

AFGHAN VOICES

**WILL THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT'S
REINTEGRATION AND RECONCILIATION
EFFORTS BRING PEACE TO AFGHANISTAN?**

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J U N E 2 0 1 0

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Will the Afghan government's reintegration and reconciliation efforts bring peace to Afghanistan?

Wazhma Frogh

Against the background of growing violence and insurgency throughout Afghanistan over the past few years, efforts by the Afghan national government aimed at 'reintegration' and 'reconciliation' have gathered pace. Afghans have listened to their President on national television repeatedly inviting the 'angry brothers' of the insurgency to renounce fighting. Typically, the 'angry brothers' have responded with suicide attacks or gunfire the very next day. For many ordinary Afghans this is all they see of their government's attempts at reintegration and reconciliation.

The Afghan government's long-awaited Peace Jirga, held in Kabul from 2-4 June, was portrayed as a major step to build a broad consensus behind the government's reintegration and reconciliation plan. The Peace Jirga brought together around 1600 men and women (women constituted over 25 per cent of the participants) to whom the government formally presented its Peace and Re-integration Program. Many Afghans, however, saw the Jirga as little more than orchestrated effort to legitimise the government's plan by bringing together only the supporters of the Afghan government. In that regard the Jirga was simply a continuation of past failed efforts by the government to bring peace to Afghanistan.¹

¹ See also the author's analysis before and after the Afghan Peace Jirga:

<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=802>, <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=794>,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/10184128.stm,
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/11/afghan-peace-jirga-hopes>.

Background

In many ways the Afghan government and the international community missed the best opportunity for reintegration and reconciliation at the Bonn conference in 2001. By excluding one party to the conflict, the Taliban, while including all others, the Bonn Agreement left unresolved the social, political and economic factors that led to the rise of the Taliban in the first place.

Following the Bonn agreement, Afghanistan's warlords consolidated their power, accumulating even more wealth and recruiting more manpower. By continuing to misuse their official powers, however, they helped the Taliban to regain momentum. It needs to be remembered that the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s was welcomed by many Afghans sickened by the widespread violence and corruption of the civil war factions and warlords. Even today, the Taliban are supported by some segments of Afghan society for these reasons. Although the movement became contaminated with external agendas and interests, notably those of the Pakistani Army's intelligence service and of al-Qaeda, by and large the Taliban grew from local seeds.

As the insurgency has gained momentum, the Afghan government has sought talks and dialogue. Following a failed disarmament initiative (DDR/DIAG,² focused on former Mujahideen, rather than Taliban fighters) in 2005, the government established the Afghanistan National Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission (Programme Tahkim Sulh or PTS) to reintegrate disarmed commanders and soldiers into society. The Taliban leadership, however, ruled out the possibility of any talks until the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan.

The PTS also failed for reasons of its own, however. One key problem was the fact that the individual charged with leading the PTS, Sibghatullah Mojadeddi, was seen to lack the impartiality needed to run such a process. Mujadidi had been an active participant in the civil war in the 1990s (as the leader of the Afghan National Liberation Front or Jabha-e Melli-ye Nijat-e Afghanistan) and was the first president of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 1992 after the collapse of the communist regime of Dr Najibullah. The PTS also lacked any significant authority or means to provide for proper reintegration, beyond providing certificates to those

² The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Plan (DDR) was run by the United Nations between 2003 and 2006. The Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG), followed as a joint programme by the Afghan government and the United Nations. Both failed to achieve their objectives due to lack of political will and proper management.

fighters who abandoned the insurgency. It had little ability to facilitate the socio-economic integration of disarmed fighters into their communities, nor offered them or their families any support to rehabilitate their lives.³ Nor did it provide security for those who abandoned the insurgency, some of whom were subsequently killed in revenge attacks by the Taliban.

Since 2009 the Afghan national government has intensified its efforts to reach a political settlement with at least parts of the insurgency. Significantly, since the London Conference in January 2010, the Afghan government's reintegration and reconciliation effort has also received international support, including from the United States, the United Kingdom and NATO.

The Afghan government defines 'reintegration' as a process whereby insurgents lay down arms and stop fighting in exchange for guaranteed personal security, economical incentives, and freedom from imprisonment. These three components of the reintegration plan were emphasised by the President's Advisor and vice chairperson of the Reintegration and Reconciliation Commission, Minister Masoom Stanekzai, in his presentations to the international community at the International Afghanistan Conference in London in January and also in May this year in Washington.

The Afghan government's definition of 'reconciliation' is less clear, however. It has largely been defined, loosely, as dialogue with at least certain elements in the Taliban. The Peace Jirga did not make this any clearer: it did not discuss the terms of reconciliation with militants, and instead asked the government to develop its own framework on both reintegration and reconciliation efforts. Nevertheless the Jirga's final declaration had two important components related to reconciliation: one was a call for the removal of the militants' names from blacklists; and another was a call to release the militants and Taliban prisoners from Afghan and ISAF prisons.

