

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



November 05, 2018

## Has the Status of Women Changed in Afghanistan?

Human society is a changing phenomenon. The changes in it are inevitable and are bound to occur. Therefore, those who are really interested to achieve something positive from these changes have to understand the nature of these changes and try to divert them towards better destinations instead of trying to block their ways.

Afghan society is also one of the societies in the world and it has to go through the process of change. Nevertheless, mostly the changes have been negative in Afghan society and these changes have made Afghan people suffer to a large extent, the changes have been there and they will be there as long as Afghan society exists and the people live in it. Yet these changes have influenced everyone, the weaker strata of society, especially women; have been largely influenced by them.

The changes in Afghan society must be analyzed from two perspectives. The first one must be analyzed from within Afghan society, keeping in consideration the social changes that occur with the interactions and development within the social institutions and other actors. Such a perspective depicts that Afghanistan is a tribal society with a slow pace of changes. The traditional culture and norms and values are strict and slow to change. Moreover, education, that can be a source of change, has not been able to penetrate Afghan society properly. Most of the rural areas still do not have schools and proper education. In addition, the education that is being provided contains obsolete curriculum that does not help much in changing the mentality of the people and thus the society as a whole. This slow pace of changes within Afghan society does not help much in changing the position of women. They, to a large extent, are still suffering from the discriminatory rules and regulations and social behaviour.

Extremist and strict religious beliefs and practices have also made the changes less frequent. Strengthened by extremist religious institutions, these beliefs and practices have no positive approach towards changes and consider them evil. They also support the patriarchal setup and keep the discrimination against women intact and even invigorate it. The political changes are also very slow as the political setups, in most of the areas, are non-existent. The democracy has not been able to reach to grass root level as local bodies are not chosen through any sort of election. The setup, therefore, is authoritative and dominated by tribal lords and extremist religious leaders, who do not welcome the positive changes at all.

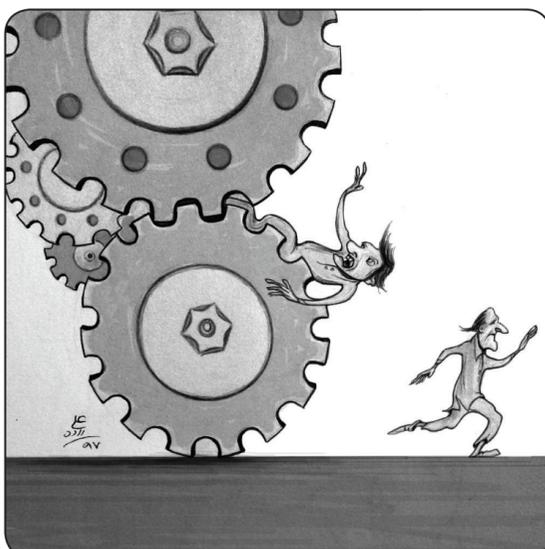
The other perspective of changes in Afghan society must be understood in its relations with regional and international community and actors. The involvement of international community has strived to impose liberal and democratic changes in Afghan society. Though, it has been successful to a certain extent, the real changes are yet to be seen. Afghanistan is now recognized as a democratic country. It has had its two regular elections. There are considerations and emphasize on the rights of minority, women and other weaker strata of the society in the constitution and many other developments have been made as well; however, they are prevalent only in the major cities while the rural areas have not yet seen their impacts.

The regional countries on the other hand have always strived to promote and gain their interests in Afghanistan. They have not been supportive enough in bringing about long-lasting changes in Afghanistan. Another important factor to consider regarding the nature of changes that may occur in the times to come in Afghanistan's socio-political scenario is the ongoing transition period. As the Afghan government seems to strike a deal with Taliban militants, there may be many compromises in the deal that may lead the society towards further religious extremism and backwardness.

The changes so far made and occurred and the ones that may follow do not seem to have much consideration regarding the rights of women and gender balance. Women have been discriminated and they may further be influenced by the future changes to a large extent as they are one of the weaker strata and weaker strata are influenced by transitions and instabilities to a large extent.

Moreover, women fear the return of Taliban-like era and fear that all the developments made for improvement of the status of women may be lost unless wise decisions are made. In the political bargain with Taliban for the peace process, it is possible that government may make certain compromises among which the law regarding the rights of women may suffer further.

Therefore, it is really necessary to understand the nature of mentioned changes and try to direct the efforts of the international community and regional players and also of the Afghan government itself in bringing about real changes in Afghan society and keep the consideration for better values through the changes that may occur. The social psychology of Afghan people in this regard can also make a big difference; therefore, efforts must be to bring about considerable changes in that regard so that people are able to see women, their role and their status with a different perspective. This way it would be possible to see the status and role of Afghan women rising in the society.



## Waves of Criticisms against Silence of Uruzgan Tragedy

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Khas Uruzgan is one of the most vulnerable places where Hazara people are repeatedly suffering from imposed violence on them. The last catastrophe, which inflicted irreparable damages on the life of already deprived people, has raised waves of criticisms and hatreds among the people. The circulation of death body's pictures and burnt-destroyed homes embodied a fearful scene of ruthlessness, and raised a lot of questions throughout the country. A number of young generations condemned the silence of the government and especially the conservative stance of Hazara leaders.

