

Taliban regime sets out to obliterate Afghanistan's cultural heritage

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Afghanistan's ruling Taliban movement is proceeding with the wholesale demolition of thousands of statues and artifacts across the country, including two giant Buddha stone statues in the central Bamiyan province, despite widespread international outrage and protests from archeologists, museums, cultural bodies and governments. The Islamic fundamentalists spurned a direct appeal from UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) and rejected offers from museums and governments to buy the irreplaceable items to prevent their destruction.

The top Taliban leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, ordered the destruction of the statues on February 26, declaring that they had been worshipped as false gods in the past and, if left standing, might be so venerated again. Justice Minister Mullah Turabi reportedly made the proposal to Omar, then discussed the issue on the Taliban's highest body, the Shuria council, which took the decision to destroy "all statues and idols" as they "idolise infidel gods".

The decision is being rapidly implemented. Earlier this week Taliban Information and Culture Minister Quadratullah Jamal said two-thirds of country's statues had been demolished since March 1, at historic sites in Herat, Ghazni, Kabul, Nangarhar, Jalalabad and Kandahar. At Bamiyan, Taliban militias are using cannon, mortars and explosives to destroy two of the world's tallest Buddhist statues—one 53 metres high and the other 38 metres. No outside observers have been permitted into the area to confirm the reports.

Taliban officials have attempted to justify their actions by pointing to the double standards of some of those expressing outrage. Afghanistan's ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeff, commented: "The United Nations is concerned about the statues but is not paying any attention to the sufferings of the poor Afghans. The people of Afghanistan are Muslim, and they don't need these statues."

It is certainly true that the UN and the major powers have done little to alleviate the suffering of tens of thousands of Afghans who have been forced to flee their homes in search of food and water after being hit by serious drought. An estimated 80,000 refugees are crowded into camps around the city of Herat in appalling conditions and a further 150,000 have fled across the border into neighbouring Pakistan. At the end of last

year, the UN Security Council at the instigation of the US and Russia imposed tough new economic and diplomatic sanctions on Afghanistan which will compound the poverty facing many Afghans.

But references to the two-faced character of others cannot hide the fact that the Taliban government is wantonly obliterating a cultural legacy that was the unique synthesis of artistic traditions from Europe and Asia. Afghanistan in general and the Bamiyan Valley in particular were at the heart of the Silk Road—the ancient overland trade route from east to west and vice versa, where silk from China, delicate glassware from Alexandria, bronze from Rome and beautifully decorated ivories from India passed through.

Describing the period, historian Jet van Krieken wrote in the *International Institute of Asian Studies 2000*: "In the early centuries of the Christian era, Eastern Afghanistan was full of lively Buddhist monasteries, stupas and monks. In this rich and peaceful climate, a new art form emerged: the art of Gandhara, bearing the same name as the province in which it appeared. The origin of this art is a matter of debate, but Hellenistic influence was strong. During this period, the earliest Buddha images in human form also evolved in this Kushan/Saka area."

The two giant Bamiyan statues, the first known examples of the massive Buddha images that spread through Asia, were carved into the cliffs. They were originally painted and gilded and may have worn masks on their faces. Dozens of small caves were cut into the rock and covered with murals. The two statues are generally believed to date from the fifth century but some believe they may be of later origin.

The fact that the statues have stood for centuries, even after the region was dominated by Islam in the eighth century, indicates that the Taliban's brand of Islamic zealotry is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. The destruction of idols and wrecking of temples was the exception rather than the rule in the past. Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan was fueled by the resentment created by the 1979 Soviet invasion and exploited by the US, which, with the assistance of Pakistan, trained and equipped mujahedeen fighters against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

The Taliban militia, recruited from Afghani refugees and others in Pakistan, was backed by Islamabad, with the tacit

approval of the US, against the unstable alliance that took power in 1992 after the defeat of the Soviet-backed regime. Well-armed and equipped, the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996 and now controls about 95 percent of the country. The rival Northern Alliance holds the remainder.

