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The Failure of Liberal Interventionism: Deconstructing Afghan Identity Discourses of "Modern" and "Tradition"

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Abstract

In Afghanistan, the crisis of liberal intervention unfolded in the failure to establish democratic structures as a solution to terrorism and extremism in the aftermath of 9/11. Following the emergency withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021, President Ashraf Ghani discreetly left Kabul, enabling the Taliban to regain control and form a new government in the country. The recurrent pattern of intervention and the subsequent return of the Taliban highlights a failure of the liberal project, which is a significant concern addressed in this article as the main question: Why has liberal intervention failed in Afghanistan? The answer lies in deconstructing the hegemonic discourse of "modern" Afghan to understand how it was resisted and replaced by the alternative discourse of "tradition," subsequently, leading to the failure of the liberal project. The "modern" discourse, rooted in the US social context, aimed to civilise the perceived primitive and traditional Afghans. Conversely, the Taliban, drawing upon the Afghan social context, contested the "modern" discourse with an alternative discourse of "tradition" portraying liberals and their supporters as "occupiers" and "oppressors," thus, justifying their armed resistance (jihad) against occupying forces. Framed within a critical social constructivism, the text, interviews, speeches, and statements of prominent Taliban leaders and the US presidents, apprise how specific identities have been employed to naturalise the "modern" discourse as justification for intervention. Critical discourse analysis explicates how the "tradition" discourse denaturalised the former and, subsequently, facilitated the establishment of the Taliban's power in Afghanistan.

Keywords

Afghan identity; critical discourse analysis; critical social constructivism; failure of liberal intervention; Taliban; US policy failure; war on terrorism

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1. Introduction

In the post-Cold War period, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was hailed as a triumph for liberal democracy. Ideas such as liberal democratic peace, free trade, and global governance placed greater emphasis on the liberal project. To ensure their own security, the West sought to extend this project with the aim of eliminating war from the world (Doyle, 2012; Fukuyama, 1992). Similarly, after 9/11, a liberal democratic process was initiated to transform the non-democratic traditional Afghan society into a modern and democratic one to counter terrorism and extremism.

After the happening of 9/11, US President George W. Bush (2001a, p. 85) declared the terrorist attacks as a threat to Western civilisation and, by extension, the liberal world order. In response, a military intervention followed by a democratisation process was initiated, which, surprisingly, failed and culminated in the return of the Taliban to Afghanistan.

The existing literature offers several explanations for the failure of liberal intervention in Afghanistan. A major stream of literature points to sanctuaries on the Pakistani side of the border which provided the Taliban with an opportunity to regroup and launch a resistance movement against the liberal forces in Afghanistan (Farrell, 2018; Miller, 2021; Riedel, 2013). Some have identified the failure of state-building projects, corruption, and incapacity of Afghan democratic governments and security forces as significant factors ending the intervention (Aquil, 2023; Maley, 2018). Others have problematised the US military strategy of fighting Taliban insurgency where the latter was perceived as a loosely structured umbrella organisation instead of a resilient, adaptive, and well-coordinated adversary (Farrell, 2018, 2022, pp. 736–738; Farrell et al., 2013).

The present study does not reject the above explanations, however, it enriches our understanding by asserting that the failure of liberal intervention needs to be evaluated in the peculiar Afghan social context. To respond to one main question: Why did liberal intervention fail in Afghanistan? It is argued here that US-led liberal forces justified the intervention by constructing an Afghan identity discourse of "modern" which was challenged and replaced by an alternative discourse of "tradition," articulated by the Taliban, which, consequently, precipitated the failure of the intervention in Afghanistan.

The present study is framed within a critical social constructivism which believes in the social construction of reality through language. It argues that the socially constructed reality "entails naturalized power relations" which should be denaturalized (Rowley & Weldes, 2012, p. 180). Reality is constructed through "meaningful practices," where meanings are largely drawn from culture through a process of meaning production called discourse (Rowley & Weldes, 2012, p. 180). Critical social constructivism believes in multiple realities of social and social agents, which are situated in various discourses. These discourses are naturalised by an intelligent deployment of language and exhibited through representations. The US-led liberal forces constructed an identity discourse of "modern" where Afghanistan was represented as "tribal" and "primitive" that had to be "democratised" and "civilised" through the intervention.

