Report

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Youth perspectives on peace and security: Afghanistan

CONCILIATION RESOURCES

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Contents

Cover image: Women seeking a brighter future. © Dan Love

1. Youth, peace and security in Afghanistan

1.1 Political and security context

The past forty years of Afghan history have been marked by near constant upheaval and war. After decades of a relatively stable monarchy, the king was disposed by his cousin in a coup in 1973, initially supported by, but in 1978 himself deposed by, a faction of Afghanistan's communist party. The communist government's inability to control rural areas and resistance by conservative tribes (social and political challenges which would be repeated following the U.S. invasion) led to invasion in 1979 by the Soviet Union and an internationalisation of the crisis. The following decades saw a fractious civil war between groups that had been armed with Soviet and American weapons and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, which claimed to be returning the country to Islam. The regime left the country largely isolated for the last years of the 1990s.[1]

The attacks on the USA in September 2001 thrust Afghanistan back into the international spotlight and some Afghans initially welcomed the wave of American-led bombing, which quickly chased the Taliban out of the country. In the ensuing years, however, the failure of the internationally-backed government in Kabul to provide stability and meaningful economic growth led to a resurgence of the Taliban and other insurgent groups in the east and south of the country. A spike in US troops and funding under American President Barack Obama in 2009 contributed to popular resentment against many Afghan leaders and the international presence. Despite three rounds of presidential and parliamentary elections, the government is now largely perceived as a corrupt patronage network rather than a responsive democratic system.[2]

The presidential election of 2014 ended in a stalemate, with Ashraf Ghani declared President and Abdullah Abdullah as Chief Executive Officer (a position not acknowledged in the current constitution). This might have provided an opportunity for government reform. Three years later, however, few reforms have occurred. Local leaders remain strong in both rural and urban areas in Afghanistan and many have continued to use their positions to secure both government resources and international development funds and contracts from the US military to enrich themselves.[3] In the meantime, with fewer international troops, Afghan troops have struggled to hold territory against the Taliban, leading to a state of low-level but continued violence, with no prospect on the horizon for an end to the fighting.

1.2 Youth and politics in Afghanistan

While Afghanistan's deeply patriarchal society makes it difficult for young Afghans to participate in a significant way in politics, there is a history of youth political movements in the country. Modern versions of these date back to the influential editor Mahmud Tarzi, who later became father-in-law of the king. In the 1920s, a group of his young followers known as the Afghanan-e Jawan (Young Afghans) pushed for Afghanistan's first constitution and were an important precursor to later youth movements.[4] Most notably in the 1960s and 70s, Kabul University became a hotbed of political activism. Radical Islamist groups formed on the right and communist groups on the left, all opposed to the monarchy. Many of the current leaders of Afghanistan were a part of these movements, becoming militarised after their expulsion from the country.

"The real war in Afghanistan is the struggle for power internally."
– respondent from Kabul

The international intervention following the US-led invasion inspired hope for a new generation of Afghan youth. With some 70% of Afghanistan's population between the ages of 15 and 29, young people benefited from schools which were quickly built and filled, causing significant competition for university seats.[5] Overall education rates have risen significantly, particularly for women. According to one survey, in 2016 89% of women between 35-39 had no education, whereas for women aged between 12 and 14, that figure dropped to 59%.[6] Kabul and other large cities have seen a growth in private universities and

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1. For a more thorough historical review of this era, see Barfield 2010.
2. See Larson and Coburn 2017.
3. In different regions of Afghanistan these figures are known as *maliks, khans, arbabs,* among other terms. While there are differences between these roles, during the research (which was carried out in different cultural regions of the country) most of these leaders were seen as participating in politics in a similar manner and are generally referred to as "local leaders" throughout. For more, see Coburn 2016.
4. See Dupree 1980 and Ruttig.
5. Ibrahimi 2014.
6. Samuel Hall Consulting 2013, 25.

