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The Afghanistan Elections: Continuing the Strategic Cooptation of Women's Rights

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AALIYAH HUSSAIN, SEP 3 2014

On April 5th 2014, Afghan people turned out in numbers to have a say in the future of their country, in the presidential elections. Around 7 million people, out of a population of 12 million, exercised their right to vote for a leader, 36% of them women. As predicted, the first count did not result in an outright winner, and a second run-off poll on 14th June between the two front-runners, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, was followed by accusations of fraud by both sides, and has left the country in a state of political limbo while the UN carries out a comprehensive audit of every single one of the 8 million votes cast being recounted.

There has been a frenzy of discussion and analysis of the elections, particularly on the high level of participation of women, both as voters and as contestants for provincial seats, as to what this could mean for democracy in Afghanistan. Presidential candidates spoke openly about their views on women's status and outlined their plans, in varying degrees, for women's equality and progress, and one candidate even had a female running mate. Abdullah and Ghani have both made it clear that they support women's rights and participation in public life if they are elected (McKirdy 2014; Qureshi 2014). However, with a new president on the horizon, and with a full NATO withdrawal planned for the end of 2014, the future of women's rights in Afghanistan looks anything but certain.

The Presidential Elections: Myths and Half-Truths

Even a brief analysis of mainstream media reports, as well as commentary from the United States government and the United Nations, reveals the dominance of a particular narrative surrounding the elections, especially following the first round. The narrative that was most forcefully circulated by what some post-colonial scholars view as the so-called 'neo-liberal imperium' (Ling 2002) was that the elections were largely peaceful, free, and fair. These elections were viewed as a symbol of the victory of democracy over the violent extremism of the Taliban. President Obama and UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon publicly congratulated the Afghan government for securing 'peaceful' elections, and praised the Afghan people for their bravery in deciding to vote in the face of threats of violence from the Taliban. The perceived success of the elections centered on repeated assertions that there was a notable lack of violence associated with them (Harooni and Donati 2014), but while it is true that there were no attacks in Kabul on election day itself, the run-up to the election was marred by high-profile attacks against key targets across the country, including a high-profile attack at the independent election commission in Kabul (Graham-Harrison and Amiri 2014). And as for the rest of Afghanistan, particularly in rural areas where over three-quarters of the Afghan population live (Trading Economics 2014), election day was far from peaceful. In several provinces where the Taliban still hold sway, particularly in the South and East of the country, houses were sent "night letters", warning villagers that they would be killed if they voted, or if voting ink was found on their fingers (Ahmed 2014). This threat of violence was realised in over 600 attacks across the country, as the Taliban planted roadside bombs on routes to polling stations and successfully kept millions of voters at home in fear of reprisals. In other provinces, it wasn't the Taliban, but other warlords supported by private armed groups that prevented Afghan citizens from exercising their right to vote independently (Wendle 2014).

Furthermore, the assertion from certain groups that the elections were relatively fair and free from corruption is particularly worrisome, given the extensive fraud that actually took place across the country, going by the number of

The Afghanistan Elections: Continuing the Strategic Cooptation of Women's Rights

Written by Aaliyah Hussain

complaints registered with the Electoral Complaints Commission, half of which have been made against the Independent Election Commission itself (Hamdam 2014). Although it is estimated that incidences of fraud were lower than in the 2009 elections, it must be questioned why the reality is being glossed over. This echoes the previous elections, which were so fraudulent that UN diplomats came to public blows over it (Murphy 2014). At that time, the United States government also preferred to refer to Afghan elections as 'messy', rather than call it the 'fraud fest' that it was (ibid), and nevertheless accepted Karzai's re-election as the only viable option. Then, the strategic need to keep Karzai in power, and Afghanistan 'stable', was deemed to be of greater importance than upholding the principles of democracy through the practice of free and fair elections. Now it appears that true democracy has come second to US national interest once again, but this time in a slightly different way. Now, the priority for the US is to ensure the presence of a 'legitimate' president and government that they can secure a bi-lateral security agreement with, in preparation for the withdrawal of NATO troops at the end of 2014. The immediate response from the United States following the June 14th fraud accusations was to fly in John Kerry to broker a power-sharing deal between the two candidates, regardless of who actually 'wins' the election, post-audit. Desperate for stability and hopeful that one side will concede defeat, the United States are willing to sacrifice democratic norms in favour of political stability and military strategy.

