kabul. The intervention reinforced Afghanistan's image as a geopolitical chessboard now between Washington and Moscow rather than a sovereign state shaping its own trajectory. The Afghan Mujahedin quickly emerged as the main resistance force, benefiting from growing financial and military support from the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other allies beginning in 1984. Their decentralized guerrilla warfare eroded Soviet authority and confined Afghan and Soviet forces to fortified garrisons. This internationalization of the conflict further embedded Afghanistan in global rivalries, transforming it into both a Cold War battlefield and a crucible of transnational jihadist networks.

Recognizing the futility of its intervention, Moscow agreed to the phased withdrawal of its forces under the Geneva Accords in 1988. Completed by 1989, the Soviet retreat marked the end of direct Soviet involvement but left Afghanistan devastated and politically fragmented. Rather than stabilizing, the country descended into civil war as rival factions, many armed and legitimized by external sponsors, competed for power. The power vacuum of the 1990s allowed warlords and ethnic militias to dominate Afghanistan. In this environment, the Taliban, largely composed of former Mujahedin fighters and madrasa students, predominantly Pashtun, rose as a movement promising order and the imposition of a rigid Islamic system. By 1994, they had seized Kandahar, and by 1998, they controlled nearly 90 percent of the country. Their regime, established in Kabul in 1996, enforced a harsh interpretation of Islam rooted in rural Pashtun traditions, most notoriously through restrictions on women's education, mobility, and participation in public life.

Initially, some external actors, including the United States, hoped that Taliban rule might stabilize Afghanistan enough to allow economic projects, such as pipeline routes from Central Asia. However, relations quickly deteriorated over the Taliban's harboring of Osama bin Laden and their refusal to extradite him following terrorist attacks, including the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa. U.S. missile strikes on Afghan soil further entrenched hostilities. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, placed Afghanistan once again at the center of global politics. The U.S.-led invasion launched in October 2001 sought to dismantle Al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban regime. While the intervention succeeded in toppling the Taliban and installing a transitional government, it failed to establish lasting stability. Insurgency, corruption, and weak governance soon undermined reconstruction efforts.

The human costs were profound. Airstrikes, suicide bombings, and insurgent attacks inflicted mass civilian casualties, while millions were displaced internally or as refugees. Women and children bore the brunt of insecurity, with access to education and healthcare uneven and often restricted in conflict zones. Reports of arbitrary detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings highlighted abuses committed both by insurgent groups and, at times, by Afghan and international forces. Despite investments in infrastructure and education, Afghanistan's social fabric remained fractured, reinforcing resentment against foreign occupation and perpetuating cycles of violence.

Taken together, Afghanistan's modern trajectory illustrates how external interventions, framed through successive geopolitical rivalries, have repeatedly undermined its sovereignty and political stability. From the nineteenth-century "Great Game" to the Cold War and the post-9/11 U.S. invasion, Afghanistan has been less an autonomous actor than a battleground for imperial, ideological, and strategic contests. Each wave of

intervention reshaped internal politics, empowering certain factions, exacerbating ethnic and regional divides, and entrenching cycles of violence—while simultaneously weakening state institutions. The cumulative effect has been a persistent erosion of governance capacity and human rights protections, particularly for women, minorities, and vulnerable groups. A postcolonial perspective is therefore essential to understanding Afghanistan's instability, as it highlights the structural legacies of imperialism, the asymmetry of power in global politics, and how external actors have repeatedly instrumentalized Afghanistan at the expense of its people

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study has the following objectives.

- I. To critically examine how political volatility, including regime changes, foreign interventions, and ethnic conflicts, directly contributes to the systemic violations of fundamental human rights in Afghanistan.
- II. To explore how colonial-era decisions and the subsequent geopolitical interests of colonial powers have shaped the nation's political dynamics.

### **Research Questions**

The present study is guided by the following research question:

- I. How have successive waves of external intervention shaped Afghanistan's political instability and state fragility?
- II. In what ways have colonial and postcolonial legacies contributed to the persistence of authoritarianism, factionalism, and weak governance in Afghanistan?
- III. What have been the specific human rights consequences of political instability in Afghanistan?
- IV. To what extent can a postcolonial framework help explain the structural and systemic obstacles to peace and human rights protection in Afghanistan?