growing emphasis on education. This has, in part, fueled the growth of various civic groups, particularly in urban areas. Youth, for example, have also been a central component in ongoing debates over the nature of democracy in Afghanistan.[7]

The fate of this younger generation is a crucial question simply due to demographics. Afghanistan, an incredibly young country, currently has a so-called 'youth bulge' with 63% of the country below the age of 25 and 46% below the age of 15.[8] While economic growth in Afghanistan has slowed in recent years, youth have struggled disproportionately: 8.1% of young men and 18.8% of young women are unemployed, which is higher than the national average unemployment of 7%.[9]

Despite some of the initial optimism of the 2000s, politically Afghan youth have remained largely disenfranchised. Most of Afghanistan's current leaders are from the generation that came to power during the jihad against the Soviets and the ensuing Civil War. This includes almost every key political player in the current administration with a few exceptions. Most of these are cases in which younger men, such as Salahuddin Rabbani, have replaced their fathers after their deaths. (Salahuddin's father Burhanuddin Rabbani was former president and head of the High Peace Council). This has not given young people the sense of political opportunity, but rather has reinforced the corrupt and dynastic nature of Afghan politics.

1.3 Youth and the peace process in Afghanistan today

Over the past fifteen years, efforts towards a peace process in Afghanistan have been halting and disjointed. Initially, the US government was unwilling to negotiate with the Taliban in any way and the Taliban has refused to negotiate with the Afghan government, which it sees as a puppet of the West. The peace efforts that have generated the most publicity have been a series of tribal gatherings, or *jirgas*, between elders in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the establishment in 2010 of a High Peace Council. Despite initial enthusiasm this council has made little progress in the past seven years. Notably, however, the efforts of the Afghan government during these processes have relied almost exclusively on

an older generation of tribal leaders. As one respondent to our research summarised, the "Peace Jirga established by the government is made up of famous warlords and influential figures – it has nothing to do with peace in Afghanistan."

While there has been an encouraging growth of civic groups working for peace with young leaders particularly in urban areas, these young people have, for the most part, been marginalised in discussions around the peace process, especially at the national level. With the US sending additional troops to Afghanistan, and a continued sense that the current government is making little progress either in terms of economic development or securing a lasting peace agreement and a growing youth population, it is increasingly important to understand the views of youth on peace and security in Afghanistan.

2. The focus group discussions

2.1 Context and challenges

To get a better sense of the future of youth and peace in Afghanistan, Conciliation Resources carried out a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) involving young Afghans. Nine FGDs were conducted: three in Kabul, three in Nangarhar and three in Kandahar. Each included about 20 participants. These participants included youth activists, members of civil society and labourers. The participants were chosen by a series of local community organisations that work with youth. As a result, it is likely that some of the participants may have more political knowledge and interest than the average young Afghan, but these opinions still represent a rather wide spectrum: for example, both educated and uneducated youth participated, in some cases young government officials were included, as well as members of civil society. Two of the FGDs were all female.

"Youth are the first victims of war."
– respondent from Nangarhar

During the FGD, respondents were asked about the political and security situation in their area, their understanding of peace and security, and the position of youth, particularly in the peace process.

Open and frank conversations about politics and security in Afghanistan are challenging. In each

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7. Larson 2011.
8. UNFPA 2014, 4.
9. Ibid 7.

of the FGDs, participants were initially hesitant, particularly discussing politics and specific political figures. Often respondents would not refer to figures by name, even while making it clear to whom they were referring to. In all but one case, the conversation eventually became much more open, with all participants involved. The moderator strived to ensure that each individual had a chance to voice their opinions.

2.2 Regional differences between respondents

While many of the central themes that emerged from the FGDs were similar in the different areas where they were conducted, other themes were clearly shaped by local experiences and the complexities of local politics in Afghanistan. For example, concern about the Islamic State was a central theme in the FGDs in Nangarhar, where that group is particularly active, while it was not much mentioned in Kabul or Kandahar.