Some of the local activists criticized the government silence calling it meaningless and deliberate; Qurban Ali Urzagani, the former governor of Daikundi, described it extremely tragic and destructive. He said, after a surprise Taliban attack nearly 42 people including small children, men and women were killed; dozens wounded and their houses were either destroyed or looted. As a result, more than 400 displaced families live in temporary mosques and shelters, and so far they have not received any emergency assistance from any organizations. Because of freezing weather in Uruzgan and lack of basic requirements, the lives of hundreds of men, women, and children are extremely at risk.

According to Qurban Ali Urzagani, Taliban were equipped with modern weapons and governmental facilities. It seems that some circles try to belittle or hide the tragedy but the span of tragedy was beyond their ability to conceal the issue. He criticized the governor of Urzagani because he justified Taliban's act as if they have carried out the attack on a local commander, Shujjae, with contribution of local people. While numerous civilian were killed or arrested, and on the other hand, Taliban fighters have repeatedly tried to seize Uruzgan strategic location in order to penetrate to Ghazni province, but have faced severe local police resistance. However, in the last clash, Taliban 23 Taliban were killed and also a few injured and arrested.

Following the long government silence, the Second Vice President Sarwar Danish also criticized security institutions for being unaware or negligence of a Taliban attack over people in Khas Urozgan district of Urozgan province. Speaking at an event in Kabul, Danish said that Afghan security forces must provide urgent support to residents of the area. "Hundreds of families have been displaced. Unfortunately, no action has been taken either by local authorities or security organs in the center to safeguard people against Taliban attacks," he said. VP Danish further said that some governmental spokesmen were even unaware of the situation in the province.

He added that residents of the area came under "Taliban's brutal attacks" because they are supporting the central government. "Security forces must defend the innocent people of this area as soon as possible, through every possible means. They should not allow this issue to be changed into another knot," he emphasized. Meanwhile, Danish urged residents of the area to strongly defend themselves against attackers and bullies and not to give up

to the invaders.

Thus, the Uruzgan Provincial Council members and lawmakers criticized security departments over not paying attention to security problems in the province. They said security challenges have plagued the province for the past many years, but according to them, relevant departments have not acted against them. "Trinkot and six districts are about to fall. This is not a new problem; it has existed over the past two and half years. People are killed every day and there is conflict every day," said Amanullah Hotaki, a member of Uruzgan Provincial Council.

"It is about two months that Trinkot (the provincial center) is about to collapse," Mohammad Hanif Hanifi, a lawmaker, said. "There are security forces in Uruzgan If they really know their duties, there will be no need for other (forces)." Atiqullah Amarkhel, a former military officer, said.

In addition to this, they (the security officials) have also shown their inability in defense of Faryab key bases that fell to Taliban. It is warned by experts if the central government do not take prompt measures regarding Faryab, then Dawlatabad, Sherin Tagab and Khwaja Sabzposh districts would collapse and there was also possibility of the fall of Maimana. A Taliban member in Dawlatabad district confirmed the capture of the base, said three police were killed, and 15 others held hostage. According to local media news, Dawlatabad road that also fell into the hands of insurgents. "The contact between Dawlatabad and Shergin Tagab districts is broken, no village or area is under the government control. The fall of the last base means the two districts are besieged." According to media reports, there is no security post on the highway between Maimana, the provincial capital, Khwaja Sabzposh, Sherin Tagab, Dawlatabad and until Qaramqul district as all posts had been captured by the Taliban.

Eventually, almost one week after the event, the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MoI) informed that they have sent more troops to resolve security problems in Urozgan. "More security and defense forces have been deployed to the area and fortunately now the security situation is under the control of government forces," the deputy spokesman Nusrat Rahimi said. Thus, President Ashraf Ghani directed government forces to address security problems in Khas Uruzgan district. "Because government is too busy in most parts of the country, sometimes problems in some places are not addressed soon," said Nabi Misdaq, an advisor to President Ghani.

Overall, the reactive approach of security forces should be changed to proactive approach otherwise their ever late and reactive approach cannot revive the lives of innocent children, men, and women. In addition, the displaced people must be rescued from various diseases, deaths, and freezing weather. As aforementioned dozens of civilians in Hussaini (comprising 8 sub-villages) Kariz and Kondalan area in Urozgan are in extreme need of emergency assistance.

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## The Khashoggi crisis: Putting Humpty Dumpty back together

By: James M. Dorsey

The killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and potential Western sanctions against Saudi Arabia has sparked renewed debate about the value of the longstanding alliance between the United States and the kingdom. The debate is not limited to the US or the kingdom, both of which are assessing the reliability of the other even if that is a debate that is waged in Saudi Arabia behind closed doors. It is also being discussed in Europe where like in the United States commercial and strategic interests are pitted against values.

