

Negotiating with the Taliban: the view from below

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While the only official woman delegate in the Afghan mission to the London Conference pleaded that women's rights must not be sacrificed on the altar of security concerns, women's rights activists who had also travelled to London brought their own message

At the conclusion of a gathering of nearly 70 countries and representatives of the international donor community in London on February 28, negotiations with the Taliban are firmly on the agenda, discussions revolving around the best way of achieving a peace settlement [1]. Both President Karzai, in need of shoring up his shaky legitimacy, and the international powers, seeking an exit option from their costly military entanglement in Afghanistan, appear united on the principle if not the modalities of these negotiations [2]. A two-pronged strategy of simultaneous military surge and meditation and talks for peace and a more inclusive political settlement are now on the table.

What will the implications of these new directions be for ordinary men and women of Afghanistan? How will the interests of civil society - national and international - be represented in this process? What of human rights and, more specifically, women's rights [3] to which the international community had made vocal commitments in the aftermath of the Bonn conference in 2001? These were some of the questions raised on January 26 at a conference titled "An Alternative View: Afghan Perspectives on Development and Security" which aimed "to ensure that the needs of the Afghan people remain forefront on the international community's agenda".

Lakhdar Brahimi, former UN Special Representative to UNAMA (2001-2004) offered a candid critique of past errors; the lack of representativeness of the Bonn process in 2001, the failure to expand ISAF forces outside Kabul at a point in time when it could have made a real difference and UNAMA choosing to politely ignore the reality of Operation Enduring Freedom, a counter terrorism operation at cross-purposes with the objectives of state-building. The unresolved issue of transitional justice - the failure to bring the past perpetrators of war crimes to justice - hung heavily in the air. Had justice been traded for peace in the post-Bonn settlement, finally achieving neither justice nor peace? Could the same errors be repeated again?

The increasing militarization of aid and its perverse consequences for effective, needs-based aid delivery dominated the concerns of civil society representatives. Why was it that the most insecure provinces, least able to absorb aid, received a disproportionate share of the resources while the poorest regions [4] were being ignored? Did Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) imperil the work of civilian providers of aid through their connection with the military who are held accountable for the loss of civilian lives? Was aid increasingly being used as a tool of counter-insurgency? If so, does the assumption that aid contributes to peace building and counterinsurgency hold any water? The injection of aid can be shown, some argued, to have destabilizing effects when it provides incentives for noxious elites who have a stake in instability, undermining the goals of both counterinsurgency and development. Kai Eide, UN Special Representative to UNAMA [5] warned that the current troop surge and larger military budgetary allocations would only accentuate what

he called “the QIP impulse” - the tendency to pilfer money through so-called “quick impact projects” meant to win “hearts and minds”- and divert resources from bottom-up projects, conceived through proper consultation with the grass roots and geared to meeting people’s perceived needs. Civil society and the NGO community could play a critical role in meeting these needs, but could they be sheltered from pressures to pursue military objectives?

Dr. Hazrat- Omar Zakhilwal, Minister of Finance and Chief Economic Advisor to the President, complained that only 20% of total aid (10% of which was earmarked for specific projects) was channelled through the government and that aid had not assisted the state-building process. However, alongside the mismanagement and ineffectiveness of international aid, grave concerns were also expressed over widespread corruption, nepotism and lack of accountability at all levels, an expensive and ineffective justice system biased against the most powerless, lack of security, lack of progress in governance reforms and limited success in socio-economic development. This resulted in high levels of distrust between the population and the government, feeding the existing tendency to look for local solutions to the provision of public goods such as justice and security.

The possible social implications of the “reconciliation” process were uppermost in the minds of representatives of human rights and women’s rights organizations. Would compliance with international standard setting human rights instruments be upheld? What would the consequences for women’s rights be? Arezo Qanih, the only official woman delegate to the London Conference (in a 63-strong Afghan mission) made a plea that women’s rights should not to be sacrificed at the altar of security concerns. She invited the government and international community to honour their commitments to the goals of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), to develop a strategy for the implementation of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) and to respect international agreements. Kabul MP, Shinkai Karokhail, chairperson of Afghan women parliamentarians, pointed out that the goal of accountable and sustainable development could not be attained without investing in women’s needs and addressing their concerns.

In written statements, press conferences, presentations to Parliament and to the London Conference the group of women’s rights activists who travelled to London articulated their common platform. They explicitly asked that “the status of women is not bargained away in any short-term effort to achieve stability”. They also demanded that women constitute at least 25% of any peace process, including upcoming peace jirgas, in line with existing constitutional guarantees for women’s representation. International donors and the government were held to account over the implementation of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan [6] (NAPWA), the gender component of the Afghan National Development Strategy [7] (ANDS), governance reforms for gender equality and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325- endeavours initially backed by international donors, now at risk of being sidelined and ignored.

What are the prospects of these demands getting a hearing? BBC’s Today programme featured an interview on 27 January with one of the women’s rights activists from Afghanistan who expressed some of her concerns about the reconciliation process. She was asked whether she thought that abuses against women in Afghanistan had anything to do with the Taliban or whether they merely expressed aspects of Afghan culture. This apparently innocuous query has a depressing ring for many women’s rights activists who have seen their concerns systematically hijacked and their voices silenced for decades. When the mujahidin were in alliance with Western powers in the fight against the Soviet Union and in the subsequent period of civil war, their human rights abuses, including horrendous instances of gender-based violence, were largely passed over in silence. Yet these were the conditions that eventually paved the way for the Taliban victory and take-over. When Operation Enduring Freedom was launched in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the plight of women in Afghanistan [8] was invoked as a humanitarian crisis justifying military intervention. Not only were the Taliban demonized, but a donor-funded infrastructure of mechanisms and institutions

was put in place to secure gender justice and equality. It was clear from the start that the political buy-in for these measures was shallow - the passage of the Shi'i Personal Status Code [9] through Parliament amply illustrates this point - and that the constituencies rallying around these policies had a very weak hand to play and were at constant risk of intimidation and retribution.

Will the women of Afghanistan now have to brace themselves to hear Western powers inviting them to find virtue in their culture in the shape of new policies more acceptable to negotiating partners in the reconciliation process? Or will international donors merely treat their earlier commitments as misguided policies that are best forgotten? As a critic of the ways in which some of these policies were implemented, I nonetheless believe that the international community should accept responsibility for their consequences. The women of Afghanistan, of whatever political persuasion, are entitled to their own voices. This they continue to be denied.

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P.S.

* From Open Democracy:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/negotiating-with-taliban-view-from-below>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/2010/01/negotiating-with-the-taliban.html>

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/29/world/asia/29diplo.html>

[3] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/29/world/asia/29diplo.html>

[4] <http://www.areu.org.af/>

[5] <http://unama.unmissions.org/default.aspx?/>

[6] <http://afghanistan.unifem.org/prog/MOWA/napwa.html>

[7] <http://www.ands.gov.af/>

[8] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/13/afghanistan.comment>

[9] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/deniz-kandiyoti/gender-in-afghanistan-pragmatic-activism>