Borrowing from critical discourse analysis (CDA), the present research examines language as a social practice, "socially shaped, but is also socially shaping, or *constitutive*" (Fairclough, 1993, pp. 134–135, emphasis added). It helps in understanding how discursive practices, events, and texts appear, how they are shaped, and how they serve the interests of the powerful or hegemon. The Taliban denaturalised and

replaced the hegemonic discourse of "modern" with an alternative discourse of "tradition," which was widely accepted and consented by diverse social groups and, eventually, culminated in the failure of liberal intervention in Afghanistan. Since CDA explores the relationship between discourse and reality within a particular social context, therefore, when investigating social and political realities, two steps must be considered: (a) establishing the association between a social context and discourse over time, and (b) identifying the process through which discourse has tangible effects (Halperin & Heath, 2012, pp. 310–317). These two steps serve as a guide for conducting CDA in this study.

CDA aims to study the discursive nature of social power relations (Golbasi, 2017). It is explanatory and interpretative where different studies lead to different interpretations (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, pp. 271–279; van Dijk, 1993). To depict how, when, and why the Afghan identity discourses were constructed, challenged, and replaced, excerpts from US presidential speeches and remarks (2001–2021) were obtained from the White House archival web page. Regarding the Taliban leaders, I primarily relied on interviews available on YouTube. Most of these interviews were conducted after the Taliban's return to Kabul in 2021, possibly due to security concerns that prevented the Taliban from appearing in the media. Additionally, most of the excerpts are taken from English translations of their remarks on their resistance movement, democracy, and the US presence in Afghanistan. The empirical data (books, reports, and journal articles) also informed about various discursive realities of intervention in Afghanistan. This research acknowledges that discourses selectively and reductively construe aspects of the world, and the reality they construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct is inherently subjective, reflective, and interpretive in nature.

This article is organised as follows: Section 2 examines the discursive construction of the "modern Afghan." It elucidates how the reality of 9/11 was discursively interpreted within the American social context and led to the construction of "modern Afghan" identity discourse for the justification and widespread support for US intervention and democratisation in Afghanistan. Section 3 explicates the failure of liberal intervention to highlight how the discursive construction of "modern" was contested by an alternative discourse of "tradition" constructed by the Taliban, ultimately resulting in the failure of the liberal intervention and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. Sections 4 and 5 provide a discussion and key takeaways.

2. The Discursive Construction of "Modern Afghan"

2.1. The American Social Context

The identity discourse has shaped American foreign policy for centuries (Rowley & Weldes, 2012). American liberal values refer to certain basic political ideas and ideals that are supported by most elements in American society with no or little change since the late eighteenth century which continues to play a central role in shaping American political identity (Huntington, 1982, p. 1). In most accounts, these values stand for constitutionalism, individualism, democracy, and egalitarianism—and by extension, a perceived obligation to promote these values via the US foreign policy.

Democracy promotion is rooted both in the instrumental maximisation of the US material interest and a moral commitment to its values and institutions abroad (Ikenberry, 2009). At the societal level, liberty, equality, private ownership, individualism, free trade, and the rule of law under the Constitution are some of

the values most dear to the American people. Since most Americans are socialised by the same political culture, over time, these values have become the powerbase of American foreign policy disguised by democratic promotion abroad. As President Ronald Reagan stated, "Our democracy encompasses many freedoms...these are rights that should be shared by all mankind" (Wittkopf et al., 2008, p. 244).

Another popular idea in the American social context is taking democracy as a mission to transform the nature of the international political system. Here, one can see the Puritan influence as one of the important sources (D. L. Larson, 1965). It is a conviction that the "United States was the chosen instrument of God, divinely appointed to introduce a government and society on the American continent" and to spread it everywhere (Monten, 2005, p. 121). According to Lafeber (2002, p. 551), the Puritans believed that Americans were an elect people, more immediate to God than others. This Puritan tradition viewed the US as engaged in a test case that would determine whether humanity could live on Earth following God's will. President Abraham Lincoln encapsulated this exceptional aspect of the American self-image when he referred to it as the "last best hope of mankind" (Deudney & Meiser, 2012, p. 22).