With both Abdullah and Ghani having indicated that they will sign the bi-lateral security agreement with the United States, Afghanistan should be prepared to have thousands of American troops stay on Afghan soil long past 2014, immunity from prosecution for American troops, unrestrained night raids and house searches, and a steady flow of profit for the American military-industrial-congressional complex (Stanizai 2014). It would arguably be difficult for the United States to justify a continued military relationship with the Afghan government, if it were deemed that the elections were fraudulent and that the new president had no legitimate mandate. Therefore, hailing the elections as a success (BBC 2014) has very much been part of an official strategy to ensure a smooth transition of power and continued American military presence and economic control post 2014.

The Strategic Cooptation of Women's Rights, Again

One of the ways that this 'myth of success' has been propagated has been through the focus on the 'high' level of women's participation in the elections. Women made up more than a third of voters, and also ran for public office in higher numbers than has been witnessed for several decades. One of the most widely circulated types of photograph accompanying mainstream headlines on Afghan elections was that of a *burqa*-clad woman holding up an ink-stained finger to prove that she has voted (as in Henderson 2014). This type of imagery has almost universally been framed as an act of defiance in the face of Taliban threats of violence against voters, particularly women, and as proof of the ultimate victory of democracy and women's rights over the Taliban's misogynist and undemocratic ideology.

However, we can arguably understand this use of imagery and rhetoric as a 'strategic co-optation' of the women's rights agenda in order to further the United States' military and geopolitical goals (Hunt 2002). Let us remember how the women's rights agenda was first strategically co-opted by the United States government in the war on terror, when they cited the plight of Afghan women as a justification for the invasion in October 2001. The 'liberation' of women from the oppression of the Taliban regime was presented as part of the reason to begin bombardment of Afghanistan. Following Laura Bush's address to the nation in which she urged 'civilized' people to back the war because 'the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women' (Bush 2001), what began as a war for avenging the 9/11 terrorist attacks was thus deliberately re-framed as a war for women's rights, in order to rally support from the American public (Bunting 2011; Fluri 2008). However, this 'feminist' justification for intervention and the approach to 'liberating' Afghanistan's women through war, can arguably be understood as a pretext for military occupation and political domination, rather than a genuine 'humanitarian rescue'. The appropriation of women's right's discourse for the purposes of foreign policy objectives was no more than a cynical ploy to justify and legitimize the USA's violent response to 9/11, and we are seeing it being used once again in order to justify the United States' current chosen strategy in Afghanistan.

Now, as the war is being wrapped up, it becomes necessary for the United States to sell the war as a success, not only to its own public, but to the international community. The longest war in American history must be seen to have been worth the cost, in terms of blood let, lives lost, and dollars spent. Both the entire military endeavour and huge

The Afghanistan Elections: Continuing the Strategic Cooptation of Women's Rights

Written by Aaliyah Hussain

financial investment into Afghanistan was propelled by theories of the securitization of democracy and development, in particular women's empowerment. Security and development are inextricably linked in neoconservative justifications for the war, which stated that stability, democracy, and economic prosperity would create a country that would no longer be a safe haven for terrorists, and thereby serve the US national interest. The securitization of Third World women's development outcomes in particular (with emphasis on participation in public life) feature prominently in national security discourses, which place the 'empowerment' of Afghan women as integral to a lasting and stable peace in the country, and victory for NATO (NATO 2010). The success of the democratization project depends hugely on the perceived 'progress' of women in Afghanistan, whether this is epitomised by women throwing off their *burqas* and *chadors*, or by women queuing in their hundreds outside polling stations as a sign that they are equal citizens in a fully fledged democracy that respects women's right to participate in public life. However, the truth for most Afghan women is that their lives are no more democratic, fair, or free than before, and neither were the elections.

