

Mobilising for Sustainable Peace in Afghanistan: a global mothers' campaign

Wednesday 13 November 2019, London School of Economics

Introduction by Marika Theros, Research Fellow at the Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit, LSE

- Before we hear more about the great work being done by Afghan mothers, and the solidarity and support provided by Make Mothers Matter.
- I wanted to provide a bit of background on the current context...and to highlight just how complex and difficult the environment in which Afghan women and mothers are operating in.
- Today, as many of you know, Afghanistan is at a critical juncture. And there is both optimism and also serious concerns about the prospects for peace and the process in which it is being arrived at.
- After more than seventeen years of war it is clear that there is a strong desire for peace amongst the people of Afghanistan. For example, we saw the Helmand Peace March, the three day ceasefire during Eid last year, and the mobilization of civil society as well as the women's peace Jirga and the Loya Jirga held by the National Unity Governments to build consensus around an Afghan-owned peace.
- But even with this desire, fear is high. This was nicely summed up by one Afghan politician Fawzai Koofi – “do not make us victims of peace as well’. People are yearning for peace, but one that is durable and safeguards the hard-won achievements of the last 17 years.
- It is important to note that more than 50 percent of peace deals around the world break down within 5 years, and this is often when small elite groups make agreements that exclude the interests and aspirations of the majority of the population.
- And it is this perception and reality of exclusion that is driving anxieties across the country, and mobilizing women and mothers to make their voices heard. In conversations and in newspapers, many evoke the memories of 1992 when optimism for peace was soon replaced by civil war.
- And why is this the case?
- First, the process which began in January of this year, has been driven by US talks with the Taliban — and the nine rounds of negotiations that took place between them has largely excluded both the Afghan people and their elected representatives, the government.
- The preliminary deal that was reached in August between the US and the Taliban appeared to many to trade a hasty US departure from Afghanistan for Taliban promises to not collaborate with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic state, and to simply sit down in intra-Afghan talks.
- That is, until they were abruptly suspended by President Trump in early September with a tweet.
- And what happened after was telling — we saw an initial sense of relief among Afghan citizens that the deal was called off, despite their deep desire to end the war.

- For many, the exclusionary nature of the US-Taliban process had signaled a de-legitimization of their democratic institutions, and, it seemed to offer few reassurances that the Taliban would make good on their promises to moderate their position to protect women’s rights and not monopolize power.
- Moreover, in the absence of a clear diplomatic commitment to process design and inclusion of non-Taliban Afghan voices, we have seen a rush from other external actors to pursue parallel efforts, which has further complicated the situation, created unnecessary competition and fragmented the process. We saw talks being held in Moscow between the Taliban and opposition political leaders, in Doha as well, and now an upcoming dialogue in China although Norway, Germany, and Uzbekistan also seemingly desire to be the host of negotiations or content dialogues.
- In the midst of all this activity, what has also loomed large and further fueled anxieties in the country has been the possibility of installing an interim government, one that includes not only the Taliban but also the same political forces implicated in past atrocities from the civil war and who continue to re-enact the cycles of corruption and conflict in the country.
- This has heightened fears that the gains of the last seventeen years may be undone. A framing of peace vs elections or peace through power-sharing between armed actors does not capture the nuances and interconnection between sustainable peace and representation. Elections in Afghanistan – as we see today – are far from perfect, but what is at risk from such a mindset of peace at all costs is the entire idea of constitutional order.
 - As one young Afghan women told me, “it is hard to imagine how peace can proceed when the safekeeping of its institutions are handed directly to violence forces under the guise of peace”
 - While another stated: “Afghanistan is a young democracy that is still dealing daily with the legacy of violence and warlords, ethnic factions - but at least we now have a constitutional and legal framework to deal with it, and to support our struggle for rights”
- What has been striking and positive in Afghanistan is the remarkable mobilization by Afghan people to get their voices heard in order to shape a better process – especially among women.
- Yet this has also been challenged. When and where women have mobilized, they have often been dismissed as too urban or out of touch, or even worse, as anti-peace – not only by political opportunists in their own country but also by Western commentators.
- And so it is important to remind ourselves that Afghanistan today is not the Afghanistan of 2001. Yes, corruption and violence continue. But despite these challenges, Afghans have been fighting extraordinary odds to rebuild their political, cultural and social institutions.
- Women are taking their rightful place in public spaces despite threats. They are policewomen, teachers, public officials, mayors and district governors, and entrepreneurs. For example, women account for 14 percent of university lecturers, and twenty-eight percent of Afghan Parliament members are women —a proportion higher than 67 percent of countries tracked by the World Bank, including France, Canada, Poland, Australia and the United States
- Lastly, demographics have changed and young people are rising to challenges and taking responsibility for implementing the changes they want to see. Nearly 80 percent of the country is under 40, with 68 percent under 25.

- This generational change, and the changing expectations it brings often goes under-reported and under-valued. People demand more education; more connection with the outside world, and they are creative and courageous in their approach to solving problems - and this is not only in Kabul but also across other provinces.
- And we see this now with the mothers network that has come together to demand their right to education, their right to autonomy, and their right to work.
- The potential that stems from this campaign should not be underestimated, especially if there is solidarity and support to them so that they can help shape their future and the peace process.
- Understanding this does not underestimate the great challenges that persist. According to the World Bank's Development report from 2011, it takes more than 30 years for countries to turn around. Afghanistan is more than halfway there, and any peace agreement must build on the progress that has been made, and on the aspirations of its people.