

George Cunningham Interview by Journalist Pierre-Antoine Donnet for Asialyst – English Language Text – 17th February 2022

« In Afghanistan, Taliban rule does not guarantee stability.»

1. **What is your impression of Afghanistan today under the Taliban, judging by your experience as a former Deputy EU Ambassador in Kabul?**

When I served as EU Deputy Ambassador to Afghanistan, progress was being made, slowly but surely, in developing civil society and rule of law, in the towns at least. Despite all the corruption, very imperfect elections and large swathes of rural Afghanistan under Taliban control not going anywhere, the roots of a more modern society were being sown in the urban areas.

One of the ironies was that the war kept the economy going. When the US first drew down their forces after the US military surge, the poverty level shot up. When I had arrived in Afghanistan in 2016, 55 % lived below the country's poverty line. Now UNDP has said that up to 97% will be in poverty by mid-2022 unless the country's political and economic crises are addressed.

The international community has gone and the population of the country cannot survive without outside assistance. The Taliban understand that they cannot deliver any meaningful improvement in the lives of the Afghan people without international support.

2. **Afghanistan was never a real country, but rather an entity made of several identities, political structures. Do you think this explains the problems this country is facing today?**

The country has always been fragmented and tribal. However, already just after the WW2, Afghanistan had many of the rudiments of a modern state under Zahir Shah, including a Parliament and a relatively independent press. It was a safe place at peace until just before the Soviet invasion in 1979.

After the US ousted the Taliban in 2001, the international community took nation-building on board, but they did not realise what a very long-term process it would be. The international community was there for 20 years, but I felt it needs a change of at least 2-3 generations for a new society to take root. 20 years is not long enough. Many of those in government and in the Taliban were around 20 years ago and are still there today.

3. **How do you see the future of Afghanistan in the new few years? There seems little alternative for now.**

It depends if the many factions of the Taliban keep united or fragment. Certainly, their desire to create an army of 100,00 soldiers with their fighters would help enormously keep their ranks intact but who will pay for that? If they move to liberalise society too much, many fighters might decide to go over to ISIS. Taliban rule does not guarantee stability.

In the briefing to the United Nations Security Council in January 2022, UNAMA asked that the one billion US dollars requested last year to address the humanitarian crisis be supplemented by 4.4 billion US dollars in additional humanitarian assistance for 2022. This is roughly the same amount that the international community spent on the entire operating budget of the government of the Republic in a given year. This cannot last with so many other challenges facing the world.

4. **Are you of the opinion that foreign governments should recognize the Taliban regime? If so, under what conditions?**

The Taliban take-over of Afghanistan was by military force. They have abolished the Parliament. They have no legitimacy from Afghan people.

What are the international community's demands? The Taliban needs to form a truly inclusive government; to govern in tolerance; to recognize and protect in particular the universal rights of women and minorities, and allow their proper participation in Afghan life; to not provide safe haven for international terrorists; and to give amnesty and safe passage to all wishing to either remain in or leave the country. Former President Karzai gave an interview on Afghan TV last month in which he called for the Taliban to form an inclusive government and to govern for all the people.

The Taliban desperately want international recognition and access to the previous government's frozen funds and the international banking system. This is why they must listen to what the outside world says. Taliban have visited Oslo and Geneva, are soon to go to London and continue holding talks in Doha.

However the Biden administration has moved to freeze and split \$7 billion worth of Afghan Central Bank assets held by the U.S. into \$3.5 billion held pending the resolution of a court case brought by former families of 9/11 victims who are seeking financial penalties from the Taliban, and the other \$3.5 billion of which will be transferred to a trust fund to support humanitarian assistance.

This unilateral act by the US of siphoning off \$3.5 billion because of 9/11 victims of course undermines the effectiveness of the leverage the international community is applying. The Afghan people now in need are not responsible for the Taliban's actions in protecting Al Qaeda. We need to keep alive those who are living now.

5. **Don't you think that the Islamic State is far worse than the Taliban? And if so, this would legitimize the fact that the West should cooperate with the Taliban?**

There is an absence of all-out war at the moment, but it has been substituted by targeted killings and fear. There were 24 international terrorist organisations believed to be operating in Afghanistan during my time. Since the fall of the previous government, ISIS has spread across the country.

A recent report by the UN sanctions monitoring team on the presence of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in Afghanistan and other regions, reported that "there are no recent signs that the Taliban has taken steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters in the country".

6. **Do you expect the Taliban to fulfill their promises to respect the rights of women?**

This will be the proof of the pudding, whether the Taliban are prepared to give a chance to half the population of the country. The situation is awful in most places but also a bit fluid. Girls are said to be going to secondary school in four provinces. Much is locally driven now. The Taliban have said they will open all girls' school at the end of March. We shall see if this happens, and whether it is everywhere. This should, of course, include areas previously under Taliban control

It is good the four arrested Afghan women activists have been released – although we do not know how they were treated - but others have been arrested, further showing that Taliban militias are taking the law locally into their own hands.

7. **Don't you think that Joe Biden had no choice but to leave Afghanistan?**

The Leader of what is still the most powerful nation on earth always has a choice. The military situation in Afghanistan was a stalemate, although one with high Afghan casualties. It was said that the US wanted to pull back its forces in Afghanistan and the Middle East to concentrate its resources on China. Well, the

world is not neat as that. A pull-out in one place has impact in other places. It can have a destabilizing effect regionally and knock-on effects elsewhere. There is also the issues of US credibility. The speed of the US pull-out was against the wishes of the US' allies who also had large number of troops on the ground. It led to the loss of 20 years of effort.

8. How do you assess the repercussion of the US' departure from Afghanistan on US/Taiwan relations facing mainland China?

Many saw the US pull-out of Afghanistan as a continuation of President Trump's US withdrawal from the world. Commentators took it as a potentially worrying sign for Taiwan.

However, if there is an invasion of Ukraine, and the US shows resolve and works with its allies as equal partners, that will be a good sign for Taiwan. This will be the real test.

9. When Joe Biden decided to withdraw all remaining American forces from Afghanistan, he commented that it was not possible to impose democracy on a population that had no wish for it. What are your thoughts about that?

Afghanistan had a parliament already in 1931. Democracy had its roots within the country without its imposition by foreign powers. Even if the most recent parliament was somewhat dysfunctional on occasion, it nonetheless represented a wide range of opinion in the country. The Taliban has had no qualms in abolishing the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs - as well as the independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaints Commission - and have said they do not want anything to do with democracy. This is because they know one thing: half of the population (women) - if they were allowed to express themselves freely - would never vote for the Taliban, but against them. And as a minimum, half of the male population would do the same. In other words, there would be no chance the Taliban would be able to stay in power. It's as simple as that.