Like fundamentalist movements elsewhere in the region, the Taliban reflects the inability of the ruling class to meet the basic social needs of the working class and masses. In conditions of deepening economic crisis and social polarisation, sections of the ruling elite have turned to religious fanaticism in an attempt to maintain a social base for themselves.

In the case of Afghanistan, the Taliban appealed to the most backward instincts and reactionary traditions of layers of poor tribespeople and villagers who form the backbone of their militia. On seizing power, the new regime imposed Islamic Sharia law throughout the country, banned women from being educated or getting jobs, insisted that men grow beards, and outlawed film, video and music.

Like its other edicts, the Taliban's decision to obliterate Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage reflects the limited outlook of impoverished and uneducated village life that regards cities, towns and all their products with deep suspicion and contempt. The attitude is summed up in the remarks of the Taliban leader Muhammad Omar, who commented on his organisation's latest actions: "All we are destroying are stones... it is easier to destroy than to build."

There have previously been divisions in the Taliban over the issue. When the Bamiyan Valley fell into Taliban hands in 1998, a local militia commander blew the head and part of the shoulders off the smaller statue and drilled holes into the head of the larger one for the purpose of inserting explosives. He pulled back on the orders of Omar after international pressure was exerted on the Taliban regime.

But under conditions of international isolation and mounting social crisis inside Afghanistan, the Taliban leaders appear to have stepped up their fundamentalist rhetoric to shore up their political position. A few weeks ago the regime declared that those found guilty of converting people from Islam would be executed. Another recent report indicates that the Taliban's religious squads have toughened up on their application of rigid dress codes and thrown a number of hairdressers in jail for providing young men with "anti-Islamic western hairstyles".

A final point should be made. The hypocrisy of the protests and concerns expressed by governments over the Taliban's actions extends well beyond the imposition of UN sanctions and failure to provide adequate aid for the thousands of desperate Afghans in refugee camps inside and outside the country.

A spokesman for the new Bush administration, Philip Reeker, commented that the US was "distressed and baffled" at the Taliban's decision, which he said directly contradicted one of Islam's basic tenets—tolerance for other religions. Not only did the US instigate the sanctions against Afghanistan but the

current administration has direct connections to those who were responsible for arming the mujahedeen fighters in the early 1980s. Bush's father, a former CIA director, was Reagan's vice-president at the time. The current vice-president Richard Cheney, a senior Republican, who had served in the Nixon and Ford administrations, voted in Congress to fund the Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan.

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh branded the Taliban's plans as a "regression into mediaeval barbarism" and offered to look after the artifacts targeted for destruction. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee added his own denunciation of the Taliban saying they were "uncivilised and had no respect for human values." But Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), the leading party in the coalition government, is directly responsible for a similar act of "mediaeval barbarism": the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 by a mob of Hindu chauvinists urged on by India's present Home Minister L.K. Advani, among others, who claimed that it stood on the site of a previous Hindu temple. The destruction of the Ayodhya mosque sparked communalist riots across the subcontinent and even today is used by the Taliban regime to justify its actions.

In Sri Lanka, the Peoples Alliance government, the opposition United National Party (UNP), the Buddhist hierarchy and the press are all up in arms about the destruction of Buddhist statues. The priests have denounced it as "barbarous" and the *Island* newspaper exclaimed indignantly: "Can man be so beastly?" But these are the very social layers who have been fanning Sinhala chauvinism for decades and are responsible for the anti-Tamil discrimination and pogroms that precipitated the country's long-running civil war in 1983.

In 1981, a group of Sinhala chauvinist thugs organised by the UNP government went on a rampage in Jaffna—the heartland of the Tamil minority in the north of the island—and burnt down the Jaffna Library along with its contents. The library was considered as one of the finest in South Asia containing a cultural heritage that comprised more than 95,000 priceless Tamil books and irreplaceable manuscripts. This act, calculated to stir up racialism, is still bitterly remembered among Tamils to this day.

And the list could easily be multiplied. The truth is that the actions of the Taliban reveal in the most extreme form the communalist sentiments which the ruling elites throughout the subcontinent—in some cases with the direct backing of the major powers—have stoked up over the last decade or so to divide working people and to buttress their own increasingly shaky rule.



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