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(20 October 1998) Afghanistan: Implications of a Taliban Government for the US

The Taliban lacks a coherent plan for running the country. The Taliban's limited efforts to revive government institutions, such as the Central Bank, have been stymied by a lack of bureaucratic savvy and economic planning, [REDACTED]

- The Taliban's exclusionary approach to governing suggests it will continue to resist a broad-based coalition government despite diplomatic efforts to press a political settlement.
- Taliban officials say the government will be based on Islamic law and that spiritual leader Mullah Omar will remain the ultimate religious and political authority.

Seeking International Respect

The top foreign policy priority for the Taliban is to gain recognition as the legitimate government, but only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have done so. The rigid policies espoused by the Taliban pose hurdles to its effort to gain recognition.

- Omar vigorously defends Saudi dissident Usama Bin Ladin's continued stay in Afghanistan, although Omar is under increasing pressure from subordinates to rein in Bin Ladin.
- The importance of narcotics trafficking to the economy, the clout of traffickers, and the involvement by some Taliban members in the drug trade will stymie counternarcotics efforts.

Differences in the Leadership

The Taliban leadership has several ideological currents, including dogmatic and pragmatic elements. More dogmatic hardliners--led by Omar--worry less about gaining international recognition, favor political asylum for Bin Ladin, and shun compromise on Omar's edicts regarding domestic issues. More pragmatic moderates--represented by Mullah Rabbani--

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attempt to abide by international norms of political behavior and may support more flexible internal policies. As the Taliban's position becomes secure, more moderate views may gain strength and provide an opening for progress on counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and human rights.

- Last month in Kandahar--the Taliban's stronghold--aid workers reported signs of relaxation of Taliban strictures on education for girls and employment for women, according to press reports.

- Differences in the leadership so far have had little effect on group unity and decisionmaking, but political differences may solidify into internal factions as the Taliban gains complete control of Afghanistan.

Isolation of the Taliban could strengthen the group's stricter adherents to its brand of Islam while increasing the Taliban's dependence on narcotics profits and the largesse of backers like Bin Ladin.

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