Similarly, while all the FGDs took place in fairly urban areas, the fact that Kabul is the capital of the country and more ethnically diverse than Nangarhar or Kandahar meant that respondents focused more on national-level political issues and seemed more adamant that the peace process going forward had to provide a venue for different ethnic groups to reconcile. This may have been in part a response to recent ethnically-based demonstrations, particularly by Hazaras, demanding equal treatment, which were then targeted by insurgent bombers.

In contrast, there was a sense in Nangarhar and Kandahar that more local autonomy and allowing different provinces to achieve peace locally was the most important first step. Relatedly, several respondents from Nangarhar and Kandahar pointed to the disproportionate attention and resources that the Kabul area received. One equated the relationship to one of a "step mother" who does not give full attention to their "step children" in the provinces.

Other differences demonstrate how certain political processes play out differently in different political contexts. For example, as discussed further below, respondents in both Kandahar and Nangarhar complained about government corruption. Respondents in Nangarhar suggested that government corruption had led local leaders to form factions and battle against each other for resources, leading to an increase in violence in the province, by allowing insurgents to take advantage of the unstable conditions and political

divides. In contrast, in Kandahar, tribal groups and the ruling elite (led largely by chief of police Abdul Reziq) had done much to consolidate local government power and had clamped down on local rivalries, which meant security in Kandahar was seen as better now than it had been in the past. In both areas, respondents complained about a corrupt government and ruling elite, but corruption was perceived as contributing to an increase in violence in Nangarhar while decreasing it in Kandahar. Despite these differences and the variety of backgrounds in the FGDs, however, the majority of other trends appeared similar across the provinces.

3. Findings from the focus group discussions

3.1 Views on the current political context

Insecurity and local instability

The two most common themes from the FGDs were economic issues, particularly the trouble that youth had finding jobs, and the insecurity across the country – issues that many saw as deeply linked. Respondents complained about the unpredictable nature of violence in each of the areas where FGDs were held. This affected their ability to move about, particularly in rural areas, and to secure employment. Others described the psychological strains of near-constant insecurity. There was more disagreement, however, about which groups were most to blame for the current instability.

While most respondents pointed first to the Taliban and other insurgent groups, such as the Islamic State, for the ongoing insecurity, many felt the government was also responsible for the ongoing instability, either directly or indirectly contributing to local violence. In several cases, respondents pointed to rumours that government officials and the Taliban were colluding to keep the country in a state of continual war. As one respondent from Kandahar explained: "I am sure the government can control the Taliban and other insurgent groups, but officials do not want the war to be controlled, since they see personal benefits in war and conflict." Others viewed the ongoing struggles in the Afghan government as producing the conditions for a continued insurgence. "Internal conflicts in the government and tribal struggles for power" are the root cause of the insurgence, one respondent explained.

Respondents in Nangarhar in particular pointed to the unevenness of security. An ethnically diverse and densely settled province, the relations of different groups to each other and to the insurgency are constantly changing. One respondent, for example, stated that their home district of Kama was relatively stable at the moment and that when a local Taliban fighter was killed, everyone but his family shunned the funeral. However, with instability in neighbouring districts just down the road, there was always the possibility that violence could return to the district.

Respondents, particularly from Nangarhar and Kandahar, had mixed opinions about warlords and other influential local figures who still controlled sizable militias. For the most part, these were seen as a part of the systematic corruption and nepotism contributing to violence in the country. However, one respondent described Haji Zahir, a parliamentarian from Nangarhar, as seen by some as a positive force after he set up a private militia of approximately 1,000 fighters that pushed the Islamic State out of his district. The issue with relying on informal actors to provide security, however, was the lack of predictability around such an approach. While some spoke positively about such non-state security provision, others were deeply concerned that the continued presence of these figures was going to continue to present a challenge for rule of law in the country.

3.2 A lack of rule of law

In all FGDs, a central complaint was the fact that many local leaders, businessmen and politicians were acting with no regard for the rule of law. This involved everything from stealing government resources to committing crimes with impunity. While the police were singled out by many as some of the worst offenders, respondents pointed to many other government bodies as well, including the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Education and various health care facilities. It was difficult to access any of these, they suggested, without either paying a bribe or having a connection with someone high ranking. For young Afghans, there was a particular concern about how difficult it was to secure a place at a state university without relying on some sort of personal connection.

