

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

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Women's Role Important in Peace Talks

The issue of women's rights and freedoms has been one of the main concerns in the peace talks. Afghan nation, notably women, urges the participation of women in the peace talks so that their rights and freedoms, achieved under the post-Taliban nascent democracy, do not be compromised at the table.

Following the downfall of the Taliban's regime, Afghan women have participated in social, political, and cultural activities and played a highly significant role. They proved that their abilities and capabilities in social and political arenas were as high as their male counterparts. Holding high political positions, Afghan women broke cultural stereotypes regarding themselves and changed public perspective to a great extent. They played pivotal role in collective life and campaigned against deep-seated cultural taboos through joining military forces, concerts and musical performances, athletic centers and bike riding competitions, film making industries, etc.

Afghan women enjoyed the relative freedoms after the collapse of the Taliban's regime. The post-Taliban Constitutions entitled Afghan men and women equally in rights, freedoms, and dignity and a number of NGOs tried to empower women perhaps to undo the restrictions imposed on them during the Taliban's regime.

Afghan women are making steady progress on day-to-day basis and try to increase their constructive role in the community. They, along with Afghan men, have been paying sacrifices for democracy and their human rights and freedoms. Female MPs, police officers, journalists, and politicians are also being threatened and targeted by the militants. Women also lose their lives while registering for elections, casting their votes, or simply walking on the streets. A woman's vote is as important as that of her male counterpart. During presidential and parliamentary elections, Afghan women use their suffrage through flocking to ballot boxes.

However, women's marginalization in the peace talks generated great concern for them. They fear that return of the "Islamic Emirate" will jeopardize their rights and freedoms. Since women bore the brunt of violence during the Taliban's regime in the 1990s, they still view the Taliban with doubt and mistrust.

Recently, the US Congress asked the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to include Afghan women in the peace talks and make sure that their achievements in the past 18 years were protected. Sending a letter to the State Department, the Congress members said, "Yet during the February and May talks in Doha between American diplomats and the Taliban, Afghan women were not represented. Afghan women voices need to be heard - not just on women's rights, but on the future of their country. We urge the State Department to protect Afghan women's negotiation position and hard-won gains in all discussions with the Taliban".

Meanwhile, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad has held a recent meeting with Afghan female politicians and senior government officials. After the meeting, Khalilzad wrote in a tweet, "We discussed progress Afghan women have made and their concerns about the future. US policy is that women should be at the table in intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations".

Earlier, officials from European Union Delegations also reiterated the role of Afghan women in the peace talks. Holding the European Day 2019 themed "Women of Afghanistan" in Kabul, Pierre Mayaudon, Ambassador and Head of European Union Delegation in Afghanistan, is cited as saying, "Peace agreement where women are massively part of the negotiating process, have 40 percent more chance of success than those where women are absent". Mayaudon added that European side would support Afghan women in their struggle for empowerment and their role in the peace process.

A study by Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission showed that Afghan women were worried about their rights in the peace talks with the Taliban.

Since the US is seeking to step up its struggle for including women in the talks, Afghan women are likely to be hopeful for the end of their marginalization. The Taliban are unlikely to refuse women's representatives in the talks to show the world that their mindset has been changed towards women and to court their trust. Facing women in informal talks, the Taliban show very positive attitude towards them. However, the Taliban yet to practically prove their genuine intention for not violating the rights and freedoms of women. Since the Taliban are still exercising their radical mindset in areas under their control, Afghan women still view the Taliban with doubt.

The Taliban have to change their mindset towards women in true way. Restricting women's social and political activities is against Islamic tenets. Women are widely involved in social, political, economic, and cultural activities in many Muslim countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Iran, Pakistan, Arab Emirate, etc. Thus, the Taliban have to stop their radical interpretation of Islamic tenets and respect the rights, freedoms, and dignity of women.

