

Afghan Women Have Already Been Abandoned

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I know Bibi Aisha, the young Afghan woman pictured on the August 9 cover of *Time*, and I rejoice that her mutilated nose and ears are going to be surgically repaired. But the logic of those who use Aisha's story to convince us that the US military must stay in Afghanistan escapes me. Even Aisha has already left for America.

I realize that last remark has no logical basis, but then neither does the *Time* cover line "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan" beside a shocking photo depicting what happened (to this woman) after we had already stayed for eight years. I heard Aisha's story from her a few weeks before the image of her face was displayed all over the world. She told me that her father-in-law caught up with her after she ran away, and took a knife to her on his own; village elders later approved, but the Taliban didn't figure at all in this account. The *Time* story, however, attributes Aisha's mutilation to a husband under orders of a Talib commander, thereby transforming a personal story, similar to those of countless women in Afghanistan today, into a portent of things to come for all women if the Taliban return to power. Profoundly traumatized, Aisha might well muddle her story, but what excuses reporters who seem to inflate the role of the Taliban with every repetition of the case? Some reports have Aisha "sentenced" by a whole Taliban "jirga."

The Taliban do terrible things. Yet the problem with demonizing them is that it diverts attention away from other, equally unpleasant and threatening facts. Let's not make the common mistake of thinking that the devil we see is the only one.

Consider the creeping Talibanization of Afghan life under the Karzai government. Restrictions on women's freedom of movement, access to work and rights within the family have steadily tightened as the result of a confluence of factors, including the neglect of legal and judicial reform and the obligations of international human rights conventions; legislation typified by the infamous Shia Personal Status Law (SPSL), gazetted in 2009 by President Karzai himself despite women's protests and international furor; intimidation; and violence. Women legislators told the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) last year that they have come to fear the fundamentalist warlords who control the Parliament. One said, "Most of the time women don't dare even say a word about sensitive Islamic issues, because they are afraid of being labeled as blasphemous." (Blasphemy is a capital offense.) Women journalists also told UNAMA that they "refrain from criticizing warlords and other power brokers, or covering topics that are deemed contentious such as women's rights." A series of assassinations of prominent women, beginning in 2005, have driven many women from work and public life. Women working in women's organizations in Kabul regularly receive threatening letters and, recently, high-tech videos on their mobile phones showing women being raped.

The Taliban claim responsibility for some, but not all, of the assassinations and threats, while most members of the Karzai government maintain a complicit silence. These developments have sent into reverse what little progress women in the cities had made since 2001, while most women in the countryside have seen no progress at all, and untold thousands have been harmed and displaced by warfare. All this has taken place on Karzai's watch and much of it with his connivance. Our

government complains that the Karzai administration is corrupt, but the greater problem—never mentioned—is that it is fundamentalist. The cabinet, courts and Parliament are all largely controlled by men who differ from the Taliban chiefly in their choice of turbans.

If our government were truly concerned about the lives of women in Afghanistan, it would have invited women to the table to take part in decision-making about the future of their country, beginning with the Bonn conference in 2001. Instead, they have been consistently left out.

Our long history of woeful policies has put us and Afghan women in a double bind. If we leave, the Taliban may seize power or allow themselves to be bought in exchange for a substantial share of the government, to the detriment of women. But if we stay, the Taliban may simply continue to creep into power, or they may allow themselves to be bought (or “reconciled”) in exchange for bribes and a substantial share of the government, all to the detriment of women, while we go on fighting to preserve that same government. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s assurance that “reconciled” Taliban will agree to observe women’s rights under the Constitution is either cynical or naïve in the extreme. And the US pretense that somehow women’s rights will be preserved if only we stay long enough to shore up the Karzai regime and the ragtag Afghan National Army is at best a delusion. Yet the specter of the demon Taliban somehow makes it seem plausible.

Before feminists and the antiwar left come to blows, we might do well to consider that every Afghan woman or girl who still goes to work or school does so with the support of a progressive husband or father. Several husbands of prominent working women have been killed for not keeping their wives at home, and many are threatened. What’s taking place in Afghanistan is commonly depicted, as it is on the *Time* cover, as a battle of the forces of freedom, democracy and women’s rights (that is, the United States and the Karzai government) against the demon Taliban. But the real struggle is between progressive Afghan women and men, many of them young, and a phalanx of regressive forces. For the United States, the problem is this: the regressive forces militating against women’s rights and a democratic future for Afghanistan are headed by the demon Taliban, to be sure, but they also include the fundamentalist (and fundamentally misogynist) Karzai government, and us.

by Ann Jones, August 12, 2010

P.S.

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<http://www.thenation.com/article/154020/afghan-women-have-already-been-abandoned>