Women and War

The most startlingly obvious cause for the suffering of Afghan women, yet one that has been silenced by dominant discourses on security in Afghanistan, is the war itself. Narratives on the plight of Afghan women often neglect to acknowledge the impact that war and foreign occupation have had and are still having on the daily lived reality of Afghan women. While much is made of the possible 'outbreak' of civil war after NATO withdraws, and what damage it could do for the women's rights cause, there is little or no mention of the effects of the current war, nor reference to the fact that women have been living under conditions of insecurity and conflict for over three decades – sadly, war is nothing new to them, and it is known that women suffer disproportionately during it.

The narratives that erase the devastating impact of the current war on terror serve to perpetuate the myth that all Afghan women have somehow benefited from US intervention. The reality is a much more nuanced picture. While there are no doubt some women who have indeed benefited from various socio-economic projects funded by international donors, there are many others who have seen an increase in restrictions, violence, poverty, and insecurity during the period of occupation. Thirteen years of bombardment, counterinsurgency, night raids, and drone strikes have affected ordinary Afghan women's lives in the way that only war can.

More than three decades of war have left Afghanistan with endemic poverty, a destroyed infrastructure, a broken economy, limited access to basic services, high levels of violence and insecurity, and the breakdown of law and order (outside of Kabul). War has caused more suffering to many Afghan women than any so-called 'cultural backwardness', as has often been used to explain the return to more conservative values in recent years. Rather, we should understand that women hold a *symbolic* value in society, as objects upon which visions of society are imposed. During times of conflict, and especially foreign occupation, gender roles become polarized and objectification intensifies; women's bodies become sites of contention, a battleground for competing visions of society (Cortright and Persinger 2011; Giles and Hyndman 2004; Anthias *et al.* 1989).

Furthermore, in the heightened context of a US military invasion, the insistence on a 'women's empowerment' agenda is often interpreted, as it has been in the past, as a 'Western plot' to undermine the country's 'traditional' culture and values (Barakat and Wardell 2002; Rostami-Povey 2007). The heavy-handed approach that has been imposed from the outside has only served to strengthen resistance, with detrimental outcomes for women's freedom and opportunities in the public sphere, as well as increasing restrictions and violence in the private sphere. The backlash in Afghanistan is evident where, despite major international pressure, President Karzai has become increasingly conservative, pandering to 'religious' leaders as a way of proving his nationalist and anti-American stance. Curtailing women's rights during wartime can be seen as a way to resist outside interference and to uphold the 'traditional' values of their society, due to the symbolic role that women place in the nation and state. Therefore, it should be clear that attacks on women's freedom are not taking place *despite* the war, but *because* of it.

The Myth of Women's Empowerment

A picture has clearly been painted by the United States and the mainstream media of the great strides that Afghan

The Afghanistan Elections: Continuing the Strategic Cooptation of Women's Rights

Written by Aaliyah Hussain

women have made in the past 12 years due to the US-led military intervention and their commitment to securing women's rights. The common terms we hear include 'empowerment', 'liberation', 'freedom', and 'progress', and we are urged to do all we can to ensure that 'struggled-for rights' and 'hard-won gains' are not eroded in the coming political and military transition. However, this is a partial truth, one that does not reflect reality for the vast majority of Afghan women.

While life may have improved for a thin layer of society in Kabul's more educated classes, life remains a struggle for the rest, and has deteriorated for a significant many. However, there have been several reports from the UN, NATO, and NGOs, commenting on the progress that has been made for women. In particular, they point to the statistical improvements in schooling rates and levels of participation in national politics and employment, as well as the introduction of new laws that seek to cement the constitutional rights of women as equal citizens, and advocate for the 'hard work' to continue. (UNWOMEN 2011; ActionAid 2011; ISAF 2013). However, we should be wary of such one-sided claims of progress, as the effects of 'women's empowerment' activities in Afghanistan are often reported by the organisations that are leading these projects, and there is a distinct silence on alternative interpretations of the women's rights agenda. While it may be true that more girls are attending school and more women are taking up jobs outside the home, these changes are concentrated in urban areas. Elsewhere, there is little evidence of this 'progress', and for most rural Afghan women, constitutional rights and female representation in national politics have not translated into improvements in their everyday lives, especially in those areas still under the influence of the Taliban or other conservative elements. It is important to remember that Afghanistan is still an overwhelmingly rural country, with many parts outside the influence of central government. In these provinces and villages, Afghan tribal custom prevails over national law, and power over women often lies in the hands of fathers, brothers, and in-laws – not parliament and its laws (Yassari and Saboory 2010).