### **Literature Review**

The scholarship on political instability and human rights in South Asia—particularly Afghanistan is vast, encompassing colonial legacies, foreign interventions, ethnic and gender dynamics, and governance challenges. This section critically reviews existing contributions, with a focus on how postcolonial theory deepens our understanding of Afghanistan's instability and its human rights implications.

#### **I. Political Instability and Human Rights in Conflict Zones**

A substantial body of research highlights how Afghanistan's geography and limited state capacity foster insurgency and violence. Rugged terrain, weak infrastructure, and minimal state presence have allowed groups like the Taliban to evade government forces and impose localized control

(Raufi, 2015). Such conditions lead to systemic human rights abuses, including targeted killings, forced displacement, and coerced allegiance (Kalyvas, 2006). Civilians remain the primary victims, often drawn into insurgent ranks through coercion or survival strategies (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2008). Cross-border sanctuaries, particularly in Pakistan, intensify conflict by providing logistical support, enabling smuggling, and sustaining cycles of violence (Salehyan, 2009). Heavy-handed responses by Afghan and international forces, such as aerial bombardments, have further alienated civilians, created new humanitarian crises and eroded trust in governance (Uvin, 1998). Women, children, and ethnic minorities, most notably the Hazaras, bear disproportionate burdens, facing gender-based violence, forced marriages, and systematic discrimination (Mampilly, 2011).

## **II. Ethnic Divisions and Governance Failures**

Ethnic and tribal cleavages are central to Afghanistan's instability. Scholars emphasize that Afghan society, historically fragmented beyond the shared identity of Islam, has witnessed enduring power struggles between Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras (Saikal, 2004; Shahrani, 1986). Pashtun dominance was altered by successive wars, heightening ethnic rivalries and fueling cycles of violence (Rais, 1999). The Taliban's resurgence has deepened these divisions, with women's rights severely curtailed and ethnic minorities targeted, particularly by ISKP (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Governance failures have left millions in need of aid, exacerbating poverty and prolonging instability (United Nations, 2023).

## **III. Postcolonial Perspectives on Human Rights**

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for understanding Afghanistan's instability. Theorists argue that postcolonial states often struggle with "self-development," leaving them vulnerable to external domination and internal authoritarianism (Gaist, 2014). Afghanistan's trajectory exemplifies this dynamic. Its independence in 1919, following the Third Anglo-Afghan War, was celebrated as a milestone in anti-colonial struggle (HRC, 2014). Yet the state's sovereignty remained constrained by its role as a geopolitical buffer, leaving it unable to develop durable rights-protecting institutions. International human rights mechanisms have also proven inadequate in Afghanistan. Surveys by the ICRC (2009) documented the pervasiveness of war's toll: nearly all Afghans reported direct or indirect effects of conflict, including torture, displacement, and family loss. UN monitoring further revealed alarming civilian casualties, with thousands killed annually and the majority of deaths caused by armed opposition groups but a significant portion attributable to pro-government forces (UNHRC, 2008; UNAMA, 2009, 2010). These findings highlight the structural failures of both domestic governance and international systems in protecting fundamental rights.



#### **IV. The War on Terror and Human Rights Discourses**

The U.S.-led War on Terror has been widely criticized for intensifying Afghanistan's instability and undermining human rights. Official justifications framed the invasion as a mission to dismantle terrorism and liberate Afghan women. However, scholars note that military strategies disproportionately harmed civilians and entrenched instability (UNHRC, 2014; ICRC, 2009). Human rights discourses were often instrumentalized to legitimize intervention, with Afghan women portrayed in Western narratives as passive victims in need of rescue. Spivak's (1988) critique "white men saving brown women from brown men" captures the paternalistic logic underlying such interventions. Political leaders reinforced this framing: Laura Bush (2001) and Cherie Blair (2001) publicly invoked Afghan women's suffering to justify war aims. Yet human rights organizations had long documented Taliban abuses (Human Rights Watch, 1999), which were ignored when they conflicted with U.S. economic and strategic interests, such as proposed pipeline projects (Rohrabacher, 1999; Abu-Lughod, 2002). This selective engagement reveals the contradictions of U.S. foreign policy, where capitalist and geopolitical priorities often outweighed commitments to human rights (UNHRC, 2002).