2.2. The Communicative Event

In the aftermath of 9/11, US President George W. Bush (2001b, para. 5) represented the terrorist attacks as an "act of war." As a result, terrorists, Al-Qaeda, and its leader Osama bin Laden were articulated as the enemy who was "imposing its radical beliefs" and resolving indiscriminate killing of " all Americans" (Bush, 2001c, paras. 14, 15). His reference to "crusade" eventually constructed the terrorist attacks in terms of a series of wars between Christians and Muslims, as was witnessed in medieval times (Bush, 2001b, para. 17). According to the Gallup Survey-2001, this construction provided President George W. Bush with the required public support to plead for a "long war" against the terrorists in Afghanistan (Newport, 2001, para. 1).

President George W. Bush (2001a, p.85) constructed the identity of the US and its allies, and Al-Qaeda and its supporters (Taliban), in the binary of civilised and uncivilised. He declared that these attacks were on the "freedom" and "way of life" of America and the "civilised world" at large (Bush, 2001c, paras. 24, 26, 35). He articulated that the civilised Western "self" does not fight but for defensive purposes and chooses "lawful change" over "coercion," "subversion," and "chaos" (Bush, 2001a, p. 85). Their mission, he explained, is to project "hope," "order," "law," and "life," which forges unity all over the world (Bush, 2001a, p. 85).

Al-Qaeda and Taliban were indistinguishably constructed as the uncivilised "others" whose objective was to cultivate "fear" and "death" (Bush, 2001c, paras. 19, 20). Initially, the president demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and his associates, release and protect all foreign prisoners, and permanent closure of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. When the Taliban refused to comply, President George W. Bush ensured that the Taliban must share the fate of the terrorists. Therefore, by articulating them as "aides," "allies," "murderers," and "terrorists," he launched the "war on terrorism" against them in Afghanistan (Bush, 2001c, para. 19). He pressed on the fact that the Taliban "oppressed" and "brutalised" the Afghan people (Bush, 2001c, paras. 18, 19). Therefore, the "war on terror" was represented as a war to "liberate" Afghans with a promise of assistance and minimum civilian casualties (Bush, 2001a, p. 86). He declared this war as a mission of "courage defeating cruelty and light overcoming darkness" (Bush, 2001a, p. 90). President George W. Bush (2004, paras. 9, 14; 2002a, paras. 18–20) asserted the US was an "ally" and "partner" to Afghans and "promised" to support a post-Taliban government that represented all the Afghan people, in other words, democracy in Afghanistan.

President George W. Bush's narration of the 9/11 happening and the construction of American identity was in covariation with the American social context. Constructed in the language of liberal values and norms, President George W. Bush's discourse was intelligible and acceptable to the American audience and people at large, which eventually naturalised his discourse and provided the legitimacy to launch the "war on terror" in Afghanistan.

2.3. Discourse in Practice

The "war on terror" was launched in the name of Operation Enduring Freedom on October 7, 2001. By November, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were defeated and flew away to take refuge on the Pakistani side of the border (Rashid, 2009, pp. 96–99). After ousting the Taliban, an interim government under the leadership of Hamid Karzai was established in November 2001. At the time, President George W. Bush (2002b, para. 2) delivered a victory speech and described it as a moment of "justice." He stated that:

> In four short months...a great coalition captured, arrested, and rid the world of thousands of terrorists, destroyed Afghanistan's terrorist training camps, saved a people from starvation, and freed a country from brutal oppression....America and Afghanistan are now allies against terror. We'll be partners in rebuilding that country.

Furthermore, he congratulated Afghans on "the rebirth of a vibrant Afghan culture," a democracy (Bush, 2004, para. 6)

