

Afghanistan's impoverished people live amid enormous riches

written by Vijay Prashad
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In this photograph taken on May 6, 2013, Afghan miners work at a factory near the village of Qara Zaghan in Baghlan province.

On September 25, 2021, Afghanistan's Economy Minister Qari Din Mohammad Hanif [said](#) that his government does not want "help and cooperation from the world like the previous government. The old system was supported by the international community for 20 years but still failed." It is fair to say that Hanif has no experience in running a complex economy, since he has spent most of his career doing political and diplomatic work for the Taliban (both in Afghanistan and in Qatar). However, during the first Taliban government from 1996 to 2001, Hanif was the [planning minister](#) and in that position, dealt with economic affairs.

Hanif is right to point out that the governments of Presidents Hamid Karzai (2001-2014) and Ashraf Ghani (2014-2021), despite receiving billions of dollars in economic aid, failed to address the basic needs of the Afghan population. At the end of their rule—and 20 years of U.S. occupation—one in three people are facing [hunger](#), 72 percent of the population lingers below the [poverty line](#) and 65 percent of the people have no [access](#) to electricity. No amount of bluster from the Western capitals can obscure the plain fact that support from the "international community" resulted in virtually no economic and social development in the country.

Poor North

Hanif, who is the only member of Afghanistan's new cabinet who is from the country's Tajik ethnic minority, comes from the northeastern Afghan province of Badakhshan. The northeastern provinces in Afghanistan are Tajik-dominated areas, and Badakhshan was the base from which the Northern Alliance swiftly moved under U.S. [air cover](#) to launch an attack against the Taliban in 2001. In early August 2021, the Taliban swept through these districts. "Why would we defend a government in Kabul that did nothing for us?" said a former official in Karzai's government who lives in Badakhshan capital, Fayzabad.

Between 2009 and 2011, 80 percent of USAID funds that came into Afghanistan [went](#) to areas of the south and east, which had been the natural base of the Taliban. Even this money, a U.S. Senate report noted, went toward “short-term stabilization programs instead of longer-term development projects.” In 2014, Haji Abdul Wadood, then governor of the Argo district in Badakhshan, [told](#) Reuters, “Nobody has given money to spend on developmental projects. We do not have resources to spend in our district, our province is a remote one and attracts less attention.”

Hanif’s home province of Badakhshan—and its neighboring areas—[suffer](#) from great poverty, [the rates](#) upwards of 60 percent. When he talks about failure, Hanif has his home province in mind.

For thousands of years, the province of Badakhshan has been home to mines for gemstones such as lapis lazuli. In 2010, a U.S. military report [estimated](#) that there was at least \$1 trillion worth of precious metals in Afghanistan; later that year, Afghanistan’s then Minister of Mines Wahidullah Shahrani [told](#) BBC radio that the actual figure could be three times as much. The impoverished north might not be so poor after all.

Thieves in the North

With opium production contributing a large chunk of Afghanistan’s [gross domestic product](#), it is often a focus of global media coverage on the country’s economy and has partly financed the terrible wars that have wracked the country for the past several years. The gems of Badakhshan, meanwhile, [provided](#) the financing for Ahmad Shah Massoud’s Jamiat-e Islami faction in the 1980s; after 1992, when Massoud became the defense minister in Kabul, he made an alliance with a Polish company—[Intercommerce](#)—to [sell](#) the gems for an estimated \$200 million per year. When the Taliban ejected Massoud from power, he returned to the Panjshir Valley and used the Badakhshan, Takhar, and Panjshir gems to finance his anti-Taliban resistance.

When the Northern Alliance—which included Massoud’s faction—came to power under U.S. bombardment in 2001, these mines became the property of the Northern Alliance commanders. Men such as Haji Abdul Malek, Zekria Sawda and Zulmai Mujadidi—all Northern Alliance politicians—[controlled](#) the mines. Mujadidi’s brother Asadullah Mujadidi was the [militia commander](#) of the Mining Protection Force, which protected the mines for these new elites.

In 2012, Afghanistan’s then Mining Minister Wahidullah Shahrani [revealed](#) the extent of corruption in the deals, which he had made [clear](#) to the U.S. Embassy in 2009. Shahrani’s attempt at transparency, however, was [understood](#) inside Afghanistan as a mechanism to delegitimize Afghan mining concerns and push through a new law that would allow international mining companies more freedom of access to the country’s resources. Various international [entities](#)—including Centar (United Kingdom) and the Polish billionaire Jan Kulczyk—attempted to access the gold, copper and gemstone mines of the province; Centar formed an [alliance](#) with the Afghanistan Gold and Minerals Company, headed by former Urban Development Minister Sadat Naderi. The consortium’s mining equipment has now been seized by the Taliban. Earlier this year, Shahrani was [sentenced](#) to 13 months’ jail time by the Afghan Supreme Court for misuse of authority.

What Will the Taliban Do?

Hanif has an impossible agenda. The IMF has [suspended](#) funds for Afghanistan, and the U.S. government [continues](#) to [block access](#) to the nearly \$10 billion of Afghan external reserves held in the United States. Some humanitarian aid has now entered the country, but it will not be sufficient. The Taliban’s harsh social policy—particularly against women—will discourage many aid groups from returning to the country.

Officials at the Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), the country’s central bank, tell me that the options before the government are minimal. Institutional control over the mining

wealth has not been established. “What deals were cut profited a few individuals and not the country as a whole,” said one official. One major deal to develop the Mes Aynak copper mine made with the Metallurgical Corporation of China and with Jiangxi Copper has been sitting [idle](#) since 2008.

At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in mid-September, Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon [spoke](#) about the need to prevent terrorist groups from moving across the Afghan borders to disrupt Central Asia and western China. Rahmon [positioned](#) himself as a defender of the Tajik peoples, although poverty of the Tajik communities on both sides of the border should be as much a focus of attention as upholding the rights of the Tajiks as a minority in Afghanistan.

There is no public indication from the SCO that it would prevent not only cross-border terrorism, but also cross-border smuggling. The largest [quantities](#) of heroin and opium from northern Afghanistan go to Tajikistan; untold sums of money are made in the illegal movement of minerals, gemstones, and metals out of Afghanistan. Hanif has not raised this point directly, but officials at DAB say that unless Afghanistan better commandeers its own resources, something it has failed to do over the past two decades, the country will not be able to improve the living conditions of its people.

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