This contributed to very negative opinions of the government and almost everyone in Afghanistan in a leadership position. One respondent from Nangarhar said: "I see an increasing gap between the government and the people, particularly young people who do not trust the government and authorities." Particularly when it came to the justice system, some respondents stated that the Taliban system of justice, which sometimes works alongside traditional tribal mechanisms, was preferable to the corrupt Afghan government court system. Strikingly, no one in the FGDs suggested a radical alteration of the current government structure – elections seem to be accepted as the only means for government formation. Instead criticism revolved around how current officials were manipulating government structures and processes.

3.3 Corruption

Youth were particularly frustrated with corruption when it came to government hiring and what this meant for those trying to secure jobs. As one respondent in Nangarhar described: "Government positions are sold in the market and if you pay a specific amount of money, you can buy a position...even if you are illiterate and uneducated." Few had any hope that corruption would decrease in the near term and one respondent suggested that the anti-corruption task forces set up in recent years were mostly there to "hide corruption from the public eye."

Respondents also emphasised the ways in which government corruption had become intertwined with the corruption of local leaders as well. Community Development Councils, originally set up to distribute international and government development aid have become increasingly corrupt, one respondent from Nangarhar described. These *maliks* and other traditional leaders are now all "linked to powerful groups at the provincial level." This has created a political system in which corruption structures almost every interaction. It has also made youth highly distrustful of their own leaders and their explanation for the ongoing political situation. This has given rise to widespread conspiracy theories about the interaction of of government officials, insurgents and the international community.

3.4 The international community and other actors

In addition to criticising the government, many respondents were highly critical of the role of other international actors in Afghanistan. While many of these criticisms blamed multiple groups simultaneously, Pakistan and the US were repeatedly referred to as perpetuators of the conflict in Afghanistan. Several respondents pointed to ISI, the Pakistani state security service,

as one of the leading factors in destabilising the country, particularly through its support of the Islamic State and its failure to eliminate Taliban sanctuaries on its side of the border.

"I think that the last four decades of war undermined patriotism and the feeling of ownership of the country for young people. Ethnic and linguistic divisions and other divides further undermined the nationalism among youths." – respondent from Kabul

Still, some emphasised, Pakistan is much weaker than countries like the US and after 17 years of fighting some of the harshest criticism was reserved for the US and other NATO countries with troops in Afghanistan. The following comment from a respondent in Kandahar is indicative of many of these sentiments:

"The main reason for conflict in the country is the existence of foreign troops in Afghanistan... I believe they are in full control of the country. They could end the war if they wanted to, but they don't. The Americans can see an object four inches long from a drone in the sky, but how is it then that they do not recognize the [insurgent] sanctuaries and training centres in Pakistan?... If I am aware of these Taliban centres, they are definitely even more aware. They should target them if they really want to defeat them.

"The Americans also know about the corruption in the government by influential figures... Rude warlords challenge the government and rob government property purchased with American money... [yet still] the American government is giving these people contracts. On one hand they teach us about democracy and rule of law and on the other hand they keep making deals with warlords and criminals. What do Americans want in Afghanistan?"

Others were more positive about changes that the US-led invasion had brought, particularly in terms of development – the building of schools was pointed to repeatedly. However, it was commonly thought that the international presence in the country was there largely for its own gain and had little concern for the welfare of ordinary Afghans. As one respondent from Kandahar commented: "[The international community] does not invest in our country. Instead they are making money by contracting out most of their projects to their own companies and the money is going back to their countries."