The process of rebirth of Afghan culture was interpreted in terms of cultivating a discourse of "modern Afghan" through a democratic state structure. To this end, the first Afghan Constitution was approved by Loya Jirga (grand tribal council) in 2004. Subsequently, four governments (Karzai in 2004 and 2009 and Ashraf Ghani in 2014 and 2020) were elected to ensure continuity in the democratic process. The Afghan National Army, police, and border forces were recruited, trained, and equipped to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan. Many local warlords also joined this cultural reform project along with their soldiers and weapons and, in return, received generous monetary assistance from the US and its allies (I. Khan, personal communication, January 18, 2023; Sharan, 2022). Traditionally, Afghans have been more loyal to local rather than to national leaders (Gallup, 2023). Therefore, when the Taliban initiated an insurgency against the US and its foreign and local allies, the democratic Afghan government was largely confined to Kabul and could not ensure governance in remote or rural Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama (2009, paras. 8, 9) acknowledged the unfavourable situation in Afghanistan, stating that the Taliban has gained momentum. However, he outlined a three-pronged approach to address it. Firstly, he decided to send an additional 30,000 troops to improve the law-and-order situation. Secondly, he aimed to enhance the capacity of the Afghan government to deliver services and assume responsibility for Afghanistan. Lastly, he sought to dismantle terrorist safe havens in the border region of Pakistan. Despite these measures, President Obama's intention to end the war was evident when he urged coalition partners to coordinate efforts to "end this war successfully" (Obama, 2009, para. 23). This objective, he urged, must resonate with American values of "freedom," "justice," and "opportunity" (Obama, 2009, paras. 46, 49).

He envisioned an inclusive government as part of the end strategy, stating that America would support initiatives that bring reconciliation among the Afghan people, "including the Taliban" (Obama, 2009, para. 27). In 2012, after killing most of al-Qaeda leadership, including bin Laden, President Obama, during his address to the nation from Afghanistan, launched the idea of "negotiated peace" to affirm the possibility of negotiations with the Taliban. The President stated: "My administration has been in direct discussions with the Taliban. We've made it clear that they can be a part of this future if they break with al Qaeda, renounce violence and abide by Afghan laws" (Obama, 2012, para. 12). Furthermore, he clarified that the real objective of the US-led foreign presence in Afghanistan was neither to "build a country" nor to "eradicate every vestige of the Taliban" but to "destroy al-Qaeda" (Obama, 2012, para. 14). It reflected that amidst the increasing influence and control of the Taliban and the prolonged war, President Obama distinguished the Taliban from Al-Qaeda and portrayed them as stakeholders in the Afghan political system. For this purpose, he even allowed a group of Taliban to move to Qatar to establish its "Doha office" for negotiations with the then-President Karzai administration ("The history of the Taliban," 2021). In the end, Obama's narrative not only revised the official US stance but also paved the way for future one-on-one talks with the Taliban.

President Trump (2017, para.13) continued supporting the policy of ending the war by stating that "the American people are weary of war without victory. Nowhere is this more evident than with the war in Afghanistan, the longest war in American history—17 years." He clarified that the main objective of the US was not "nation-building" but "killing the terrorists" (Trump, 2017, para. 33). Therefore, to pursue an end to the Afghan war, the Trump administration initiated direct talks with the Taliban in Doha in 2018.

In this context of war weariness, the US–Taliban peace deal was concluded, without taking on board the incumbent Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani, on February 29, 2020. The deal broadly provided for a ceasefire between the US and the Taliban, safe passage for US and allied troops from Afghanistan, guarantees from the Taliban that the Afghan land would not be used for terrorism in future, prisoner exchange between the Taliban and Afghan security forces, lifting of all sanctions, and an invitation to the Taliban to join the intra-Afghan negotiations for a political solution in Afghanistan ("Joint declaration," 2020). President Trump endorsed this deal by saying that it was "time to bring our people back home" and, consequently, announced the withdrawal of all US troops by May 2021 ("Afghan conflict: Trump hails," 2020, para. 1). He added that the US has completed its job by killing "thousands" of terrorists and now, after the withdrawal, the Taliban must take up this responsibility ("Afghan conflict: Trump hails," 2020, para. 8). President Trump was criticised for an unconditional and hasty withdrawal policy, without any vivid plan for the evacuation of the US troops and their Afghan allies (The White House, 2023, p. 2). Nevertheless, Pew Research Survey revealed that 54% of the US adults viewed the withdrawal policy to be the "right" decision as compared to the 42% who regarded it as a "wrong" move (van Green & Doherty, 2021).

With the apprehensions of Afghans about the return of the Taliban, the US started withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan ("What to know about the Afghan," 2020). By the time, the newly elected US President Joe Biden took office, "the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 2001" (Biden, 2021, para. 24). When the final US troop extraction was executed, the Taliban had already captured Kabul and reinstated their government in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, President Biden (2021) announced the ending of America's "longest war" by arguing that America could not stay indefinitely and that it had already accomplished its objective: eliminating Al-Qaeda

leadership. The dramatic withdrawal of the US forces and their Afghan allies and the Taliban's resurgence to power poses a big question: What made the US failure and the Taliban's return possible in Afghanistan? I will now turn to Section 3 for the answer.