³ In a discussion paper, Matt Waldman, from Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, Harvard University, writes about failures and weaknesses of previous attempts to reintegrate the insurgents and militants into Afghan societies in *Golden Surrender: The Risks, Challenges, and Implications of Reintegration in Afghanistan*, published by Afghanistan Analysts Network in April 2010.

Reintegration and reconciliation: What is missing?

The general Afghan population has a basic right to know about the government's reintegration and reconciliation plan and to understand if it addresses their frustrations and can put an end to the ongoing violence in the country. From a practical perspective, however, communicating the details of the plan would also help build the support and trust of the people for both the plan and for the Afghan government. This would mean talking with community elders, women, youth groups and other civil society organisations nationwide. Moreover, the focus should not just be on those parts of the country most affected by the insurgency. Reintegration and reconciliation is not just about talks with the Taliban leadership. It should be a national plan for the thousands of Afghan men fighting for the Taliban, many of whom are not fighting on ideological or 'resistance' grounds alone.

Afghan women's groups and civil society institutions have repeatedly expressed their concerns about the lack of transparency around the reintegration and reconciliation plan and have called on the government not to compromise on the constitutional rights of its citizens. Nevertheless, there is a consensus among civil society groups that the country does need to find political ways to end the violence and that a reliance on military means alone will continue to generate popular disenchantment, particularly as civilian casualties mount.

To succeed, the government's reintegration and reconciliation plan must address four key issues. First, it must be based on a comprehensive analysis of the causes of ongoing instability in Afghanistan. Threats to the stability and security of Afghanistan do not start nor end with the various insurgent groups that are labelled Taliban. The often predatory and self-interested behaviour of some of the country's warlords, regional and local commanders and power brokers also pose major threats to Afghanistan's stability.

Based on discussions with many youth groups in the central northern provinces, I found a growing feeling that they were being marginalised in political, social and economic reconstruction programs.⁴ Indeed, the unbalanced allocation of development aid throughout Afghanistan is sowing the seeds of future problems. Much of the development effort seems

⁴ Discussions with youth groups in central and northern provinces including Parwan, Bamian, Balkh, Daikund and Faryab.

aligned with the international community's counter-insurgency goals, but one consequence of this is that it effectively rewards those areas where there is violence and militancy. Meanwhile, the growing disillusionment of jobless and angry Afghans elsewhere is largely being ignored. What are the incentives and rewards for those who did not join militants and whose districts were declared opium-free? As one group I interviewed said:

'We didn't grow poppy, we supported the government and we embraced non-violent means to raise our concerns, but the government of Afghanistan and the international community focuses only on insurgency-afflicted areas. We feel we don't matter to the government or the international community because we didn't pick up guns and fight. Do they want us to pick up guns and fight and then they will reintegrate us and provide us with incentives?'

The risks here are obvious: a large proportion of the Afghan population is under the age of 25, possibly as high as 60-65 per cent. They have typically been ignored by the Afghan political process and the international counter-insurgency strategists, but are already a key recruitment pool for local and regional insurgent groups. There were only a few young women and men as Jirga delegates and their voices were overshadowed by the tumultuous presence of the powerful warlords and government officials within the Jirga.

Second, the reconciliation components of any reintegration and reconciliation plan need to be clear. The plan presented at the Peace Jirga seems to suggest that any militants willing to drop their guns and renounce violence would be welcomed with a reintegration package that includes financial incentives and also amnesty from further prosecution and any accountability for their crimes.

Many Afghans believe, however, that the mere provision of financial incentives to insurgents will be counter-productive and unsustainable. The poor state of Afghan national finances and the uncertain commitment of Afghanistan's current international backers bring into question the ability of the Afghan government to sustain such incentives into the future. If such financial incentives are the main motivating factor for militants to withdraw from insurgency, what will happen when those financial incentives are no longer there?

Moreover, there is a serious question about whether reintegration can really happen before reconciliation. Many Afghans believe that we cannot look to the future without addressing the past, and addressing the past is not about mere legal prosecutions, but remembering and condemning injustices, creating platforms for the victims and their families to express what they have gone through and healing those wounds. Past crimes were not only committed by the Taliban, but also occurred during the civil war in the 1990s and in the past nine years since the fall of the Taliban regime.

Even in traditional customary laws of Afghanistan, reconciliation in its simplest form is about dialogue between two opposing groups or tribes, or even individuals. Elders (as part of a tribal *jirga*) question them, condemn their wrongdoings and make a decision that both groups adhere to and, as a result, the people in the community feel justice is rendered. By excluding the opposition and ordinary Afghan voices, the Peace Jirga also went against the traditional practices of typical Afghan *jirgas*.