3.5 Challenges for youth in Afghanistan

A lack of political voice

While respondents were concerned about the fates of all Afghans, most seemed to agree that Afghan youth were in a particularly difficult situation, with few means for asserting themselves politically. Respondents felt that they were being silenced and censored in multiple ways. As one respondent suggested: "If we express our ideas and criticise those in the government, certain people who have power in the province will send us threats and warnings." This included pressure from family members to act in culturally appropriate ways (particularly for women to not work outside the home), but also more extreme measures such as violence by police against young people who spoke out openly.

Several respondents described how local decision making and dispute resolution continues to take place in traditional gatherings of elders, often times referred to as *jirgas* or *shuras*. Most emphasised the fact that these were forums where it was difficult for young people (and especially women) to participate, though one respondent in Nangarhar did suggest that younger people could participate in certain circumstances particularly since young people were perceived as better educated. This, however, was an exception and most felt that traditional practices particularly excluded young people.

Some suggested that this censorship had led to an increased reliance on social media and commenting on Facebook and other forums, which were more difficult for the older generation to monitor and allowed for a degree of anonymity. Even here, however, several claimed they were being monitored and one respondent described how after posting a political message on his Facebook page, he had received repeated online threats, asking for his address. Another said he had been called down to the local police department after a political posting. It was not clear how the police had heard about this post, but other accounts supported the theme that even the internet was not a safe place to make political comments.

3.6 Manipulation by local leaders

Notably, respondents felt not just excluded from the current political system, but that leaders were

working actively to use young people to support their own corrupt networks. As one respondent from Kabul said: "The politicians and leaders of Afghanistan misuse youth for their own personal and group gain." Entities such as youth branches of political parties were not seen as actually helping young people, but being used to do things like gather votes or organise rallies for the political elite and, in many ways, further erode the status of young people. Membership of these groups was perceived as more an expression of loyalty to the ruling elite in control of whichever party the group supported, than a means of furthering a youth agenda.

Several of the respondents felt that economic challenges, particularly unemployment, were the biggest problems for youth in Afghanistan. Even so, these economic challenges were almost always tied to the political context and particularly the dominance of a ruling class that controlled the economy more generally and jobs more specifically. (Notably, respondents in the FGD in the Kama District in Nangarhar, which has a relatively large ice cream factory, employing a good number of young people, tended to be more optimistic about the future of Afghanistan than some of their counterparts in other districts. This seemed directly related to the jobs available to them).

There was a strong sense that the older generation of leaders was using ethnic and tribal identity as a means of maintaining their power. As one respondent stated in Kandahar: "Favouritism and nepotism based on tribal relationships are very high. Here, everyone has to belong to a powerful tribe, such as the Popalzai, Alakozay, Noorzai or Achakzai [in order to get a job or other position]. Positions in government are based on these relationships. For those from other provinces or from weaker groups, it is very difficult in Kandahar to survive and they must obey the order of influential tribal figures."

Older leaders use these identity-based politics to reaffirm their own support and to undermine younger leaders, respondents implied. As one woman from Kabul explained: "The leadership in Afghanistan is very limited...they do not have tolerance for new leaders or youth taking leadership positions...Their priority is personal interest, their families and how to extend their power."

3.7 Challenges for female youth

While youth in general in Afghanistan face many challenges, respondents were clear that the challenges for women were even more acute – especially for those working outside the home. A few months before the FGD in Kandahar, a woman working for United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) had been killed on her way to work; in a separate incident, five women working at the airport were killed. These attacks had a significant effect on respondents' views on the ability of women to participate meaningfully in society and women were particularly concerned about violence against them.

"On one hand the international community says they are assisting us, on the other they are sending money through contracts back to their own countries; no one honestly wants to bring peace and security to the country." – respondent from Kandahar

Beyond direct violence, low level harassment was seen as an even larger problem. One participant in Kandahar pointed out that most families did not allow women to work outside their homes, but even when they could, "young women and girls are harassed in their offices and organisations... [and] there is no complaint mechanism in place. Policies and procedures are not being created by the government [to handle cases of harassment]." Another woman pointed out that the justice department did little to support women who were victims of domestic abuse. Existing laws are not currently being enforced, respondents said, and one described a woman who had recently been fired from her job as a school teacher for requesting maternity leave. The failure of the government to protect women in particular led participants in Kandahar to agree that things for women, particularly those outside urban areas, were getting worse instead of better, with fewer jobs available for women and fewer girls in schools.