3. Discourse of "Tradition": Contesting the Discursive Reality of "Modern" Afghans

3.1. The Afghan Social Context

The Afghan social context is divided into various ethnicities and groups. The Afghan population (of almost 32.9 million) has been classified into multiple ethnic communities, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, where Pashtuns form 40% and Tajiks 30% of the total population. Most of the Afghan population, almost 70%, are settled in rural areas.

Despite the ethnic diversity, Afghanistan may largely be defined as the land of Afghans (Dupree, 1980, p. xvii). Traditionally, a sense of Afghan unity has been generated in the name of Islam (Hamid, 2021). In the presence of foreign "occupying forces," religion becomes the most defining feature of Afghan society. Rubin (2007, p. 57) strongly asserted that Afghans have always rejected foreign occupation. Historically, they fought three wars with the British colonial power and, afterwards, the Soviet forces by articulating both as foreign occupiers. They represented themselves as "soldiers of God" to wage "jihad" against the invaders (Bearden, 2001, pp. 20, 24). Arguably, this radical jihadism can be attributed to Wahabi-Deobandi seminaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan (A. Khan, personal communication, May 15, 2023).

One may observe multiple interpretations of Islam, Sunni, and Shia; however, Sunnis form the majority in Afghanistan. Despite varied interpretations, Afghans take pride in their "Muslimness" and have been performing religious rituals adamantly. The Afghans are not orthodox Muslims; however, they believe in religious practices and symbolism, including prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, beard, lawful and unlawful rites prescribed in Islam (halal or haram), burqa or veil or women covering the head, etc. The Afghans hold great value in fighting a holy war (jihad). This value has generally subsumed in the Afghan tribal tradition of fighting for honour, for instance, women, protection of their guests, usurpers, occupiers, infidels, or avenging blood, etc. (Rubin, 2002, p. xxii). Among other subjects, a substantial part of Afghan folklore and legends have been based on the narration of figures and events from Islamic history (Dupree, 1980, pp. 112–131). Afghan Islam, therefore, is not orthodox but local and symbolic (Lee, 2018, p. 40). Along with traditions and culture, Islam is perceived as a guiding code of behaviour in Afghanistan.

3.2. The Communicative Event

The terrorist attacks in the US were perceived as a catastrophe and were condemned by the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abul Salam Zaeef. He said, "We want to tell the American children that Afghanistan feels your pain. We hope the courts find justice" ("Taliban diplomat condemns," 2001, para. 2). Zaeef made it clear that the Taliban hold respect for human life and condemn the indiscriminate killing of humans irrespective of religion. His response was in accordance with what bin Laden had explained in an interview before 9/11, that he was not against the "American people" but "policies" of the American government, which he regarded "unjust, criminal, and tyrannical" (KellyWurx Films, 1997).

Similarly, the Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omer ("Transcript: VOA," 2001) condemned the killings of innocent civilians in the US. He asserted that neither the Taliban gave "permission" to use their land for any terrorist activity, nor did bin Laden accept responsibility for the attacks. While completely rejecting the possibility of handing over bin Laden to the US, he regarded this demand as a violation of "Islam" and the "Afghan tradition" of hospitality and honour. By asserting that Islam believes in justice, he insisted America should "investigate" this matter. He asked for the "evidence" of bin Laden's involvement in the terrorist attacks so that he could be tried by the Afghan Supreme Court, or by clerics from any three Islamic countries, or may be placed under the observation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which the US utterly rejected (Omar, 2001). Since bin Laden was a guest and the Afghan tradition of hospitality demanded the protection of the guest, he could not be handed over to the US. Nevertheless, the Taliban tried hard for a diplomatic solution to US concerns. To avoid war, the Taliban, in a grand Jirga (tribal procession) of around 800 members, were even successful in seeking an agreement that bin Laden must leave Afghanistan (Tehelkatv, 2013). However, President George W. Bush was not convinced and had already decided to invade Afghanistan.

