

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



October 06, 2018

## Afghanistan National Assembly: Promoting Gender Equity As A National Priority

A gender-sensitive parliament is one that is responsive to the needs and interests of both men and women in its structures, operations, methods and in its work. The term 'gender' refers to the social attributes associated with being male and female and the relationships between women, men, girls and boys in a given society. These attributes and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization. The concept of gender also includes the expectations about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviors of both women and men, and when applied to social analysis, reveals socially constructed roles. Sex and gender do not mean the same thing. While sex refers to biological differences, gender refers to social differences; as a result, they can be changed by the society, since gender identity, roles and relations are determined by it.

### How Afghanistan can have a gender sensitive parliament

A gender-sensitive parliament is founded on the principle of gender equality – that is, that both men and women have an equal right to participate in its structures and processes, without discrimination and without reprimand. Parliaments that are gender-sensitive have no barriers to women's full participation and set a positive example (or role model) to society at large. They are institutions which favor less aggressive parliamentary language and behavior; and gender-sensitive training programs for all MPs.

An Afghan gender sensitive parliament shall meet the basic premise of gender equality, where rules are accessible to all MPs, do not exclude, restrict or discriminate against women, and provide for gender neutral language. It shall be an organization that accepts the need to review all policies, laws and practices from a gender perspective, either through a dedicated committee on gender equality or by sharing that responsibility across all bodies of the parliament. It shall work in accordance with gender equality policies which provide direction for setting priorities against strategic and well-targeted interventions to achieve the goal of gender equality in the country.

In becoming gender-sensitive, Afghan parliament shall adopt the strategy of gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing and taking into account the impact on women and men of any planned action – including legislation, policies or programs – at all levels and in all spheres. Its ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality. It is understood as strategies that put gender issues at the center of broad policy and program decisions, institutional structures and resource allocation.

Mainstreaming gender equality in the work of Afghan parliament should contribute to effective implementation and oversight of legislation and policies that address the needs and interests of both men and women.

### How Afghan Parliament can mainstream gender equality

Afghan parliament can mainstream gender equality by promoting gender equality and aiming at achieving it within society at large. To do so, it therefore shall mainstream gender throughout its work processes and outputs. Members of Parliament can assume the responsibility to mainstream gender in their everyday activities: legislating, overseeing and representing.

In legislating, Afghan MPs are required to draft and debate laws and policies, and review and approve the national budget. From a gender perspective, Afghan MPs shall initiate gender equality laws and institute gender-based analysis of all legislation; they shall ask questions about the effect of the proposed law on men and women during legislative debates; and shall consider whether taxation and the allocation of expenditure is equitable for men and women, or at least does not have a negative effect on either.

Afghan MPs always need to remember who the target public of a draft law is, and be aware of how that bill may affect different sub-groups of that public, most particularly women and men, girls and boys. In carrying out their oversight responsibilities, Afghan MPs scrutinize government activity and expenditure through debates, questioning and inquiries. For example: during question time (or interpellation), shall seek to ask ministers about the effectiveness of their programs in terms of gender equality. Raising questions in this forum attaches publicity to an issue; they can send written questions to ministers or their departments when they require more substantial responses, including sex-disaggregated data; during budget debates, they can question Afghan ministers on public expenditure and its impact for women and men, girls and boys.

Assessments of the overall Afghan national Assembly members, especially the Wolesi Jirga members, show that low attendance, a preoccupation with presidential decrees and only a nominal oversight of the executive are the main characteristics of the current Afghan National Assembly members. Further, most of the MPs have failed to carry out their roles in many areas including contributing to gender equality in the country. As a result, it is expected that the coming MPs shall better represent the Afghan citizens and especially contribute to gender equality as a national priority in the country.

## Achieving Religious Harmony in a World of Fear and Populism

By James M. Dorsey

A podcast version of this story is available on Soundcloud, Stitcher, TuneIn and Tumbler.

Edited version of remarks made at the Inter-Religious Organization Singapore, 1 October 2018

This is a tough time for men and women of the cloth, at least those whose message is one of peace, tolerance, mutual respect, equality and inter-faith dialogue.

Underlying the rise of populism, nationalism, protectionism, fear of the other, anti-migrant and anti-foreigner sentiment, and hate speech is an erosion of the norms of debate. Articulation of hate speech has become permissible, if not fashionable. Often blunt and crude language employed by leaders, politicians and some people of the cloth help shape an environment in which civility has been lost.

Intolerant, racist and supremacist have risen in significance even in democratic societies that project themselves as open, tolerant guarantors of equal rights irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, religion, colour or sexuality. Suppressing those voices through laws and bans drives hate speech and racism underground, it doesn't erase or eradicate it. Countering it with a message of tolerance and mutual respect won't erase it either but can help shape an environment in which those principles become dominant again.

Let's face it, prejudice is a fact of life. Its inbred in whatever culture each of us adheres to and whatever education at home and in schools that we have enjoyed, irrespective of how conservative or liberal our family and societal backgrounds are. We all were raised on implicit or more explicit notions that our culture is best or by implication other cultures are not as good.

