

# Neo-colonialism, Proxy war, and Gender Apartheid: Cold war intervention and the Structural origins of Taliban Gender Policy in Afghanistan

POLI 279: Politics of the Global South

The systemic oppression of Afghan women under Taliban rule is often reduced to deep-seated religious conservatism or cultural tradition. This explanation, however, is insufficient. Women in Afghanistan held government positions, attended universities, and participated actively in public life during the 1960s and 1970s. All within a Muslim-majority society. The collapse of these conditions was not inevitable. This paper argues that Cold War superpower intervention in Afghanistan comprises a form of neo-colonial domination that deliberately empowered the most conservative militant factions, dismantled the state institutions that had previously supported women's participation in public life, and created the structural conditions from which Taliban gender apartheid emerged. The oppression of Afghan women cannot be reduced to cultural or religious purposes; it is, above all, the product of external intervention that treated Afghanistan as a geopolitical arena rather than a sovereign society.

This argument proceeds in three stages. First, it establishes the theoretical framework of neo-colonialism and demonstrates how Cold War superpower conduct in Afghanistan fits this model. Second, it examines the specific historical mechanisms, such as the American funding of religiously conservative mujahideen factions and Soviet destabilization of the Afghan state, that together enabled the Taliban's rise. Third, it analyzes the Taliban's gender decrees as a political program whose structural origins are inseparable from Cold War intervention and considers the legal and moral implications of appointing this regime a case of "gender apartheid".

## Neo-Colonialism as a Theoretical Framework

Neo-colonialism, as theorized by Kwame Nkrumah and André Gunder Frank, describes the mechanisms by which powerful states exercise control over nominally independent nations through economic, political, and military means rather than direct territorial occupation.<sup>1</sup> Frank's dependency theory extends this framework to explain that peripheral states are systemically underdeveloped in service of core interests.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, neo-colonial control does not require the formal apparatus of empire. It can operate through proxy forces, conditional aid, and deliberate engineering of political instability.

Afghanistan's experience during the Cold War fits this model. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union sought to formally colonize Afghan territory. Instead, each superpower used Afghanistan as a theatre for geopolitical competition. In which they would fund proxies, toppling or propping up governments, and subordinating Afghan developmental needs to their own strategic calculations. The consequence was not the advancement of Afghan sovereignty but its erosion. The country's institutions, political culture, and social fabric were reshaped by external forces pursuing external agendas. This is neo-colonialism in its working form.

## How the United States Funded Religious Conservatism

The historical record of women's participation in Afghan public life prior to the Cold War interventions is essential context. During the 1960s and 1970s, Afghan women served in parliament, practiced medicine and law, and constituted a significant portion of university

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<sup>1</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965), xi.

<sup>2</sup> André Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 3.

student population.<sup>3</sup> This was not just a non-Islamic fluke but a feature of Afghan state policy under constitutional monarchy. The deterioration of these conditions was not an organic cultural reversal but the product of specific interventions. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the United States launched Operation Cyclone, the largest covert CIA operation in history, funneling billions of dollars to Afghan resistance fighters through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence.<sup>4</sup> The critical and often underemphasized side of this program is that American and Pakistani officials consistently directed resources toward the most religiously conservative factions of the mujahideen, prioritizing their anti-communist credentials over any concern for their political ideology or their attitudes toward women and civil society.<sup>5</sup> Moderate commanders who demonstrated greater tolerance for women's education and public participation received comparatively little support.

Ahmed-Ghosh documents how the influx of foreign funding restructured the Afghan resistance movement, empowering groups whose interpretation of Islam was far more restrictive than that historically practiced in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> These groups used their newfound resources to establish religious schools and militias that would form the organizational backbone of what later became the Taliban. The United States did not create the Taliban directly, but it created the financial, organizational and ideological conditions in which the Taliban could emerge and thrive.

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 58.

<sup>5</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh, "A History of Women in Afghanistan," 6.

## How the Soviet Union Destabilized the Afghan State

The Soviet intervention compounded these dynamics through a different but equally destructive mechanism: the systematic dismantling of Afghan state institutions. The Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government, which came to power in 1978, attempted to impose radical social reforms (including land redistribution and changes to marriage laws) at a pace that generated widespread resistance.<sup>7</sup> The Soviet invasion in December 1979 to prop up this failing government triggered a decade long war that destroyed Afghanistan's physical and administrative infrastructure.