Many respondents blamed this discrimination on culture and history. One cited the Pashto proverb that "a woman looks better in the kitchen." In particular, Pashtun women expressed more difficulty securing permission from their families to work outside the home, while Tajiks and Hazaras had an easier time. Despite this, all respondents speaking on the issue saw the lack of protection for women as deeply intertwined with government corruption and the patriarchal nepotism of the government more generally.

One respondent concluded grimly that "women in this situation have no path forward other than committing suicide or marrying some judge or someone else powerful."

3.8 Reflections on the peace process

Challenges defining peace

Youth were split on the meaning of peace and there was debate around the concept both generally and what peace might look like in Afghanistan in the future. Responses tended to coalesce around three themes:

1) Peace as the absence of violence. As one respondent suggested: "Peace means life without war and conflict." For these respondents, peace was primarily the end of insurgent attacks and, to a lesser extent, attacks by the Afghan government or international forces against these groups.

2) Peace as a combination of development and social justice. In these responses peace was often linked to prosperity and opportunity. Here, the end of violence was also implied, but peace was more about creating a just society. For these responses, it was also suggested that peace was an ongoing process. It means "negotiating between hostile groups and solving conflicts through negotiations." These figures tended to view the ongoing conflict as not just between insurgents and the Afghan government and their NATO allies, but as a more complex conflict with numerous sides. Others in this category tended to focus on the links between the government and perceptions of peace. One suggested that peace means "equality and equal treatment by the government," while another said that peace means "a government free of corruption."

3) Linking peace with the concept of arami or calmness. Respondents suggested that the ongoing conflict denied youth the opportunity for tranquility or the ability to do simple things, such as pray five times a day as stipulated in Islam. Respondents also saw the ability to travel freely between districts and provinces as a product of peace that the government should work to provide to the people.

3.9 Views on peace process

Almost all respondents felt removed from the ongoing peace project and that youth had, thus far, had very little involvement in the political discussions around the peace process. This was particularly true for women respondents, who felt they had few opportunities to act politically outside the house, let alone take part in the peace process on either a local or national level.

Respondents also pointed to the ways in which corruption had infiltrated aspects of the peace process as a barrier for participation. One respondent in Nangarhar described a man from his district who had participated in the government's reconciliation process for former Taliban fighters six times, each time receiving a stipend of $100 USD. Now, the respondent concluded, the man was angry because the stipend had been lowered to $20. Such stories greatly delegitimised the entire process in the views of these young people.

"Now, educated youth are occasionally given consideration in discussions of village issues, but overall it is the elders who have the respect of the community that make decisions."
– respondent from Nangarhar

A minority of respondents did feel that youth were being consulted and involved in certain aspects of the reconciliation process. These respondents tended to be members of civil society who had participated in various programmes sponsored by the government or international agencies. One pointed towards recent government workshops on countering terrorism and radicalisation as being a venue for youth participation. Others, however, pointed to the fact that many of the large political parties have youth branches, which are often perceived as co-opted by the leaders of the party rather than fora in which youth can effectively express their political opinions, thus giving the perception that youth are involved, even when they are not.

Still others placed the blame for the lack of youth involvement in the peace process on the youth themselves. One said that "Youth nowadays just wait for others to do the work for them," suggesting that young people were too preoccupied with economic challenges and trying to become rich.

3.10 Role of religious leaders in the peace process

While respondents tended to be highly critical of the role of government officials and local leaders in the peace process, opinions were much more mixed on religious leaders. Some

felt that imams and mullahs had been effective at standing against the war, using Friday sermons to preach against violence and serving as a moral voice for the community. Particularly for those who saw Afghan culture as fixed and difficult for youths to change, religious leaders were some of the only figures who could convince leaders to become more involved in bringing peace to the country.