On May 9, 2010 a 'Jirga for the victims of wars' was organised in Kabul by more than 25 civil society and human rights organisations and was attended by hundreds of ordinary Afghans from across the country. As one attendee noted, 'I don't want revenge, I want justice. I want to know why they did what they did and I need them to at least admit it and apologise to the people'. Another woman, whose entire family was killed in 1992 and whose husband was imprisoned during the years of Taliban rule said, 'peace cannot come without justice for what happened to us'. Likewise, relatives visiting the site of a mass grave of people killed during the communist period argued that President 'Karzai has no right to give amnesty to anyone. We don't forgive or forget. Only if his own son was buried here can he give amnesty.'

No such process of reconciliation is happening in Afghanistan, nor does it seem likely in the future. The so-called Amnesty Law, officially gazetted by the Ministry of Justice in early 2010, closes doors of reconciliation, but grants blanket amnesty to all fighters who ruined the country and took Afghan lives.

Indeed the Peace Jirga seemed to reinforce this idea. For example, it was repeatedly noted that the Taliban should not be called or referred to as terrorists, but rather as the 'angry brothers' of Afghans. The use of such terminology only reinforces fears that the crimes committed by insurgent groups will be ignored, provided they are prepared to lay down their arms.

Third, the reintegration and reconciliation plan must address the concerns of the women of Afghanistan, who constitute more than 50 per cent of the population and have most at risk in any political settlement. Because they have not been consulted properly in the villages, communities and even in the cities where they are still the victims of inhumane treatment, torture, domestic violence and structural discrimination, women activists and groups fear that even their minimal achievements since the overthrow of the Taliban regime will be compromised for a political deal that will not, in any case, bring peace.

The Peace Jirga only served to heighten those concerns. Women were only granted 25 per cent of the seats (and only due to heavy international pressure). Only one of the 28 committees was led by a prominent woman MP, the rest of the committees had women as note-takers and deputies. During the three days, no plenary speech opportunity was offered to any woman to express women's concerns and perspectives on what could happen if Taliban militants were incorporated in to the government.

However, before reaching any decisive steps to reconcile with the Taliban militants, the prospect of such reconciliation for the progress of Afghan women needs to be carefully examined. While the Peace Jirga delegates constituted a large number of women, participation is not about filling empty seats but being able to shape the agenda and influence decisions as well. Unfortunately, the final declaration did not reflect women's concerns and perspective pertaining to peace talks. Any talks or processes intended for peace have to proceed with a firm commitment to women's participation and progress as non-negotiable, otherwise Afghanistan will again be returning to the dark days of its past.

Finally, any effective reintegration and reconciliation effort will need to provide incentives for Taliban leaders to join the process. The Afghan government was either unable or unwilling to secure the participation of any militants and Taliban leaders in the Peace Jirga (those former Taliban that attended the Jirga are now effectively part of the government). But without Taliban representation the movement's members will not accept the Jirga's decisions. When the Afghan intelligence services, police and army, and international forces are all mobilised against the insurgency then it seems unlikely that insurgents will come and join any political processes. Some claim that fighting and talking can take place at the same time, but the insurgency in Afghanistan is not like a conventional war where there are clear demarcations of the enemy and the state. In such circumstances, a counter-insurgency strategy itself precludes the options for

talks and reconciliation. A rapid reconciliation and peace deal might happen if the insurgents were losing, but that is not the current situation.

Conclusion

Many agree that the solution to Afghanistan's many problems cannot come from military efforts alone. However, incentive-based reintegration and reconciliation, built upon an insurgent-focused paradigm, is equally unlikely to succeed. There needs to be a nationwide initiative that brings together all Afghans from all tribes and ethnicities, and from all provinces, be they volatile or relatively peaceful. A band-aid strategy that aims to buy off the insurgency without producing long-term, justice-oriented solutions will not be sustainable.

Indeed, even if such efforts bring short-term peace, many Afghans will ask 'peace at what cost?'. The strategies presented so far by the government of Afghanistan do not address the concerns and doubts of many Afghans about the parameters of any peace deal. Many Afghans believe that if the larger issues of representation and equal treatment of all are not incorporated into the plan, then the result will not be peace, but a worse condition. What is required is a comprehensive approach that includes a genuinely national consultative and consensus-building process and efforts to address both broader governance failures and other threats to Afghan stability and security (not just the Taliban insurgency). A comprehensive approach needs to address past injustices inflicted on all Afghans if enduring peace and stability is to be achieved.

As expected, the most important casualty of the Peace Jirga was justice: justice not in its abstract form that everyone read poems about, but justice in practical terms. There was no mention of the war crimes during the civil war, nor the injustices and violence inflicted on the Afghan nation in the past nine years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since the age of 17, Wazhma Frogh has worked as a writer, reporter, and social activist. While living in Peshawar from 1992 to 2001, she organised community-based empowerment programs for women, travelling frequently into Afghanistan's most insecure provinces in support of these efforts. In 2001, she returned permanently to Afghanistan to continue her work advocating social and legislative change to benefit women's rights. In 2009 she was one of eight international recipients of the US Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Award, and was presented with the award by US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton and the US First Lady Michelle Obama. Ms Frogh is currently a postgraduate fellow at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom.

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