#### **V. Analytical Gaps**

While existing scholarship richly documents Afghanistan's humanitarian crises, ethnic conflicts, and the failures of international intervention, there remain gaps in theorizing the structural legacies of colonial and postcolonial dynamics. Much of the literature treats instability as a product of governance weakness or terrorism, underemphasizing how Afghanistan's position as a buffer state and site of repeated external manipulation has shaped its political fragility. A postcolonial lens allows for a more nuanced understanding of these structural conditions and their implications for human rights.

Overall, the literature underscores how Afghanistan's human rights crises cannot be understood in isolation from its history of colonial subjugation, geopolitical manipulation, and enduring internal divisions. While existing studies provide detailed accounts of insurgent violence, civilian suffering, and governance failures, they often overlook the structural legacies of external domination that continue to shape Afghanistan's political fragility. A postcolonial perspective reveals that international interventions, framed in the language of democracy and women's rights, have frequently reinforced rather than resolved cycles of instability. This paper builds on these insights by situating Afghanistan's ongoing human rights challenges within a broader postcolonial critique, highlighting the need for approaches that center local agency, inclusive governance, and structural reform as prerequisites for sustainable peace.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is grounded in postcolonial theory, which offers a critical framework for interpreting Afghanistan's political instability and human rights issues. Postcolonial scholarship underscores the manner in which colonial legacies, territorial reorganization, external interventions, and externally imposed models of governance continue to define weak state formations. In Afghan society, the "unfinished decolonization" of political power has created a hybrid order in which local customs, tribal networks, and external actors continuously intersect. Postcolonial theory also challenges the international actors' role, showing how interventions in the name of modernization, democratization, or protection of human rights tend to recreate dependency and erode sovereignty.

## **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design informed by a postcolonial theoretical framework to investigate the relationship between political instability and human rights violations in Afghanistan. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for unpacking the complex historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative generalizations. By employing interpretive methods, the study seeks to illuminate how shifting regimes, external interventions, and entrenched social hierarchies have produced enduring patterns of instability and rights abuses. The research relies primarily on secondary data drawn from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and policy reports, complemented by publications from international organizations such as the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. This diverse body of material provides both empirical detail and critical interpretations, enabling a multilayered analysis of Afghanistan's political trajectory and human rights landscape.

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify and organize recurring patterns related to regime change, foreign intervention, ethnic fragmentation, and gender-based exclusion. These themes were examined through a postcolonial lens, emphasizing how colonial legacies and contemporary geopolitical strategies continue to shape Afghanistan's political order and human rights practices. The interpretive focus allows for contextualizing present-day crises within a *longue durée* of historical subjugation and external manipulation, thus moving beyond surface-level explanations of instability.

Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, this methodology prioritizes contextual depth and historical sensitivity, foregrounding the structural and discursive forces that perpetuate conflict and inequality. By synthesizing insights across disciplines and perspectives, the study contributes to broader debates on postcolonial governance, sovereignty, and human rights, while offering a critical reappraisal of Afghanistan's position within global power dynamics.



## Limitations and Scope

This research is limited by its reliance on secondary sources, which means it is shaped by the interpretations and biases of existing scholarship and organizational reports. The absence of primary fieldwork, such as interviews or ethnographic data, restricts the capacity to capture lived experiences and local perspectives in their full complexity. Furthermore, much of the available literature on Afghanistan is produced through Western epistemological lenses, which may inadvertently reinforce essentialist narratives. The scope of the study is confined to Afghanistan within the broader South Asian and Central Asian geopolitical context, with an emphasis on the period from the colonial era through the post-9/11 U.S.-led intervention. While this focus provides historical depth, it does not allow for detailed comparative analysis with other South Asian states. Nonetheless, by situating Afghanistan's trajectory within postcolonial theory, the study highlights patterns that resonate with wider debates on the intersections of instability, intervention, and human rights in the Global South.

## Intersecting Factors Shaping Instability and Human Rights Violations

This paper argues that Afghanistan's enduring political instability and widespread human rights violations are structurally rooted in the legacies of colonialism, the destabilizing effects of foreign interventions, and the failures of successive regimes to build inclusive governance. Rather than viewing these crises as episodic, the study contends that they represent a sustained pattern of power struggles and external manipulation that have entrenched cycles of violence, repression, and social fragmentation. By situating Afghanistan within a postcolonial framework, the paper demonstrates that lasting peace and human rights protection require confronting these structural drivers and prioritizing local agency over externally imposed solutions.

