

Media Disinformation: Reframing the War in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a “Class War”

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The fact that the Taliban is a party of the peasant classes, but certainly not the only one, is not news in Afghanistan or Pakistan. It is thus interesting that *The New York Times* (“Taliban Exploit Class Rifts to Gain Ground in Pakistan,” 16 April 2009) is now exploiting the fact the Taliban do represent significant groups of peasants as if this is news. This indication of a possible reframing of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a class war is significant as the U.S. escalates the intensity and scale of warfare in the region.

My Afghan-Canadian research partner, Hamayon Rastgar, has said many times since we returned from a research trip in Afghanistan that “the West gives the monopoly of anti-imperialism to the Taliban” by crushing and continuing to suppress socialist forces in Afghanistan and by portraying the complex insurgency in the simplistic way Western governments and media do.

Many non-violent resisters as well as various insurgent groups oppose the Taliban, the mujaheddin, and imperialist forces. The complexity of the resistance and insurgent forces remain opaque to most Western analysts. Articles by Afghan intellectuals engaged in non-violent resistance against all the forces of repression – the Taliban, the mujaheddin, and the Western forces – are rarely translated for Western readers. Westerners believe all insurgents are under a Taliban banner. However, as an Afghan Maoist leader told us: “The government credits the Taliban for every insurgent attack; the Taliban like to take the credit; and that works for everyone else at this moment.”

Operation Enduring Freedom and the Afghanistan State

It is important to recall that the militaries of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), from the U.S., Britain, Canada, and Australia, set the stage to institute a supposedly ‘democratic’ state in Afghanistan. However, this state is a reconstitution of the theocratic Islamic Republic of Afghanistan originally instituted in 1992. The Islamic Republic was instituted by one of several competing mujaheddin factions who were built up as part of the U.S.’s anti-socialist “freedom fighters.” The later rise of the Taliban, facilitated as it was by the Pakistani equivalent of the CIA, the ISI, was in good part a response to the horrors inflicted on Afghans by conflicts between the rival mujaheddin factions after 1992. Several of these factions retreated to the north, in 1996, fleeing from the advance of Taliban military forces. These mujaheddin factions formed the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, which the Western news media sanitised with the title Northern Alliance.

In an article in *Briarpatch* (March/April 2008) regarding the use and abuse of feminism to sell Canada’s war in Afghanistan, I wrote: “The Taliban are radical Islamists intent on isolating

Afghans from the world; the mujaheddin are radical Islamists intent on profiting from their relationship to the U.S. and now Canada. The Taliban are reprehensible, but the mujaheddin are hardly different; both created misogynistic regimes based on erroneous interpretations of Islam.”

The Taliban and mujaheddin also share a hatred of ‘Godless’ socialists. It is still illegal, based on religious grounds, as it has been since 1992, to form a socialist party in the elected theocracy of Afghanistan. Freedom of religion is supposedly guaranteed by the new Afghanistan constitution. But in practice the state acts in a way that all Afghans are considered Muslim by default. This misses the incredible cultural diversity in Afghanistan, and the many religions including several unique indigenous ones, that Afghans practice. Moreover, socialists (which include an important organized Maoist component) are not likely to have suddenly found salvation in Islam. There is, it seems, no Islamic equivalent of Latin American liberation theology or Canadian Christian socialism in Afghanistan.

The kicker is that in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan apostasy is punishable by death. Any Afghan socialist could be ‘legally’ executed on the grounds she or he has converted from Islam. Moreover, the Afghan Supreme Court ruled socialists are legally atheists to ban socialist parties from electoral politics.

Despite this suppression, Afghan Maoists claim they have consolidated disparate Maoist and socialist organisations into a new party. The Maoists also claim they will eventually beat the Taliban in a competition for the hearts and minds of peasants, once the insurgency has exhausted the OEF-NATO occupation, which even Afghan liberals consider as an imperialist occupation.

Even Michael Ignatieff (2003), in his book *Empire Lite*, which is a collection of his *New York Times* essays, explicitly identifies the occupation of Afghanistan as imperialist. Ignatieff just happens to think this imperialist occupation is “humanitarian,” because, he argues, imposing a liberal world order in Central Asia is preferable to allowing people he claims are “barbarians” the autonomy to govern their own affairs. The fact that the hierarchical priorities of this liberal world order rank the accumulation of state power and individual wealth far above observation of international laws and human rights is, for Ignatieff, an inconvenient but unavoidable truth. Ignatieff’s complaint is that this empire needs to throw its weight around more forcefully to establish liberal world order – an argument the Obama administration seems to be implementing.

The New York Times and Class War

However, the powerful Western states are finally acknowledging the fact – made rather obvious by the events in recent weeks over applications of law with respect to women – that the ‘Global War on Terror,’ overtly being fought in Afghanistan and covertly in Pakistan since 7 October 2001, was never a war for the liberation of Afghan women. Now they seem to be reframing this imperialist war as a class war.