Others, however, felt that there were more that the mullahs could be doing. One respondent from Nangarhar, for example, said that religious leaders "are passive… until they are criticised, they just remain silent." Another pointed to the fact that the religious establishment in Pakistan was more unified and that they had declared that "war in Pakistan was haram, while in Afghanistan it was a jihad [and thus permitted]." The respondent felt that Afghanistan was more violent than Pakistan as a result, and that a more unified clergy in Afghanistan could potentially reverse some of these trends.

3.11 Potential role of youth in peace process

The majority of respondents emphasised the challenges that youth are likely to face in terms of becoming more active in the peace process. As one respondent in Kandahar concluded: "Youth are silent in Kandahar as well as in other provinces." Another respondent concluded: "There is no motivation and encouragement for youth to be part of the government or take part in the peace process or the development of the country." For many, this seemed to generate real feelings of hopelessness about the future and the lack of opportunities for youth in the country.

Some respondents in Nangarhar described some of the ways in which local youth had already been active in working for peace. One explained that a few groups of young men had stopped a group of insurgents from crossing the Kabul River into their district after the local police refused to act. Others suggested that current cultural and social gatherings that are attended by youth could be useful starting points for encouraging peace.

Respondents also reported on more subtle impacts of the activities of young people. In the Kama district in Nangarhar, several speakers described a recent funeral of a young Taliban fighter. The funeral, apparently, was ill attended, something that culturally is deeply shameful for a family. The young people suggested that through such boycotts it would be possible to pressure

people to not support the insurgency. However, most acknowledged that these steps were minor.

Some respondents held out hope for the future of youth in the country. One pointed to the fact that, given Afghanistan's decades of conflict, young people were the only ones who had not been involved in the conflict actively. One suggested that those who fought against the Taliban were not going to be good at negotiating with them, so perhaps the youth could fill this role.

Others stated that there was a particular need for youth to be unified going forward. One of the central complaints about leaders from older generations was their tendency to emphasise ethnic and tribal divides. To battle against, one respondent suggested: "Individually we cannot do much… we cannot risk our lives individually in these risky situations. We need support from the government and other organisations to organise, campaign and motivate youth involvement in peace and security."

4. Conclusions

These FGDs suggest that the road ahead for youth in Afghanistan is a difficult one. While Afghanistan has a history of youth involvement in politics, the past decades of conflict have been particularly difficult for those in younger generations and, despite a growing youth bulge, there is a sense that the generation of leaders who were themselves youth activists in the 1970s have a solid grip on power. A common theme throughout the FGDs was the observation that most in the older generation of the ruling elite and the international community were directly benefiting from the ongoing conflict. Respondents felt the current war was unlikely to end while so many groups were benefiting from it.

Despite this, these young people were not without hope. In particular, youth in Kabul seemed more optimistic about the role of civil society and non-governmental organisations in shaping politics in the future. While still feeling disenfranchised, some of those in Kabul expressed hope that alternatives to the nepotistic patronage webs that make up the current government might gain strength in the future. These respondents also saw the need for individuals from different tribes and ethnic groups to come together actively.

Respondents disagreed on many of the details of the ongoing conflict and attempts at beginning the peace process. However, in every FGD, there was widespread agreement that youth in Afghanistan needed both better education and access to jobs.

These steps were widely considered necessary to continue some of the positive changes of the past 15 years.

It is also worth pointing out, that while respondents were widely critical of all parties in the conflict, the Taliban, the current Afghan government and the US in particular, there were no real calls for an entirely new political system. After three rounds of presidential and parliamentary elections, the youth commitment to an electoral democracy should not be taken for granted and no respondent suggested that an alternative like a theocracy or autocracy would improve the current situation.

Respondents were also clear that the road to peace in Afghanistan would be smoothest if the youth of Afghanistan are involved. Considering the fact that this younger generation has the most to gain from a stable, democratic future for Afghanistan, their voices need to be heeded in any peace settlement.

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