### I. Political Volatility through Successive Regime Changes

Successive regime changes in Afghanistan have entrenched political volatility and systematically eroded human rights protections. The 1978 Saur Revolution, which brought a communist government to power, marked the beginning of large-scale state repression. The Soviet-backed regime employed torture, mass executions, and forced displacements to suppress dissent, creating a legacy of human rights violations that alienated much of the population (Rubin, 2002; Amnesty International, 1984). The subsequent Soviet invasion in 1979 further deepened instability, as widespread resistance led to a brutal counterinsurgency campaign characterized by civilian massacres and the destruction of villages (Maley, 2009). Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the collapse of the communist regime did not bring peace. Instead, Afghanistan descended

into civil war as rival mujahedin factions turned against each other, committing atrocities such as ethnic cleansing, summary executions, and mass sexual violence (Rashid, 2000). This period of warlord dominance fragmented the state and entrenched cycles of impunity. The Taliban's emergence in 1994 initially promised order but soon replaced warlord violence with rigid authoritarianism. Their regime institutionalized gender apartheid, banning women from education and employment, while implementing public executions, amputations, and floggings as instruments of control (Human Rights Watch, 1999; Ahmed, 2002).

The U.S.-led invasion of 2001 overthrew the Taliban and sought to establish a democratic state. However, the new government struggled with endemic corruption, weak institutions, and a persistent insurgency. Internationally supported security forces were themselves implicated in human rights abuses, including torture, arbitrary detentions, and civilian casualties from counterinsurgency operations (Goodhand & Sedra, 2010; UNAMA, 2010). Thus, from the communist coup to the post-2001 democratic experiment, each successive regime has perpetuated instability and rights violations rather than resolving them.

## **II. External Military Occupations as Catalysts of Instability**

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan represents one of the most violent and destabilizing episodes in the country's modern history. Following the Saur Revolution of 1978, the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) launched widespread repression against political opponents, marked by arbitrary arrests, torture, and executions of dissidents and suspected collaborators (Amnesty International, 1984; Rubin, 2002). The Soviet invasion in December 1979 intensified this repression, transforming Afghanistan into a battlefield where systematic violations of human rights became routine. Civilian populations endured aerial bombardments, destruction of villages, and mass displacements, forcing millions to flee into Pakistan and Iran (Maley, 2009). While the Soviet occupation entrenched state-led violence, external involvement compounded the crisis. The United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan provided financial and military support to the mujahedin, framing them as freedom fighters against Soviet imperialism (Coll, 2004). This militarization of Afghan society had long-term consequences, as the proliferation of armed groups and weapons sowed the seeds of protracted civil war (Rashid, 2000). Thus, the Soviet invasion not only triggered widespread human rights violations but also set the stage for decades of instability by empowering militant actors whose influence persists today.

The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, justified as a response to the 9/11 attacks, was initially framed as a mission to dismantle al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban regime. While it succeeded in overthrowing the Taliban government, it also inaugurated a prolonged period of foreign military occupation marked by persistent human rights

violations (Goodhand & Sedra, 2010). Civilian casualties became a defining feature of the conflict, with airstrikes, drone operations, and night raids killing thousands of non-combatants (UNAMA, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2011). Beyond deaths, the conflict produced mass displacement and the destruction of vital infrastructure, leaving millions dependent on humanitarian aid (United Nations, 2023).

Despite international rhetoric about democracy promotion and women's empowerment, counterinsurgency strategies frequently sidelined civilian protection. The prioritization of military objectives over human security eroded public trust and contributed to the persistence of insurgency (Suhrke, 2011). Furthermore, corruption and weak governance under Western-backed administrations undermined the state's legitimacy, ensuring that rights abuses—ranging from arbitrary detentions to torture in secret facilities—remained widespread (SIGAR, 2021). In effect, the U.S.-led intervention, while initially dislodging the Taliban, reproduced cycles of violence and repression, deepening the humanitarian crisis it sought to resolve.

### **III. Aid as a Tool of Power: Dependency and Political Instability**

Foreign aid has been central to Afghanistan's political economy since the Soviet invasion, but rather than fostering stability, it has often reinforced dependency, corruption, and weak governance. Scholars argue that aid in fragile states frequently functions less as a developmental resource and more as a political tool wielded by donors to secure strategic influence (Goodhand & Sedra, 2010; Suhrke, 2011). In Afghanistan, the inflow of billions in external assistance created a rentier-style economy, where elites relied on donor funds rather than domestic capacity-building, undermining state legitimacy (Rubin, 2008).

