
Determining if Progress Will Prevail or Peril: The Role for Women in Defining Afghanistan's Future

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After twelve years in Afghanistan, U.S.-led coalition forces are drawing down their presence. Despite a mixed track record, they leave behind a reformed nation. More than eight million children are now in school, up from 900,000 in 2001. Maternal and infant mortality rates have decreased significantly, and average life expectancy has increased by sixteen years. Sixty percent of the population is within an hour's walk of a health center. Women have exercised their rights to work, vote, be educated, and serve in political office.

Meanwhile, the question of how to sustain these gains remains unanswered, largely because no one knows the exact formula. Many experts have touted the need to advance the rule of law, maintain and expand infrastructure development, ensure democratic political processes, increase access to education, and nurture the civil service. In parallel, there are public

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siload as an issue distinct from the broader conversation on security and stabilization. Unless the two conversations become one—with Afghan women’s development and integration as a core component of strategies to achieve broader political, economic, and security objectives—the problem of how to secure Afghanistan’s socio-economic, security and political gains made will elude solution.

The success of the international community’s transition strategy rests on two pillars: the April 2014 elections and effectiveness of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The two reinforce one another. Security is required for the presidential elections

to be free and fair, and political institutions must be capable of enforcing the rule of law for security forces to fulfill their mandate. Women play a part in both.

THE 2014 ELECTION

Afghans will take to the polls on April 5, 2014 to elect a new president and new provincial councils. This election will determine the government’s new interlocutor, who will lead peace talks with the Taliban, cultivate a democratic state responsive to its citizens, and help shape the laws that protect men and women from harm. Provincial council contests will determine the representatives tasked to govern at a local level, including the thirty-four provincial council delegates who will be selected to comprise 33 percent of the upper house of parliament.

The election outcomes will have a far-reaching impact on women. There is a risk that the newly elected president will barter away women’s rights in a negotiated settlement with the Taliban or revoke the Elimination of Violence Against Women law enacted by presidential decree in 2009.¹ There is also concern that conservative provincial leadership will usher a

return to the draconian judicial and social practices of the Taliban era. However, it does not suffice to look solely at the impact of elections on women; one must also consider the impact of women on elections.

As voters, candidates, and rights defenders, women shape election outcomes and consequent governing bodies in ways that better serve female constituencies and communities. Women are also a moderating force against extremism.² Because they arguably suffer the most from extremist interpretations of Islam, they have the most to lose if the Taliban or similar conservative elements regain power. As such, women have a vested interest in electing liberal and moderate candidates, and female voters demonstrate as much in their voting patterns.³

Women's rights defenders work tirelessly to ensure that women make informed choices at the polls. They register women to vote, explain the voting process, and educate on how candidates' political platforms address women's rights, needs, and concerns. They know that consequence of elected new public officials unsupportive of women's rights, and are keenly aware that the best way to mitigate that risk is to enable women to vote. Because their work is perceived as subversive by both the insurgency and existing power brokers, these activists work under constant threat. Their options for physical protection are minimal. Once coalition forces have left, it will be harder to operate in the face of unsupportive authorities and insecure conditions unless women are integrated into the political and security apparatus of the state.

The election of Afghan women to public office can yield several benefits for the effort to promote democracy and good governance—namely, by improving the political representation of Afghan citizens. Globally, women legislators are more likely to report that the attitudes of their constituents are their most important consideration in determining how to vote in parliamentary proceedings.⁴ Ken Wollack, president of the National Democratic Institute, testified before Congress that “[t]here is strong evidence that as more women are elected to office, there

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is also a corollary increase in policy-making that reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities.”⁵ In the Afghan consti-

larly within civil society, but leveraging it in the political realm is essential to further civic progress. Preserving the space for women's full and meaningful participation in political bodies directly correlates not only to enhanced protections for women's and minority rights, but to improved governance that correlates to stabilization. To be fair, the international community has attempted to resource efforts toward this objective. However, the Afghan government and allied nations have fallen short in evolving their perceptions of the role that women can play in the security sector. Women factor into security planning as the protected rather than the protectors. An inability to see beyond the victimization of women impedes the ability to understand and employ the role they can play as security providers. This is then reflected in the planning for and resourcing of the international mission to support development of the Afghan National Security Forces and associated ministries.

THE AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES

The ANSF are now officially responsible for the provision of security in every province of Afghanistan, nearing completion of what is referred to as the "security transition." As of July 2013, the size of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) was 178,826 and 151,824 members respectively—with women comprising less than 0.3 percent of the military and 1 percent of the police forces.