Afghan-Pak Friendly Relations Critical to Peace Process

By: Hujjatullah Zia

Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have passed many ups and downs. Afghan-Pak officials exchanged harsh rhetoric against each other about the issue of terrorism on multiple occasions. The two sides viewed each other with mistrust despite the exchanges of trip between Afghan-Pak high-profile delegations. Recently, the relations between the two countries seem to be in the making.

On his trip to Islamabad, Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Idrees Zaman held a meeting with Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi for the first review session of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS), under which the two sides agreed last year to discuss diplomatic and political issues and military and intelligence cooperation.

Meanwhile, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said after a meeting with Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani in Kabul that the talks focused on relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Discussed building further international consensus for peace. Also regional requirements and implications for peace including recent positive movement in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations," Khalilzad wrote in a tweet.

Last week President Ghani and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan had a meeting on the sidelines of an Organization of Islamic Cooperation Conference in Saudi Arabia, in which Ghani's visit to Islamabad on June 27 was agreed. Later, Ghani hoped that his trip would change years of mistrust into mutual trust and cooperation towards peace.

Pakistani officials have said constantly that they would support Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace talks and use their leverage to push the Taliban to the negotiating table with the Kabul government. Moreover, Islamabad has been reiterating dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government arguing that military deal would not lead to peace.

Meanwhile, Afghan officials believe that Pakistan's role in peace talks would be highly significant since she has leverage on the Taliban. According to officials, Pakistan would be able to bring the Taliban to the peace table with Afghan representatives. With the Imran Khan administration, Afghan officials are more optimistic and hopeful about Pakistan's support for peace talks.

Having said that, the Taliban still refuse to hold direct talks with the Afghan government. Despite the fact that the Ghani administration has been pushing for talks, the Taliban, turning down the offer, have intensified their attacks against Afghan soldiers and civilians. The Taliban, who have reportedly targeted Afghan

civilians intentionally in recent weeks, carry out indiscriminate attacks to put pressure on the government. On the contrary, President Ghani said in his Eid message that he would release hundreds of the Taliban militants jailed in Afghan prisons as a gesture of goodwill saying that the release had been demanded by Afghan representatives in Loya Jirga. However, the Taliban have showed no positive reaction to the issue continuing their insurgency.

Although the Taliban held sixth round of talks with the US representatives in Qatar, insurgency continues unabated and the Taliban have not signaled positively for ceasefire. In short, the US-Taliban backdoor talks have had no direct impact on Afghanistan's security situation so far.

Germany has reportedly offered to support an intra-Afghan dialogue to be held in Qatar next month. Khalilzad tweeted after his trip to Germany that "Germany also hosted 2nd US-Europe Group for Afghan Peace meeting". He added, "After peace process update, we reviewed upcoming Oslo Forum & German-Qatari hosted intra-Af dialogue. Our focus was intra-Af negotiations (that lead to a political roadmap)..."

The Afghan government has always welcomed the constructive role of the neighboring countries and regional stakeholders calling on them to engage actively in arranging intra-Afghan dialogue. Germany, which hosted the Bonn Conference to support the establishment of interim government in the post-Taliban administration, was actively and constructively engaged in Afghanistan's issues.

The news about intra-Afghan dialogue to be hosted by Germany and Qatar will generate optimism for Afghan officials about meaningful talks. The regional stakeholders, especially Qatar, should use their leverage on the Taliban to hold talks with the Afghan government and be reasonable at the table.

Islamabad is expected to play more active and constructive role in the peace talks so as to support peace and stability in Afghanistan. Indeed, Pakistan's support to peace process is highly essential and she will be able to persuade the Taliban to come to the table with Afghan representatives.

The two countries have to cement their ties and increase their mutual cooperation, mainly in peace issues. It is self-evident that terrorists are common threat to the two countries jeopardizing the life of both Afghan and Pakistani people. Thus, Kabul and Islamabad have to seek common ground, combat common threat, and increase their mutual cooperation.

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What's Wrong with Environmental Impact Assessments?