The U.S. and its allies framed aid as part of a dual strategy of counterinsurgency and reconstruction, yet the outcomes were contradictory. While aid projects sought to win "hearts and minds," they often fueled corruption and empowered local patronage networks rather than building sustainable institutions (SIGAR, 2021; Chayes, 2015). Reports indicate that significant portions of aid were siphoned off by warlords, contractors, and political elites, deepening public distrust in the government (Transparency International, 2010). Moreover, the uneven distribution of aid exacerbated regional disparities, privileging strategically important provinces while neglecting others, which reinforced grievances and, in some cases, fueled insurgency (Lister & Wilder, 2007).

Afghanistan's reliance on aid thus created a paradox: while international assistance sustained basic services and humanitarian relief, it simultaneously entrenched dependency, distorted local governance, and legitimized corrupt actors. This dependency undermined the Afghan state's

ability to develop autonomous institutions, leaving it vulnerable to both domestic instability and external manipulation (Suhrke, 2011). Ultimately, aid became less a pathway to development and more an instrument of geopolitical power, contributing to the very instability it sought to resolve.

#### **IV. Sanctions, Economic Isolation, and Political Fragility**

Economic sanctions and international isolation have further entrenched Afghanistan's political fragility, disproportionately harming civilians while doing little to alter the behavior of ruling elites. Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the United States and its allies froze nearly \$9.5 billion in Afghan central bank assets and suspended most forms of international aid (World Bank, 2022). This sudden economic shock triggered a collapse of state revenue and paralyzed public institutions that had long depended on external funding (SIGAR, 2022). While sanctions were designed to pressure the Taliban into respecting human rights and forming an inclusive government, their immediate effect was to exacerbate humanitarian suffering.

The freezing of assets and aid suspensions contributed to widespread poverty, food insecurity, and the breakdown of essential services such as healthcare and education. By 2022, the United Nations reported that over 90% of Afghans faced food insecurity, with millions at risk of famine (UNDP, 2022). Hospitals ran out of critical supplies, teachers and civil servants went unpaid, and humanitarian agencies warned of "systemic collapse" (UNICEF, 2022). Rather than empowering civil society, sanctions constrained the Afghan economy, leaving ordinary people with diminished livelihoods and increased dependency on emergency relief (Jackson & Amiri, 2022).

Scholars and human rights organizations argue that sanctions in fragile states often function as blunt instruments, weakening civilian populations while entrenching authoritarian actors who control access to scarce resources (Weiss, 1999; Galtung, 1967). In Afghanistan's case, the Taliban consolidated their grip by monopolizing humanitarian aid distribution, using it to strengthen patronage networks and suppress dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Thus, far from promoting accountability, sanctions have deepened Afghanistan's economic isolation, intensified political fragility, and prolonged human rights violations by creating a humanitarian catastrophe borne by the most vulnerable.

#### **V. Corruption, Weak Institutions, and Political Instability**

Corruption and weak institutions have been central to Afghanistan's persistent political instability and systemic human rights violations. The monopolization of bureaucratic resources and misuse of centralized power produced an environment where justice and equality were routinely compromised. Nepotism and cronyism in hiring practices entrenched exclusionary politics, depriving citizens of equal opportunities and

fostering systemic discrimination—particularly against women, minorities, and economically disadvantaged groups (Transparency International, 2019; Larson & Ramsbotham, 2018). Such practices undermined the right to equal treatment and meaningful participation in governance.

Administrative inefficiency and corruption exacerbated economic inequality by restricting access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment. According to the World Bank (2017), more than 50% of Afghans lived below the poverty line despite the inflow of billions of dollars in international aid, much of which was siphoned off through corrupt networks or mismanagement. Poverty-level salaries among government employees further incentivized bribery and extortion, deepening the cycle of corruption and widening the socioeconomic divide (SIGAR, 2021). This economic stagnation created widespread disenfranchisement, fueling grievances and weakening the state's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens.

Corruption also eroded accountability and reinforced ethnic and political cleavages. Politically and ethnically connected elites often escaped justice, while ordinary citizens bore the brunt of selective enforcement and extortion, reinforcing patterns of impunity (Chayes, 2015). This unequal system exacerbated mistrust among communities, perpetuating cycles of resentment and instability. Moreover, the mismanagement of international aid—frequently diverted or lost due to weak monitoring mechanisms—further institutionalized corruption, leaving the most vulnerable populations without essential support (Goodhand & Sedra, 2013).