The presence (or absence) of women in the armed forces has important implications for the success of the upcoming election, the efficacy of counterinsurgency operations, and the ability to provide security to Afghan communities. Without female security personnel to support the elections, Afghan women will not be allowed to vote. The majority of voter registration and polling stations are sex-segregated, and voters are subject to a body search before entering. Female security officers are required to staff the women-only stations. In the absence of sufficient female security personnel, women-only voter registration and polling stations remain closed.

As history has proven, securing an election is not limited to policing polling stations. Provincial and regional security plans are required to minimize threats posed by an insurgency historically intent on disrupting democratic practice. It is doubtful that an all-male force can deter the threat. On at least thirteen recorded occasions last year, male insurgents dressed as women entered restricted areas from which they launched attacks. There were no female body searchers to stop them. Due to prohibitive cultural norms, male security officers cannot conduct body searches of women or

conduct security checks of homes where a woman is present. Nor can they interrogate women, inhibiting their ability to gather information effectively.

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Women in the Afghan forces have proven effective at engaging women and civilian communities. According to NATO's Civil-Military Cooperation Center of Excellence, engaging women in community outreach efforts expands access to local populations, improves

information sharing, enhances mutual understanding and respect, and improves situational awareness, resulting in a safer and more secure environment.⁸ This engagement enables a better understanding of community needs, localized security threats, and options for response, all of which benefit the ANA as it assumes responsibility for the counterinsurgency campaign.

Beyond the elections and securing the country against insurgency, there is a core obligation to provide law and order at the local level, such that Afghan women, men, boys, and girls can live free from fear and have access to legal recourse when transgressions occur. In order to effectively address the risks that threaten these groups, it is essential to understand that each experiences separate and distinct security threats. For example, sexual and gender-based violence against women is more likely to be properly registered, investigated, and prosecuted when female police officers are handling the case. As many as 87 percent of Afghan women experience some form of domestic abuse or forced marriage.⁹ Cultural norms prohibit or limit communication between unrelated men and women, including between a woman experiencing abuse and a male police officer. In cases where women report these crimes to male police, they are often blamed for the abuse or worse, abused by the officer.¹⁰

In an attempt to rectify what has been a dramatically under-resourced effort to support the women in the Afghan forces, the United States' Congress has this year for the first time authorized and appropriated funding specifically for the recruitment, integration, and retention of women in the ANSF.¹¹ The funds reserve a tiny fraction of the \$7.7 billion

that will appropriated for the Afghan Security Forces Fund—approximately .003 percent of that amount—for this explicit use but it's an acknowledgment that something was missing from the effort to strengthen and professionalize Afghanistan's security forces. Congress is recognizing that women are perhaps the greatest underutilized resource in the effort.

Ultimately, if women's rights are to be protected post-2014, women themselves need to be enabled to fight for them. Meaningful integration of women in the political sphere—as voters, candidates, appointees, peace negotiators, and activists—must be a core feature of the political transition strategy. If democracy is to be promoted, extremism moderated, and security preserved, Afghan women must lead the effort alongside their male counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Discussions about women's leadership in either the political or security realm inevitably devolve into a conversation on the immensity of the social and cultural barriers limiting women's participation in public life. What is outlined above is not meant to insist those barriers do not exist, but rather to suggest that Afghan women have devised strategies for how to navigate those challenges, particularly when they can count on sustained support from the international community.

In Afghanistan, too much of the debate about women's leadership potential has been curtailed by men deciding what is and is not permissible for women. Far too little action has derived from asking women how to expand the realm of the possible. Women in the police force understand that their presence is a cultural necessity and that they enable the force to reflect their culture's values. Women interested in negotiating with the Taliban note that women have mediated conflicts within and between families in their communities for centuries. Women activists maintain that the organizations they run today are born of the underground schools, health clinics, and training centers they led secretly under the Taliban. And women running for public office declare that they are tired of the status quo.

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The interests of Afghan women are aligned with the interests of those who seek a secure and democratic Afghanistan. As the Afghan government and allied nations negotiate how to prioritize increasingly limited resources, tough choices will need to be made. Afghan women's security and inclusion in decision making should not be perceived as issues to consider in parallel to political stability and a cessation of violence when in fact the latter are contingent on the former. Advancing women's participation in the political arena and security sector must be integrated into existing strategies and correlated resource streams designated to transition U.S.-led coalition forces out of the country without sacrificing the progress made. To sustain even a fraction of what so many fought so hard to achieve, women must be recognized as the fulcrum on which the future of Afghanistan rests. *f*

ENDNOTES

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- 10 Louise Hancock, *Women and the Afghan Police*, Oxfam, September 2013.
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