Economists Explain the Taliban

Strict behavioral rituals make religious groups effective at organizing collective action.

By Anthony Gill
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The Taliban's rapid overthrow of the U.S.-supported regime in Afghanistan came as a surprise to many in the West, including President Biden, who said in early July: "Do I trust the Taliban? No. But I trust the capacity of the Afghan military, who is better trained, better equipped, and more and more competent in terms of conducting war."

How could a ragtag group of religious fundamentalists be so effective in capturing a territory that has resisted rule by some of the most formidable world powers, including the British, the Soviets and the Americans?

An answer can be found in a quirky academic subfield known as the political economy of religion. It was developed in the late 1980s by sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke and economist Laurence Iannaccone. Political scientists including Carolyn Warner and me added the political side of the equation in the early 1990s.

An insight from Mr. Iannaccone bears directly on the success of the Taliban: Groups with strict behavioral rituals are especially effective at organizing collective action. He was intrigued by the organizational vibrancy of some of the strictest faiths in the U.S., including Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Orthodox Jews. These groups all have demanding behavioral codes and intensely devoted adherents.

Mr. Iannaccone argued that behavioral codes like a prohibition on alcohol and stigmatizing behavior like wearing distinctive clothing enhanced cooperation. Religious organizations are "club goods," wherein members share many collective benefits such as welfare provision and fellowship. Those benefits depend on active contribution. If everyone participates willingly, the organization is vibrant. If many members are free riders—receiving the benefits without pulling their weight—the quality of the good dissipates and the organization becomes anemic.

To limit free riding, strict religious groups require members to prove their loyalty via costly and visible behavior that deters the lazy, such as going on two-year missions or memorizing holy texts. Such "sacrificial signaling" can be seen in other groups, such as fraternities and street gangs with strange hazing rituals.

Stigmatizing behavior also limits the outside opportunities of group members and binds

them more closely to the organization. Members find it difficult to betray the group because they have few alternative social options.

Economist Eli Berman used Mr. Iannaccone's insight to study terrorist and rebel organizations. In his 2009 book "Radical, Religious and Violent," Mr. Berman explained that operating a rebel group requires a high degree of loyal cooperation. If an individual is captured or defects from the group, the entire organization could be compromised.

Linking a strict religious sect to a radical rebel group is an effective way of enhancing loyalty and cooperation. People who keep strict dietary habits, pray publicly several times a day, write poetry, and study religious texts to the exclusion of other activities make good cooperators.

The Taliban are an excellent example of Mr. Berman's thesis. Their fundamentalist version of Sunni Islam imposes strict requirements on all members. It is easy for them to identify and choose leaders who are the most cooperative and know that they can be trusted not to defect. As a result, they have become a disciplined organization wherein leaders and lower-level militants are unlikely to defect from the group's mission of creating an Islamic state.

That explained their rise to power in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, Afghanistan collapsed into a disorganized mess of rival clans vying for political and economic power. A disunited governing system couldn't effectively collect taxes. The nation's infrastructure, including the ability to guarantee basic market interactions, fell into disrepair.

The Taliban was the only unifying entity that could guarantee safe trade routes, collect taxes without excessively plundering the population, and provide essential public goods to key cities. They did this initially by securing control of the Kandahar-Herat Highway, an important trade route between Pakistan and Iran. Previously, competing tribal organizations dominated sections of this highway, stopped all transit, and excessively taxed truckers. With many different clans extracting money every few miles, it became too expensive to transport goods along this road, and commerce ground to a halt.

The Taliban eventually stationed militants at key locations on the highway and taxed merchants only once while protecting truckers from other bandits. Since devout Taliban members proved their loyalty via adherence to strict religious codes, they were unlikely to plunder the trucking caravans further, allowing commercial transport to resume.

Successfully securing this road, the Taliban collected tolerable taxes, which they used for infrastructure projects throughout the country. The Taliban became reasonably popular. Afghans might not have liked their repressive religious policies, but at least the roads

were open and the electricity came back.

The Taliban also proved to be reasonably fair arbitrators of civil justice, as imams adjudicated contract disputes between merchants. If people trust that property rights can be fairly enforced, they are more likely to make long-term investments that promote economic growth. Even after being overthrown in 2001, the Taliban continued to serve as a shadow judiciary in some locales where the secular regime proved ineffectual.

All this was possible because the Taliban are a strict religious movement in which leaders and members prove their loyalty by adhering to strict behavioral requirements. The secular government lacked this advantage. Little wonder that when the Taliban rolled into a town, the local population usually put up little resistance. For many Afghans, the strict and predictable implementation of Shariah is preferable to the arbitrary and kleptocratic rule that Afghans have endured for two decades.

A classically liberal government with broad-based civil liberties would be far better. I offer only an explanation for why the Taliban have been able to overrun the country in short order: They represent a disciplined and tolerably trustworthy alternative to a corrupt regime that needed U.S. troops to guarantee its power.

Despite the seeming irrelevance of religion in the secular West, policy makers and military strategists would do well to understand its power elsewhere in the world.

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