In other words, prejudice is not the issue, it's how we deal with it, how we manage it. The problem arises when we lose our sense of relativity, when we adopt an absolutist approach, the high way or no way. It arises when pluralism is thrown out the window and we abandon the notion that our world is populated by a multitude of equally valid faiths, worldviews and belief systems.

To quote Mahatma Gandhi, a deeply religious Hindu, who said in 1942: "I believe with my soul that the God of the Qur'an is also the God of Gita and that we are all, no matter by what name designated, children of the same God. My whole soul rebels against the idea that Hinduism and Islam represent two antagonistic cultures... To ascent to such a doctrine is for me a denial of God."

In the battles in the late 1940s and 1950s over a proposed national ban in India on the slaughter of cows, Gandhi declared himself a worshipper of cows whom he regarded with the same veneration as he viewed his mother. Yet, Gandhi, went on to say that "the Hindu religion prohibits cow slaughter for the Hindus, not for the world. The religious prohibition comes from within. Any imposition from without means compulsion. Such compulsion is repugnant to religion."

On a visit in 1942 to a German camp populated by Indian prisoners of war captured from the British during fighting in North Africa, Subhas Chandra Bose, a deeply religious leader of the Indian independence movement, reportedly warned inmates that "if you use religion to unite yourself today, you leave the door open for someone to divide you later using the same sentiments."

Recent history validates Bose's warning, not only in India and Pakistan, but across the globe expressed in Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and anti-Shiism, just to name a few, as well as in conflicts, wars and brutal repression in places like Syria, Yemen and the north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang.

Many of you represent faiths with multiple sects, legal schools and interpretations – proof that your belief system in the narrow context of that system is open to multiple interpretation. Some of those interpretations may be intolerant, anti-pluralistic, supremacist. They too are a fact of life, like it or not. Countering them depends on the social environment one creates, a sphere within which men and women of the cloth have an important role to play as well. It is also a function of the social and economic policies implemented by governments.

Indeed, the key is not suppression, what is suppressed doesn't go away, at best it goes into hibernation, only to re-emerge at some point in the future. The key is containment, communities and societies that make discriminatory, racist, supremacist expressions socially taboo. That key is not enforcement by force of law but by social custom and an environment in which those expressions are continuously challenged in public debate, social settings and individual encounters. I am not talking about political correctness that stifles debate.

Leaving aside those whose beliefs are absolute and intolerant of any other view, a majority of people gravitate towards the middle. It's what some call

moral shock or what former trader Nassim Nicholas Taleb dubbed black swans coupled with economic, social and societal uncertainty and political manipulation that drives people towards more literal, absolutist, intolerant beliefs.

It is those circumstances in which normally tolerant communities and societies become more amenable to those beliefs. It's what allows men like Slobodan Milosevic or Bashar al-Assad to turn societies where inter-communal relations and inter-marriage were the norm into wastelands in which one community tries to exterminate the other.

Think of Bosnia Herzegovina in the 1990s that seemingly transformed overnight from a beacon of harmony into a hell or the tensions in multiple countries ranging from Bahrain to Nigeria or the tenth parallel that journalist Elizabeth Rush aptly described as the fault line cutting across Africa and Asia between more strident forms of Islam and Christianity.

The last two decades have witnessed a renewed hardening of fault lines, not just ones between strands of Islam and Christianity, but across the board. This latest round started in 2001 with the moral shock of the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington and subsequent attacks across Europe as well as in Asia and Africa that continue until today. 9/11 was the death knell of multi-culturalism and the cradle of the latest wave of Islamophobia and rising anti-Semitism.

The economic financial crisis of 2008/2009 with its decimating effect on the lower and middle classes, the flourishing of jihadism, the impact of heinous attacks close to home and the fear, a human being's most irrational emotion, that generated the breeding ground for populism, nationalism, protectionism and the return to primordial, absolutist beliefs propagated by multiple sources, including men and women of the cloth.

To be sure, the groundwork for this pre-date 9/11, fuelled by some strands of Christianity, massive Saudi funding across the globe of ultra-conservative strains of Islam, and the use of religious intolerance by leaders and governments because it served a political purpose.

Pakistan illustrates what this can produce. The tolerant and live-let-live types live in a bubble, primarily in Pakistan's three foremost cities, Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. The gravity of society has shifted towards intolerance, anti-pluralism and supremacism. Ultra-conservatism has been woven into the texture of segments of society and the culture of some institutions of the state. It is a world in which absolute truth rules supreme, discrimination based on an absolute truth is anchored into law, competence is determined not exclusively on the basis of merit but on what faith one adheres to, democratic freedoms are curtailed. Mob lynching becomes acceptable, violence against minorities the norm, and anti-blasphemy the tool.

It's a trend that is not unique to Pakistan and not unique to the Muslim world. It is a trend that is nurtured by the rise of populism, nationalism, authoritarianism and autocracy visible across Western societies, the Muslim world and Israel, in other words irrespective of cultural-religious roots.