Ultimately, corruption and institutional weakness in Afghanistan were not merely symptoms of instability but structural drivers of fragility. They entrenched inequality, perpetuated human rights violations, and undermined state legitimacy, creating fertile ground for insurgent groups to exploit public disillusionment with the government.

## **VI. Ethnic Fragmentation and Political Instability**

Afghanistan's political instability and human rights violations cannot be fully understood without accounting for the deeply entrenched tribal and ethnic divisions that shape its political order. Historically, power in Afghanistan has been structured along ethnic and tribal lines, with political loyalty rooted in kinship and sectarian identities rather than meritocratic or democratic processes (Barfield, 2010). This system of governance produced exclusionary politics that consistently marginalized non-dominant groups. The institutionalization of Pashtun dominance—often through policies of centralization and “Pashtunization”—exemplifies this pattern, creating an internal colonial order where minority groups such as Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks were denied equitable access to political representation, resources, and justice (Saikal, 2004; Shahrani, 2002). Such exclusion has generated longstanding grievances, fueled cycles of violence

and resistance, while normalized systematic rights violations against marginalized groups.

These ethnic cleavages were not only cultural but also profoundly political, enabling successive regimes to consolidate power through favoritism, coercion, and suppression. The result has been a fragile and fractured political system where ethnic identity determines access to opportunities and rights. This fragmentation also facilitated the proliferation of armed insurgent groups, as marginalized communities often turned to militancy to challenge an exclusionary state order (Rubin, 2002). In effect, Afghanistan's political volatility and recurring humanitarian crises cannot be disentangled from the structural inequalities embedded in its ethnic politics.

The situation has worsened dramatically since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, when economic collapse compounded the structural fragility of Afghanistan's ethnically divided polity. According to the World Bank (2022), Afghanistan's economy contracted by 27% in the first year of Taliban rule, unemployment doubled, and the collapse of the financial sector crippled public and private institutions. Small-scale enterprises and subsistence farming remain the only sources of livelihood, but they are insufficient to meet the country's urgent needs (UNDP, 2022). This economic breakdown has created a humanitarian catastrophe: over 90% of Afghans face food insecurity, while millions live in precarious shelters without reliable access to water, health services, or education (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022).

The human rights consequences of this economic decline are especially stark for women and girls. The Taliban's ban on secondary and higher education for girls, combined with restrictions on women's employment, has further entrenched gender-based discrimination and curtailed opportunities for empowerment (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The exclusion of women from the public sphere not only violates fundamental rights but also undermines Afghanistan's economic recovery, as half the population is systematically prevented from contributing to development. These restrictions, paired with the absence of capital and foreign investment due to sanctions and political isolation, perpetuate poverty, inequality, and disenfranchisement, leaving the majority of the population dependent on dwindling humanitarian assistance.

In short, the convergence of structural ethnic exclusion and post-2021 economic collapse has produced a dual crisis that perpetuates Afghanistan's political instability. Ethnic divisions have historically entrenched inequality and fueled violence, while the recent economic implosion exacerbates humanitarian suffering and deepens authoritarian control. Together, these dynamics highlight how Afghanistan's instability is not a temporary phenomenon but a structural condition sustained by systemic exclusion, economic fragility, and persistent rights violations.



## **VII. The Limits of Afghanistan's Peace Process**

The failure of the peace process in Afghanistan constitutes a critical driver of prolonged political instability and human rights violations. For much of the post-2001 period, the United States prioritized a military solution over a political settlement, operating under the assumption that time favored its position and that Afghan security forces would eventually outlast the Taliban insurgency (Jones, 2009). This overreliance on military strategies ignored early indications of declining state legitimacy and the Afghan National Army's inability to function without external support (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2019). As a result, opportunities for diplomatic engagement were consistently postponed, while human rights conditions deteriorated under the combined weight of insurgent violence and counterinsurgency operations. When peace initiatives eventually emerged, beginning with exploratory talks in 2010, they were marred by incoherence, lack of resourcing, and bureaucratic infighting within the U.S. government (Ruttig, 2014). The absence of a unified strategy between the military and diplomatic tracks undermined negotiations, while political leaders proved reluctant to take the risks required for genuine compromise (Gopal, 2021). Key steps such as prisoner exchanges and confidence-building measures were delayed or mishandled due to political calculations, further eroding trust between parties (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2020).