The central spokesperson for the Taliban, Zabihullah Mujahid (CTV News, 2022), articulated that the "war on terror" was "imposed" on the Afghan people. He completely rejected the American construction of the Taliban as "terrorists, killers, and savages." He explained that the Taliban are "civilised" and want to live "freely" in their country like any other nation in the world. He constituted the Taliban identity as "Muslims," "Afghans," and "reasonable" people who wanted to negotiate to avoid the war. Instead, he declared the US-led foreign forces as "occupiers" who have been involved in "transgression against Afghan people." Anas Haqqani (TRT World, 2021a), a senior Taliban leader, explained the transgression as excessive bombing, which led to indiscriminate civilian killings in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Zabihullah contended that Afghanistan is for "Afghans only" and no one has the right to occupy it. He justified the Taliban resistance (jihad) as a legitimate act in defence of the Afghan land and its traditions (TRT World, 2021b).

3.3. Discourse in Practice

The Taliban framed their resistance against the US-led foreign forces in the name of jihad. In an interview, Sirajuddin Haqqani (CNN, 2022), the deputy Taliban leader and present interior minister of Afghanistan, informed about this framing. By doing so, he constructed legitimacy for the Taliban resistance and framed this struggle as "jihad" (holy war against foreign, non-Muslim occupiers). The Taliban represented their fighters as "mujahideen" to craft a resemblance between the US "war on terror" and the Soviet invasion of 1979 (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 17). He asserted that the US did not get anything from this war, but it destroyed its reputation of a free society by committing serious violations of human rights in Guantanamo and Bagram prisons and in their conduct of the war in Afghanistan. To naturalise this discourse, the inmates narrated stories of their sufferings and widely circulated them among the Afghan public (International Crisis Group, 2008, pp.18–19).

In their counter-narrative to the liberal intervention, the Taliban articulated the process of democratisation as an "alien" concept and regarded that the foreigners came up with their own "agendas" which they wanted to "implement by any means … It's over now, and the puppet government is eliminated now" (TRT World, 2021a). In a media campaign, the Taliban explained the Western agenda by stating, "Non-Muslims and Westerners are implementing their own laws to spread immorality and corruption throughout Afghanistan and other Islamic

countries" (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 12). As revealed in the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's study, Afghans understand democracy in terms of "unlimited and immoral freedoms" that have been largely associated with Western society (A. Larson, 2012, para. 6). Therefore, by declaring the democratic Afghan governments as "puppets," the Taliban warned that "We will never forgive those people who brought the Americans to our territory and those who entered Kabul supported by American warplanes, because the nation will never forgive them: they have sold their Afghan identity and freedom" (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 22).

On the other hand, in practice, the Afghan democratic government was inefficient and marred by corruption allegations. In one of the reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2016, pp. 19, 77), it was acknowledged that by "legitimizing warlords with political and financial support, the United States helped empower a class of strongmen at the local and national levels who had conflicted allegiances between their own power networks and the Afghan state." Consequently, the US faced resistance to its political and economic reform projects in the local Afghan context (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021, p. 73).

Picking up on this, Amir Khan Muttaqi (Geo News, 2021), senior Taliban commander and the present minister for foreign affairs, asserted that whatever reforms or democracy the US initiated, it was rejected as an alien or foreign idea and, therefore, could not resolve the problems of Afghans. He believed that the foreigners disrespected Afghans, especially women, and their traditions. He represented the Taliban as guardians of Afghan traditions and claimed that the Taliban governed for the betterment of Afghan people and in accordance with Afghan "traditions and Islamic principles." For him, Taliban have been the most "successful experiment" as they ousted the "external powers" and brought unity, security, and peace to Afghanistan. Moreover, he insisted that the Afghans only aspire for peace and stability, and no one could deliver it except the Taliban.

Interestingly, the Taliban kept themselves relevant and visible in society without participating in the democratic process. The democratisation was largely confined to cities; however, in rural settings, the Taliban and their political and judicial systems were the ground reality (A women aid worker in Kabul, personal communication, January 5, 2023; O'Hanlon, 2010; Raghavan, 2021; "Taliban rule sparks hopes," 2021). Their narrative was empowered further by the deteriorated law and order situation (a large number of suicide attacks, remotely detonated bombing incidents), indiscriminative killings of Afghan civilians in the prolonged war, and the poor performance of corrupt Afghan democratic governments. It mounted anti-US sentiments in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, therefore, constructed the discourse of "tradition" in reflection of its culture. Framed in the language of Islam and Afghan tradition, the Taliban's narrative successfully resonated among most of the rural population, and with sustained armed resistance, they regained Kabul on August 15, 2021. The foreign forces concluded a peace agreement with the Taliban and consequently accepted them as a "reality" of Afghanistan.