The prevailing narrative of the press, prior to *The New York Times* declaration of a class war, on 16 April 2009, was that Taliban leaders either physically or economically coerce peasants to fight as insurgents. Thus the article, written by Jane Perlez and Pir Zubair Shah, published online 16 April and on the front page of the New York print edition 17 April, represents a significant shift in the hegemonic narrative. Perlez and Zubair Shah claim the Taliban “have

advanced deeper into Pakistan by engineering a class revolt that exploits profound fissures between a small group of wealthy landlords and their landless tenants.” The writers claim the “Taliban’s ability to exploit class divisions adds a new dimension to the insurgency.” They cite an unnamed senior Pakistani official who states: “I wouldn’t be surprised if it sweeps the established order of Pakistan,” which, according to the writers, “remains largely feudal.”

Perlez and Zubair Shah report that Pakistani-American lawyer, Mahboob Mahmood, who they add was a classmate of Barack Obama, states Pakistanis are “psychologically ready for a revolution.” The insurgents are “taking advantage of deep class divisions that have long festered in Pakistan,” according to the lawyer. He adds that the insurgents promise “Islamic justice, effective government and economic redistribution.”

When we [visited Afghanistan in 2007](#), one of the narratives we frequently heard from Afghans, whether intellectual elites and students or workers and peasants, was that the complex insurgency was an anti-imperialist class war. We were told non-Taliban resistance and insurgent groups existed in parallel to the Islamic insurgency, which is far more complex than Western reports generally indicate. It is curious that it has taken so long for a major Western news source to begin to barely scratch the surface of a story of class conflict so obvious to Afghans.

This new narrative of class war, if it is picked up beyond *The New York Times*, might replace two faulty narratives previously observed in North American media. The first of these faulty narratives was that the Taliban are the only force oppressing women and a primary goal of defeating the Taliban is to liberate women. The fracturing of this narrative became evident in recent weeks as the truth that the mujaheddin, who Western forces rewarded with political and economic power in 2001, differ little from the Taliban.

Replacing the faulty narrative claiming Western forces are liberating Afghan women, an interim narrative that claims the supposedly backward people of the region are not ready to allow the Western powers to liberate women, has become evident in North American media in recent weeks. This narrative conveniently ignores the fact that many groups resisting misogyny are suppressed by the occupation itself. This narrative also ignores the facts of six decades of slow but consistent progress demanded by women during the peaceful interregnum of 1919 to 1979 between the British-Russian inter-imperialist wars and American-Soviet proxy war. This inter-bellum period of progress was problematic, but it did allow increasing space for women to effect their own liberation. This period culminated in legislation that, among other progressive initiatives, banned dowries for brides, protected freedom of choice within marriages, and enforced compulsory universal education for boys and girls.

However, progressive legislation and some of the ways it was clumsily and coercively implemented by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan government provided some of the sparks for the mobilization of Islamic forces in 1979. Islamic revolutionaries were subsequently supported by the U.S., and eventually sucked Soviet forces into Afghanistan to back the socialist government. Leaders of the Islamic revolution were rewarded for their service to the U.S. during the anti-socialist *jihad*. They were rewarded for their service to the American, British, Canadian, and Australian forces of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001. And many of them continue to be rewarded by the parallel OEF and NATO missions that continue today.

Many of the leaders who now occupy power in the coalition backed Afghan government and positions of economic power were mujaheddin warlords. It is no surprise that they promote the ongoing oppression of women. As the reality that the war in Afghanistan (and Pakistan) was not fought to liberate Afghan women as part of the legitimization of the 'War on Terror' has become too obvious to deny, a new narrative to legitimate escalating the war is desperately needed.

The Obama Military Surge

If the example set by *The New York Times* is followed, we may soon see state and media agencies in the U.S., UK, and Canada shifting their war propaganda to suggest that the Operation Enduring Freedom and NATO forces fight to usurp the Taliban's claim as liberators of the poor in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This argument is as threadbare as the propaganda Western forces were acting as liberators of women, and it is equally as likely to fail.

The Obama administration is deploying a military surge in Afghanistan pushing the combined total of OEF and NATO forces in Central Asia close to the 100,000 mark. The OEF forces also seem to be in preparation for an escalation of military activities not only in Pashtun regions of Pakistan, but also in Balochistan. An attack on Baloch Pakistanis could draw Baloch insurgents from Iran and western Afghanistan into the war. This could provide a pretext to attack eastern Iran and establish OEF and NATO forces in the yet impenetrable Baloch province of Nimroz in the far west of Afghanistan.

An invasion of northern Pakistan seems ever more imminent, given the failures of escalating covert actions. State agencies and news media have for some time been fanning fears by suggesting Taliban forces will seize Pakistani nuclear arms. Since the first U.S. presidential debate, Obama has stated he would not hesitate to bomb Pakistan if Pakistani nuclear weapons fell into the wrong hands.

Westerners may be led to fear a class war led by the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the way they were previously led to fear the Taliban as misogynist Islamists. However, the real reasons for the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, remain the same as ever, the geopolitical manoeuvrings of a superpower to maximise state power and facilitate the accumulation of capitalist wealth. •

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