In most, if not all of these countries, significant segments of the population have no real stake in society. Intolerance, anti-pluralism, racism and supremacism fuel the perception of disenfranchisement and marginalization that often produces a sense of not having anything to lose. It is some combination of religious ultra-conservatism, exclusivist ethnic and nationalist sentiment, and lack of a stake that creates breeding grounds for militancy and extremism.

Men and women of the cloth working in Singapore are in many ways privileged. While Singapore regulates hate speech or expressions it believes would undermine harmony, it has been successful in ensuring that all segments of the population have a stake in society – perhaps the most important factor in combatting discrimination, racism and supremacism as well as militancy and extremism.

Singapore demonstrates messages of tolerance and inter-ethnic and inter-faith harmony can and will be heard in a political and social environment that fosters mutual respect and dialogue.

There is however one caveat. Peace and harmony in society requires peace and harmony at home. The divisions and animosity between different religions and ethnicities at large are reflected in divisions and animosity within faith groups. Tolerance, mutual respect and dialogue starts in one's own community and its message is as credible as one practices it without exception. That probably requires a redefinition of the concept of absolute truth. That's a tough order, but no one claims that ensuring that a peaceful and harmonious existence and future would be easy. It also is a litmus test of one's sincerity.

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## Optimism Lingers Even With Peace Talks Stalemate

By Hujjatullah Zia

The peace deadlock remains unbreakable despite all sacrifices paid by Afghan soldiers and civilians and casualties sustained by US-led NATO troops for more than a decade. Peace and stability are still elusive, albeit Kabul government sought all possible ways to stabilize the country.

In the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly, Afghan Chief Executive Officer Dr. Abdullah, however, said Afghanistan had "turned a page" toward peace in the last year and called for the support of world leaders in getting to "a new phase free of violence" in Afghanistan. He said Afghans "pose no danger to anyone" and seek to "play a constructive and collaborative role" in the region.

Despite the recent escalation in insurgency, Abdullah said the country is in its best position since 2011 to start a process resulting in peace talks with the Taliban guerilla fighters.

Abdullah's statement in the UN General Assembly is believed to be in direct conflict with the real situation in Afghanistan as the death toll increases among soldiers and civilians, especially with the presence of the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which was responsible for 52 percent of civilian casualties within the first half of the current year, based on the UN report. ISIL declared its Khorasan Province, known as ISIL-KP, on 26 January 2015 in Afghanistan and appointed the former Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan militant Hafiz Saeed Khan as its leader, who was killed in US drone strike in July 2016. The ISIL-KP was widely involved in sectarian violence as it targeted Shiite ethnic group from its establishment up to now.

On the other hand, the Taliban hold out against negotiation with Kabul government and continue their insurgency. They stormed Ghazni province in August, which left hundreds of people, including soldiers and civilians, dead. This attack came after the Taliban held talks with the US diplomat Alice Wells in Qatar. Although the two sides were optimists and deemed the negotiation important and productive, insurgency did not only fail to decline but intensified and the Taliban's unprecedented attacks on Ghazni filled the air with disappointment. In short, the intensification of violence could minimize the optimism generated by the US-Taliban talks.

The US-Taliban talks were described as a "preliminary" discussion to set up

a channel between the group and senior US officials for further meetings. Therefore, the Taliban are said to prepare to send a delegation for further talks with the US officials and their discussion will include exchange of prisoners. "We would hand over a list of prisoners languishing in jails across Afghanistan. If they set free our prisoners then we would meet again for another great cause," an anonymous source is cited as saying.

While the Taliban are willing to talk to the US, they refuse to enter into any negotiations with Afghan government. There is no indication yet of the insurgent leaders showing any flexibility in their headline position on this matter. If the Taliban continue their insurgency in Afghanistan and in the meantime pursue negotiation with the US, it will be no more than a political game which has been ever played by the Taliban without any positive result for Afghanistan. So, which country will be able to push the Taliban to peace table with Kabul government?

As part of the promised cooperation on not providing shelter to Pakistan's enemies on Afghan soil, the allies of Kabul government, in drone attacks in Afghanistan, killed a number of TTP leaders including Mullah Fazlullah and four other senior TTP commanders. This was followed by the killing of Umar Rehman, another leading TTP commander. The US would add that earlier when drones were operating more frequently in Pakistan and Afghan air space, former leader Baitullah Mehsud, Hakeemullah Mehsud, Said Khan Sajna, Mufti Waliur Rahman, Qari Hussain, Azam Tariq and Shahidullah Shahid were all eliminated. Also, in each of the past three years, there were fewer than 10 drone strikes in Pakistan, down from a high of 117 in 2010. Now both Kabul and Washington expect Pakistan to use its leverage in nudging the Taliban to peace table with Afghan government.

With sending a delegation to Kabul, Imran Khan's administration promised to support Afghanistan in peace issues. Thus, there is still room for optimism about fruitful talks.

It is self-evident that if non-violent mechanism does not come to fruition and the Taliban continue their insurgency, Afghanistan and its allies and neighboring countries will have to intensify their attacks and the real war is won through the consistent dismantling of the network, their sanctuaries, their training grounds and recruitment centers and their financial systems.

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