Mosamim and Villeneuve trace how the war years produced a catastrophic collapse of the institutions through which women had previously accessed public life: universities were closed or severely disrupted, government ministries lost capacity, and professional networks were disbanded as educated Afghans fled as refugees.<sup>8</sup> The Soviet strategy of destroying rural infrastructure to deny the mujahideen a base produced population displacement on a massive scale. By the time Soviet forces withdrew in 1989, Afghanistan's state had been emptied out, creating a power vacuum that no legitimate government could fill.

It was into this vacuum, which was created jointly by Soviet destruction and American proxy funding, that the Taliban moved in the mid-1990s. The organization's rapid integration of territory was enabled not only by its military capacity, built with Cold War resources, but by the absence of alternatives of functioning state. The Afghan state that had once employed and educated women had been taken apart by a decade long competition of superpowers.

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<sup>7</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 179.

<sup>8</sup> Mosamim and Villeneuve, "75 Years of Women Representation," 268.

## Gender Apartheid as a Structural Outcome

The Taliban's gender decrees such as banning women from education, employment and public place are not expressions of timeless Afghan or Islamic values. They are a political program implemented by a faction whose rise was structurally enabled by Cold War intervention. Farid and De Alwis argue that these decrees constitute "gender apartheid," a term the United Nations has applied to describe a system of institutionalized gender-based segregation and domination.<sup>9</sup> The designation carries significant moral and legal weight: it frames Taliban gender policy not as cultural practice but as a systematic violation of international human rights norms.

De Alwis further argues that the gender apartheid framework creates possibilities for new forms of international accountability, including prosecution under international criminal law.<sup>10</sup> The concept demands that the international community treat Taliban gender persecution as a crime with identifiable perpetrators and structural enablers rather than as a cultural phenomenon beyond legal reach.<sup>11</sup> This framing is significant for the argument advanced here: if Taliban gender policy is a crime, then the question of structural causation becomes not merely historical but legally and morally urgent.

This paper does not argue that Cold War intervention is the sole cause of Taliban gender apartheid. Internal Afghan political dynamics, regional influences, and the specific ideology of

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<sup>9</sup> Naheed Farid and Rangita de Silva de Alwis, "Afghanistan Under the Taliban: A State of 'Gender Apartheid'?" Princeton SPIA Afghanistan Policy Lab, 2023, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Rangita de Silva De Alwis, "Holding the Taliban Accountable for Gender Persecution: The Search for New Accountability Paradigms under International Human Rights Law, International Criminal Law and Women, Peace, and Security," *German Law Journal* 25, no. 2 (2024): 295.

<sup>11</sup> Farid and De Alwis, "Afghanistan Under the Taliban," 9.

Taliban leadership all played roles. However, external intervention is the primary structural cause in the sense that it is the factor without which the other causes could not have produced this outcome. Without American funding of conservative factions, those factions would not have had the organizational capacity to emerge as a dominant political-military force. Without Soviet destruction of the Afghan state, there would have been no vacuum for the Taliban to fill. Cold War intervention did not merely influence Afghan politics, it created the field on which Taliban gender apartheid became possible.

## Conclusion

The inferiority of Afghan women under the Taliban is not a product of culture or religion. It is a product of history, specifically the history of neo-colonial intervention that treated Afghanistan as a chessboard and Afghans as pieces. The United States funded the most conservative factions of the mujahideen, empowering organizations whose ideology was incompatible with women's participation in public life. The Soviet Union destroyed the institutions through which that participation had been possible. Together, these interventions created a state of ruin into which the Taliban emerged. The gender apartheid they imposed is the political program of a faction whose existence is a result of Cold War neo-colonialism.

The analysis I made has implications beyond Afghanistan. It demands that discussions of human rights in post-conflict states attend not only to the immediate perpetrators of violations possible. Accountability for gender apartheid must include accountability for the interventions that created the conditions for it. As De Alwis argues, new legal frameworks are needed to capture this complexity.<sup>12</sup> Afghanistan is a test case for whether the international community can

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<sup>12</sup> De Alwis, "Holding the Taliban Accountable," 300.

develop such frameworks, or whether the language of rights will continue to hide the politics of power.

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