And it is on the minds of Israeli leaders who increasingly have concluded that they need to temper expectations that Saudi Arabia would be able to lead a Sunni Muslim alliance in the Middle East capable of confronting Iran and countries like Turkey and Qatar viewed as Islamists akin to the Muslim Brotherhood. Israel increasingly looks at its relationships with Gulf states in transactional rather than strategic terms.

No one is contemplating a full rupture in relations, yet leaders on all sides of the divide realize that the Khashoggi crisis is a watershed that at the very least has fundamentally changed perceptions. Tempered expectations did not stop Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu from travelling to Oman last month, the first such visit in more than two decades, or his culture and sports minister, Mir Regev, from going to Abu Dhabi.

The crisis has consequences even for powers like Russia and China that are unconcerned about rights and other Western concepts of universal values but worry about the threat posed by ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim Islam to their soft underbellies in the Caucasus and Xinjiang.

It calls into question Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ability to make good on the pledge to steer the kingdom towards an undefined form of 'moderate Islam' by cowing the kingdom's religious establishment into submission and shaving off of the sharp ends of Wahhabism with actions such as lifting the ban on women's driving.

Much like the United States has in the past two decades had to cope with the fallout of Saudi Arabia's embrace of an ultra-conservative interpretation of the faith, Russia and China, with their own history of militant attacks, will increasingly confront similar risks.

That is particularly true for China that has framed its crackdown on Turkic Muslims in its north-western province of Xinjiang in what amounts to an almost unprecedented assault Islam as a fight against extremism and political violence.

At the core of the Western debate about Saudi Arabia's viability as a reliable ally are several myths, including the belief that Saudi leaders over the decades were reformers who needed to tread slowly and cautiously in changing norms in a deeply conservative society as well as the notion that Saudi Arabia propagated an austere, ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam that threatened US interests. A critic of Prince Mohammed, Georgetown University historian Abdullah Al-Arian last year combed through 70 years of New York Times reporting that repeatedly depicted Saudi leaders as reformers rather than conservative leaders who over the decades made unavoidable accommodations with modernity to fulfill their part of a social contract and ensure their own survival as leaders. For sure, Saudi Arabia and the United States certainly never did and do not see eye to eye when it comes to values, particularly with regard to human rights and basic freedoms.

Yet, Saudi global funding of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism often served US purposes as an anti-dote to communism during the Cold War, no more so than in Afghanistan in the 1980s when ultra-conservative militants forced the departure of Soviet troops and set the stage for the demise of communism or when

the kingdom helped the Reagan administration circumvent a Congressional embargo on the sale of arms to the Contras in Nicaragua.

That convergence of Saudi and US interests was severely dented by the 9/11 attacks with 15 of the 19 perpetrators hailing from the kingdom even if both sides realized that they were interdependent. The jury is out on whether the Khashoggi crisis constitutes a significant setback to Saudi Arabia's US-backed regional ambitions, and if so to what degree.

The discovery by Saudi rulers that they share conservative family values as well as political interests when it comes to President Donald J. Trump and Israel with evangelists and fundamentalist Christians, a significant voting block in the United States and part of Mr. Trump's support base, is emerging as one route to counter perceptions of the kingdom's moral standing having been undermined.

Saudi Arabia, to fudge the growing perception of a lack of shared values with the United States reflected in Saudi actions, particularly since the rise in 2015 of the Salmans, King Salman and his son, Prince Mohammed, has poured tens of millions of dollars into public diplomacy and lobbying in the United States. As part of the effort, the Salmans have sought to project the kingdom as a beacon of religious harmony despite its discrimination of Shiites and long-standing history of prejudice against Jews and Christians.

To that end, they have redirected vehicles the kingdom once used to promote its austere, intolerant interpretation of the faith such as the World Muslim League, to advocate inter-faith harmony.

Working through the kingdom's various lobbying groups in Washington and contracted US public relations and lobbying firms, the league last month, as the Khashoggi crisis erupted, organized a conference in New York attended by Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders to discuss a cultural rapprochement between the United States and the Islamic world and countering extremism.

The league's general secretary, Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, a former Saudi justice minister, who in the past in line with ultra-conservative precepts denounced witchcraft defined as including, among other things astrology, the use of plants for medicine, palm-reading, and animal calling, has emerged as the kingdom's prime spokesman on religious tolerance.

Mr. Al-Issa has advocated tolerance and moderation, promoted dialogue, denounced violence against Israel and recognized the Holocaust, major steps for a country that once tailored its visa requirements to bar Jews from entry.

Mr. Al-Issa was last week present in a meeting between Prince Mohammed and US evangelical leaders close to Mr. Trump, including Reverend Johnnie Moore, Israel-based evangelical political strategist-turned-novelist Joel Rosenberg, former congresswoman Michele Bachmann, and prominent religious broadcasters.

The visit, despite evangelical denials had as much to do with US politics as it was about shared values. Reverend Pat Robertson, a key figure in evangelical circles, made that clear on his influential Christian Broadcasting Network.

Closely following Mr. Trump's statements on the Khashoggi killing, Mr. Patterson went from warning days after the journalist's disappearance that "you don't blow up an international alliance over one person" to denouncing Prince Mohammed.

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