By the time the Doha Agreement was signed in 2020, the peace process had been reduced to a narrow deal that excluded the Afghan government from meaningful participation and prioritized U.S. withdrawal over a durable political settlement (Semple, 2020). This exclusionary approach empowered the Taliban, delegitimized Kabul's already fragile institutions, and exacerbated internal divisions. As a consequence, the agreement not only failed to end the war but also accelerated the collapse of the Afghan state in 2021, triggering new waves of displacement, repression, and humanitarian suffering. Thus, the weakness of the peace process underscores how the absence of sustained diplomatic engagement, combined with overconfidence in military solutions, perpetuated conflict and compounded human rights violations. Rather than stabilizing Afghanistan, the mismanaged and ultimately exclusionary peace efforts deepened its structural fragility and paved the way for the Taliban's return to power.

## **VIII. Systemic Gender Discrimination and Human Rights Violations**

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 marked a devastating reversal of the modest gains made in women's rights during two decades of democratic rule. From 2001 to 2021, Afghanistan saw significant, though uneven, progress in gender equality, with constitutional guarantees, legal reforms, and international aid-driven programs expanding women's access

to education, employment, and political participation (Kakar, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2017). However, these fragile achievements collapsed almost immediately after the Taliban takeover, as the regime implemented a sweeping framework of gender apartheid designed to eliminate women from public life (Amnesty International, 2022). The Taliban's decrees restricting women's mobility, banning their access to secondary and higher education, and prohibiting employment in most sectors have systemically stripped Afghan women of autonomy and basic human rights (UNAMA, 2023).

The consequences of this rollback are stark. As of 2023, nearly 80% of Afghan girls and young women, approximately 2.5 million individuals, were excluded from schools and universities, with more than 100,000 female university students barred from higher education (UNICEF, 2023). Before the Taliban takeover, women made up 26% of the civil service; today, their participation has been reduced to near zero (UN Women, 2022). Beyond institutional exclusion, Afghan women face severe gender-based violence: a 2018 national survey found that 50.8% of women aged 15–49 had experienced intimate partner violence, with rates as high as 92% in some provinces (Asia Foundation, 2019). Child marriage further entrenches this cycle of disempowerment nearly 29% of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18, and almost 10% before 15, restricting their access to education, health, and economic independence (UNFPA, 2023).

This systemic denial of women's rights is not only a human rights catastrophe but also a driver of broader political instability. Excluding half the population from education, employment, and governance undermines economic productivity, worsens poverty, and deepens social divisions (Kabeer, 2015). Moreover, by institutionalizing gender apartheid, the Taliban regime perpetuates structural inequalities that prevent inclusive governance and sustainable peace. Afghanistan's gender crisis thus reveals how systemic discrimination functions both as a human rights violation in itself and as a catalyst for political fragility.

## **IX. Displacement as a Driver of Political and Social Fragility**

Decades of protracted conflict, compounded by recurring natural disasters, poverty, and political upheaval, have made Afghanistan one of the largest sources of displaced populations in the world. More than 6.4 million Afghan refugees are currently displaced globally, with neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran shouldering the heaviest burden (UNHCR, 2024). Iran alone hosts at least 4.5 million Afghan refugees, 71% of whom are women and children, while Pakistan continues to host millions more despite strained domestic resources (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has further accelerated this crisis, leading to new refugee flows and undermining

fragile political systems both within Afghanistan and across the region. Displacement has thus become both a humanitarian emergency and a destabilizing factor in regional politics, creating social, economic, and security pressures that exacerbate fragility.

Within Afghanistan, displacement has reached alarming levels. As of 2024, the country hosts 3.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) alongside nearly 651,000 Afghans forcibly returned from Pakistan since September 2023 (IOM, 2024). This crisis is compounded by climate shocks such as floods and prolonged drought, which have devastated livelihoods and forced communities from their homes. Displacement has a direct human rights dimension: millions of Afghans, especially women and children, face food insecurity, malnutrition, and denial of basic services. Recent estimates suggest that 12.4 million Afghans (28% of the population) face acute food insecurity, with 2.4 million at risk of famine-like conditions (WFP, 2024). Children remain disproportionately vulnerable, with 6.5 million facing emergency hunger levels as families struggle to survive amid collapsing infrastructure and limited humanitarian aid (UNICEF, 2024).