The status of women in Afghanistan is still extremely contested, and subject to political wrangling, and the last year has seen an escalating series of serious attacks on the legal and political rights of women. In 2013 alone, a landmark law to prevent violence against women was pushed out of parliament, the quota of seats for women on provincial councils was cut, and a proposal to reintroduce stoning as a punishment for adultery was put forward by the justice ministry (Graham-Harrison 2014). Earlier this year, parliament passed a law that gagged victims of domestic violence by preventing relatives testifying against each other, effectively legalizing domestic violence against women and children (Arbabzadah 2014), although it was later modified on Karzai's orders. Human Rights Watch and Afghan women's organisations report that cases of suicide and self-immolation have reached an alarming high, and violence against women is soaring, including so-called 'honour killings' and punishment for 'moral crimes' (Human Rights Watch 2013). Bearing this mind, it does not appear that 12 years of US occupation have 'empowered' Afghan women in the way that may neoconservatives argued that it would. The fact remains that after all the rhetoric and the promise to 'strongly stand by the women of Afghanistan' (Clinton 2012), it is still one of the worst places in the world to live as a woman (Graham-Harrison 2014).

Conclusion

With this in mind, it is hard to be optimistic about the elections as proof that democracy is functioning as it should in Afghanistan. While there is talk in the media about electoral 'milestones' being made by women voters, almost all reports fail to mention the fact that the female proportion of the vote was slightly lower this time around than in 2009, when women made up 38.75% (EIC 2009) of the voting population, and the number of women candidates for provincial seats was also lower than in previous provincial council's elections (Heinrich Boell Foundation 2014). The dearth of female candidates for the presidential office shows part of a disappointing trend when compared to previous elections: in 2009, there were two female presidential candidates, and in 2005, one female candidate ran for office (Fleschenberg and Athayi 2014).

Furthermore, when you look at net voter numbers, only 1 in 5 Afghan women actually voted – meaning that an overwhelmingly large majority of women did not participate in the elections at all. Women's 'empowerment' does not occur when 80% of the female population are completely absent from the democratic process.

From a military perspective, the war in Afghanistan has been a failure, and yet the headlines urge us to be proud of

The Afghanistan Elections: Continuing the Strategic Cooptation of Women's Rights

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our achievements, bringing Afghanistan out of the darkness into the light of democracy and prosperity. The war for Afghan people's hearts and minds has not been won, and women have not been 'liberated'. It should seem obvious that war does not bring lasting peace, nor will it bring emancipation for women, or create a fully-fledged Western-style democracy in the liberal Capitalist vision.

Afghan women have been used again and again to uphold whatever narrative the United States government seeks to circulate in order to further its military and geopolitical objectives, and the elections have been no different. Many women's rights activists in Afghanistan are refusing to accept the dominant narrative that the elections are a symbol of victory for women and democracy, which heralds the beginning of a better future for them. In fact, they are hesitant to share in the enthusiasm about the supposedly groundbreaking presidential elections, insisting that 'the end of female struggle will not come from a ballot box' or a new political regime (Sadar 2014). Rather, they point to the effects of war and foreign interference in their country, as well as the continued domination of the political landscape by an elite made up of former warlords and strongmen, who see women's rights as nothing more than a bargaining chip in their negotiations to maintain power. As such, even though the elections have been trumpeted as a 'political awakening' (Mihara 2014) for the country, ultimately, for women, it is just more of the same.

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The Afghanistan Elections: Continuing the Strategic Cooptation of Women's Rights

Written by Aaliyah Hussain

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The Afghanistan Elections: Continuing the Strategic Cooptation of Women's Rights

Written by Aaliyah Hussain

About the author:

Aaliyah Hussain is a PhD candidate at the Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick. She can be contacted at aaliyah.hussain@warwick.ac.uk.