4. Discussion: Identity Discourses of "Modern" and "Tradition" and Their Meaning for the Failure of Liberal Interventionism

In this study, the failure of liberal intervention is explained by looking into how the discourse of "modern" was challenged and replaced by another identity discourse of "tradition" in the context of Afghanistan.

The hegemonic discourse of "modern" articulated and represented by the US-led liberal forces not only constructed a justification for intervention but also naturalised a specific "reality" which, consequently, provided legitimacy to stay and establish a democratic structure in Afghanistan, albeit it failed. To explain, it is important to analyse how, when, and why this discursively constructed reality was denaturalised; challenged and consequently replaced, by another reality, discourse of "tradition," articulated and represented by the Taliban.

The discourse of "modern" became powerful by naturalising the "reality" of liberal intervention as just and legitimate in the wake of 9/11. Along with material factors, power has ideational and normative orientations, generating consent or common agreement to accept it (Lears, 1985, pp. 568–569). In this vein, Laclau and Mouffe (2014) named this process of consent generation as discourse. Therefore, it can be argued that the "reality" of liberal intervention has been nothing but meaningful practices (discourse) to establish power relations. The "modern" discourse was articulated in the language of "terrorism" and "oppression" with an aim to liberate Afghan people from the tyrannical rule of the Taliban. In doing so, a specific identity of the Taliban was constructed as "oppressors" and "uncivilised," posing a threat to global peace and order. By linking these meanings with the larger liberal discourse of "individual freedom," the "modern" discourse partook the institutional power and, therefore, became hegemonic, accepted as "reality" by the majority of people. By articulating socially intelligible meanings and representations, the "modern" discourse and the discursive identity of the Taliban as "others" (terrorists and oppressors) were produced and naturalised in Afghanistan.

On the flip side, Laclau and Mouffe (2014) suggest that social change requires an alternative discourse that could frame power and inequality as "oppression." The discursive change entails a process where newly articulated meanings (a common thread which is socially interpreted) generate support from a larger and diverse audience and can provide a viable alternative (how an alternative society looks like). Laclau (1991) warns against viewing social and the social agent in terms of fixity. In fact, the social is situated in an "infinitude of meanings and differences" (various discourses), and so is the identity of a social agent, which is "nothing but the unstable articulation of constantly changing positionalities" (Laclau, 1991, pp. 25–26). The impossibility of fixing meanings or associating a deterministic character to the social and the identity of the social agent brings about the change. Therefore, when social (discourse) changes, it also produces and naturalises new identities of the social agent (actors). It implies that, instead of questioning the social change as true or false, right or wrong, (un)just, (in)appropriate, the ultimate test of a discursive reality is acceptability and a shared agreement among diverse social groups in a given context.

In the Afghan context, the Taliban denaturalised "modern" discourse by framing it as "oppression," and "occupation." As described in Section 1, the Taliban have demonstrated agility or adaptability in the battleground. By recruiting other ethnic minority groups (non-Pashtuns) as part of their resistance movement, they garnered more acceptability and, consequently, power to the discourse of "tradition" (Bezhan, 2016; Farrell, 2022; Giustozzi, 2010). Moreover, by ensuring security, and providing speedy justice, they offered a viable administrative alternative to the corrupt, incapable, and exclusive Kabul-based Afghan government (Coburn, 2016; Dorronsoro, 2009; Thomas, 2021). They represented the Afghan government as "puppets" or "stooge" of the West and therefore did not strictly represent the people of Afghanistan (Jones, 2020). Later, by associating the "tradition" discourse with the existing larger discourses of Afghan identity (Islam, Afghan culture, and resistance to foreign occupation), the Taliban earned more acceptability among

most of the diverse social groups and, consequently, the discourse of "tradition" became powerful enough to won over the discourse of "modern." Carter Malkasian (2021, pp. 5–6), a former advisor to the US military commanders in Afghanistan, in his book *The American War in Afghanistan*, elaborated that:

> The Taliban exemplified something that inspired, something that made them powerful in battle, something closely tied to what it meant to be Afghan. In simple terms, they fought for Islam and resistance to occupation, values enshrined in Afghan identity. Aligned with foreign occupiers, the government mustered no similar inspiration. It could not get its supporters, even if they outnumbered the Taliban, to go to the same lengths. Its claim to Islam was fraught. The very presence of Americans in Afghanistan trod on what it meant to be Afghan. It prodded at men and women to defend their honor, their religion, and their home. It dared young men to fight. It animated the Taliban. It sapped the will of Afghan soldiers and police. When they clashed, Taliban were more willing to kill and be killed than soldiers and police, or at least a good number of them....The Taliban's tie to what it meant to be Afghan was necessary to America's defeat in Afghanistan.

It reflects that the Taliban superimposed the discourse of "tradition" and constructed the reality of "war on terror" in the social context of Afghanistan, which was largely understandable to most of the local Afghans. Articulated in the language of Islam and Afghan culture, the diverse Afghan masses largely accepted the discourse of "tradition" and eventually weakened the competitor discourse of "modern." It made the relevance or legitimacy of the Taliban in the Afghan context, provided them with domestic support in their armed resistance against the US and NATO forces, and eventually paved their way to power.

As a result, when the US declared the end of its "longest war," the Taliban emerged as the most influential political authority in Afghanistan. This reality was further solidified when the US, without involving the incumbent democratic regime in Kabul, reached an agreement with the Taliban for the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan (Dobbins et al., 2019). Following an unconditional surrender by the Afghan security forces and the discreet departure of President Ashraf Ghani, the Taliban successfully seized control of Kabul on August 15, 2021.

The "modern" discourse articulated the reality of the "war on terror" in a language of American values and basic freedoms (democracy) and was intelligible for the American and Western liberal audiences at large. Once operationalised, it became performative and provided legitimacy to both liberal intervention and interventionists. This discourse was practised widely at the institutional level and got naturalised and later hegemonised over time. In the event of the Taliban as an unchanging ground reality, the US official narrative was revised, and so was its foreign policy behaviour.

The knowledge production practices in the Anglosphere where Afghanistan was imagined in the self-reflection of the West, facilitated the "modern" liberal project in Afghanistan. The Afghans were represented in tropes of "tribal," "racist," "dangerous," "isolated," "antiforeign," and "economically impoverished," which justified not only the intervention but also the establishment of democratic structures in Afghanistan (Hanifi, 2011; Machanda, 2020; Savic, 2020). The liberal discourse of "modern," which constructed democracy as a solution to war, was specific to the Western context. Therefore, when it was employed in the non-Western context—Afghanistan— it did not work.

5. Conclusion

The study of language in context provides insights into the question of the US-led liberal intervention, negotiations, failure, and withdrawal, as well as the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. It establishes the relationship between context, text, and practices through the lens of CDA. The analysis of text; interviews, speeches, and statements from prominent leaders on both sides, liberals and the Taliban, inform on how specific identity discourses have been constructed, naturalised, and denaturalised. Both sides have strategically utilised the interpellation process by institutionalising their respective discourses, thereby, making them appear as common sense to the audience. The discourse and discursive identities appeared to be in flux, situated in an infinitude of socio-cultural meanings. Once meanings are discursively changed and socially accepted, it brings about the change. It highlights how the discourse of "tradition" challenges and replaces the discourse of "modern" and, ultimately, facilitates the failure of liberal intervention in Afghanistan.

Bringing social context into discourse, the failure of the US-led liberal intervention demonstrates that it had a very poor understanding of Afghan society and its traditions, and the Taliban vividly exploited this weakness of the US and NATO forces. It reflected that the military power failed to deliver in front of social forces. The discourse of "tradition" overpowered the discourse of "modern" and, subsequently, facilitated the return of the Taliban to power. Taliban's rhetoric of traditional Afghan values, Islam, and jihad against the "occupied forces" appealed to most of the Afghan social groups, who happened to be less educated and more traditional and religious as opposed to the modern, educated, and secular urban minority. Hence, the Taliban intelligently used this factor as a power base of their narrative against the liberal intervention and won more support in Afghan society, helping them come to power in the event of US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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