Displacement also heightens exposure to human trafficking, gender-based violence, and exploitation, particularly for women and girls who are already stripped of their fundamental rights under Taliban rule (Amnesty International, 2022). Refugee camps and temporary shelters often lack adequate protection, leaving vulnerable populations at risk of forced labour, child marriage, and trafficking networks (IOM, 2023). Despite efforts by UNHCR and international NGOs to facilitate voluntary returns and provide emergency relief, humanitarian assistance remains chronically underfunded, leaving critical gaps in protection.

Beyond the immediate humanitarian toll, displacement undermines political stability by eroding social cohesion and straining state legitimacy. The exclusion of displaced populations from political participation and economic life creates long-term marginalization, fostering grievances that insurgent groups can exploit (Salehyan, 2009). In host countries, large refugee inflows fuel xenophobia, labour competition, and security fears, which often destabilize domestic politics and bilateral relations with Afghanistan. Thus, displacement functions not only as a consequence of conflict but also as a driver of fragility and ongoing human rights violations, locking Afghanistan and its neighbours into cycles of instability.

### **Key Findings**

Historical legacies of conflict and colonial interference have entrenched political instability in Afghanistan. British interventions and subsequent colonial practices disrupted governance structures, deepened ethnic divisions, and weakened national cohesion, leaving a legacy that

continues to shape instability. Successive regime changes have perpetuated cycles of power struggles and authoritarianism, prevented the consolidation of stable political institutions while contributing to widespread human rights violations. Foreign interventions driven by geopolitical interests from the Soviet occupation to the U.S.-led war on terror have exacerbated internal divisions, intensified civilian suffering, and undermined prospects for sovereignty and self-determined governance. Ethnic and tribal divisions remain central obstacles to national unity and democratic progress. These divisions, often manipulated by both foreign actors and insurgent groups, reinforce exclusionary politics and weaken institutional legitimacy. Erosion of civil liberties accompanies political instability, with women, minorities, and vulnerable populations disproportionately affected. The rollback of women's rights under the Taliban highlights the intersection of instability, authoritarianism, and systemic discrimination. A postcolonial framework is critical for understanding Afghanistan's crises, as it highlights how colonial legacies, global power dynamics, and internal structural weaknesses converge to perpetuate instability and rights violations. International strategies require recalibration toward supporting local agency, inclusive governance, and human rights. Without prioritizing Afghan voices and grassroots participation, external interventions risk reproducing dependency, fragility, and systemic violence.

## **Conclusion**

Afghanistan's political instability and pervasive human rights violations are not isolated phenomena but the cumulative outcome of colonial legacies, foreign interventions, internal divisions, and systemic inequalities. A postcolonial lens underscores how the disruption of governance structures, coupled with external manipulation, has left enduring fractures in Afghan society. Foreign military occupations, often justified in the name of security or counterterrorism, have instead deepened cycles of conflict, undermined sovereignty, and perpetuated suffering among civilians.

At the same time, Afghanistan's internal ethnic and tribal divisions continue to obstruct inclusive governance and democratic consolidation. Addressing these structural fractures requires policies that foster national unity through equitable representation, inclusive education, and the recognition of cultural pluralism. Reducing socioeconomic inequality is equally critical: without sustained poverty alleviation, job creation, and expanded access to health and education, the grievances that fuel instability will persist, particularly among disenfranchised youth.

Equally vital is the strengthening of civil society and independent media. These actors serve as the backbone of accountability and rights advocacy, ensuring that voices from all regions—especially marginalized groups—are represented in national discourse. Press freedom and grassroots

mobilization can counter authoritarian tendencies and rebuild trust between citizens and the state.

Ultimately, sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan will require recalibrating both domestic governance and international engagement. External actors must move beyond militarized strategies and instead prioritize Afghan agency, inclusive development, and the protection of fundamental rights. Only through such a multidimensional and inclusive approach can Afghanistan break free from its cycles of instability and move toward a future grounded in justice, dignity, and sovereignty. Breaking Afghanistan's cycle of instability will only be possible when both domestic leaders and international actors commit to dismantling systems of exclusion and oppression, and instead place human rights, inclusive governance, and Afghan sovereignty at the core of peacebuilding.

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