By: Maxwell Gomera

Wahli, Indonesia's largest environmental organization, recently took the government to court for issuing construction permits to a Chinese company based on what they allege was a "deeply flawed" environmental impact assessment. In fact, Wahli contends, the \$1.5 billion Batang Toru dam project will have severe ecological consequences, including the likely extinction of the world's rarest great ape, the Tapanuli orangutan.

Batang Toru is just one of many planned infrastructure projects worldwide that are officially deemed environmentally sound, despite posing serious environmental risks. For example, construction is nearly complete on a railway line through Kenya's famous Nairobi National Park, despite public outrage over an "incomplete and incompetent" environmental impact assessment.

Similarly, in Guinea, the government has approved plans for another Chinese company to build a dam inside the Moyon-Bafing national park, a chimpanzee sanctuary. The environmental impact assessment that was carried out, experts say, significantly underestimates the number of chimpanzees that the project threatens.

This is a dangerous trend, and it could unravel the biodiversity and ecosystem services - including the production of food and water, the cycling of nutrients, and the natural regulation of crop pests and pollinators - on which all life depends. Already, some 60% of those services are degraded. With the world expected to invest around \$90 trillion in infrastructure (including roads, dams, and power plants) in the next 15 years alone - resulting in more new infrastructure than is currently in existence globally - action is urgently needed to ensure that investment decisions account for projects' real environmental consequences.

That is the purpose of strategic environmental assessments (SEAs). In 1991, parties to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe agreed to a convention on SEAs in transboundary contexts. In March this year, the UN Environment Assembly, the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment, adopted a resolution requiring all governments to conduct SEAs before approving any infrastructure projects.

These moves reflect a recognition that SEAs are needed to ensure that the decisions taken by governments and companies do not cause undue damage to the natural environment or the people who depend on it. Many countries now acknowledge the relationship between economic activities and environmental outcomes, and require SEAs to be conducted before greenlighting projects.

But, as the examples cited above reveal, SEAs are not fulfilling

their purpose reliably. This is because, as it stands, technical specialists typically conduct SEAs at the behest of project developers - a practice that, as activists have repeatedly pointed out, is grossly unethical. With the assessors frequently basing their conclusions on only a superficial appraisal of the ecological and market value of the affected ecosystems, it should be no surprise that damaging projects are often approved, despite failing to adhere to broadly agreed green development guidelines.

To play an effective role in protecting the planet and its people, SEAs must be rigorous, credible, and transparent. This means that they must be conducted by well-regulated, impartial professionals. To some extent, the laws and institutions needed to make this happen already exist: SEAs are legally required in many jurisdictions, and the International Association for Impact Assessment could provide self-regulation. But a clear framework for regulating the conduct of those who carry out impact assessments, like bar associations for legal professionals, is still missing.

Here, the evolution of the accounting profession can offer useful lessons. While accounting can be traced back thousands of years to Mesopotamia, it wasn't until the end of the nineteenth century that the profession was recognized. In the United States, an 1896 law dictated that, to earn the title "certified public accountant" (CPA), one would have to pass state examinations and accrue two years of working experience.

In April, lawmakers in the United Kingdom moved to improve transparency and prevent conflicts of interest in bookkeeping by urging the Competition and Markets Authority to prohibit the "Big Four" accounting firms from offering consulting services to customers they are auditing. This comes after audit failures at the construction company Carillion and the retailer BHS, and a pledge from three of the four firms to phase out advisory work for their audit clients.

The evolution of the accounting profession has been driven by the recognition that imprudent financial management jeopardizes social and economic stability. But imprudent environmental management poses at least as serious a threat; similar action is needed to establish clear requirements for those carrying out relevant assessments.

Governments must wake up to the conflicts of interest allowed by the current approach to SEAs, and compel real change. Only by ensuring that infrastructure-investment decisions are based on rigorous and credible impact assessments is it possible to reconcile economic development with the preservation of the natural environment.

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