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Afghanistan: Reconciliation plans, tribal leaders and civil society

by Thomas Kirk

A reading of the Afghanistan's troubled history against recent explorations of the contemporary conflict question the wisdom and trajectory of the current peace talks for creating a lasting end to the violence. Current efforts at reconciliation should carefully pinpoint the country's powerbrokers and uncover Afghanistan's voiceless civil society.

In a recent article *The Washington Post* details the great efforts being put into secretive negotiations currently taking place with insurgent leaders in Kabul. As the Americans reportedly take pains to discern the level of power of each of the participants, optimistic analysts note that the incumbent government and its international surrogates recognise the need to involve members of Pakistan's various *shuras*, the importance of regional actors' participation and the necessity of defining boundaries between moderate and irreconcilable elements. Furthermore, drawing lessons from previous conflicts, a growing body of commentators posit the country's tribal elders as the silver bullet with which to drive reconciliation. However, episodes from the nation's violent cyclical history, combined with an appreciation of the nature of Afghanistan's current conflict, suggest that if bypassed Afghanistan's civil society will carve its own violent path towards peace.

Before proceeding it seems important to outline what this essay means by the contested term civil society. Most observers, historical and contemporary, suggest that civil society is a sphere of peaceful activity located in the gap between the state, economic and personal realms.¹ Narratives suggest that membership of civil society has progressively widened from elite groups agitating for rights in 19th and 20th century Europe, to transnational networks protesting against authoritarian dictatorships, socioeconomic exclusion and human rights abuses across the globe. However, all examples share the trait of the voluntary association of individuals, and increasingly transnational actors, in pursuit of varying public socio-economic goals. Furthermore, it is commonly accepted that although distinct from the state, actors from within civil society are not prevented from interacting with politic process and policy formation. For more radical Habermasian interpretations civil society acts as a guard against capitalism's excesses, overbearing elites and the erosion of basic rights.² While for neoliberals civil society complements and helps the state facilitate the global spread of democracy and economic liberalisation.³ Most definitions also allow for the existence of 'bad' elements within civil

¹ Jean, L Cohen & Andrew Arato (1994), *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Massachusetts, MIT Press.

² Habermas, J. (1996) *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

³ Kamal Pasha, M (2002) 'Savage Capitalism and Civil Society in Pakistan'. In: Wiess, A and Gilani, S (2002) *Power and Civil Society in Pakistan*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

society, which it is usually suggested occupy themselves with particularistic, sectarian and violent goals.⁴

Regardless of which camp one adheres to, under functioning states, the civil sphere provides actors a safe site from within which to debate, negotiate and mobilise in support of public issues. To paraphrase London School of Economics' Professor Mary Kaldor, civil society's activity consists of 'negotiating, pressuring, bargaining and influencing the centres of economic and political power in pursuit of agreed social goals'.⁵ Civil Society is the voice of forgotten publics in a world enthralled by economic and militarised power.

It seems intuitive therefore, that at its most basic and when struggling to survive in an environment such as Afghanistan, 'good' civil society would be concerned with securing a lasting peace. Unfortunately, the only formula for identifying these elements is a thorough and deep appreciation of Afghanistan's society, its history, its groupings, their interests, needs and the context within which it currently finds itself.

Conflict and Reconciliation within Afghanistan

Dubbed an 'exit conference' and accused of being designed to strategize the beginning of the end of Western engagement in Afghanistan, January's London summit laid down a set of challenges familiar to observers of histories attempts at resolving seemingly intractable conflicts with reintegration and reconciliation programmes. Utilised to provide a measure of closure to conflicts in South Africa, Kenya, Bosnia, Algeria, Cambodia and Rwanda, the concept is also invoked in debates over the resolution of conflicts in Sudan, the Middle East and Somalia.

Copying largely failed efforts in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), current reconciliation plans involve the Afghan government, supported by its international allies, negotiating an end to hostilities with insurgent groups in return for a degree of political inclusion. Historically, roughly half of the countries that have embarked on transitions of this type have reverted to conflict within a few years. Elaborating all of the reasons for this dismal record would require a lengthy study; however, it is this paper's argument that without widespread civil society buy in reconciliation will only prolong violence.

The current peace talks should be viewed as the continuation reconciliation efforts begun some years ago and first publically aired at the London conference. Previous discussions have been led by United Nation's envoys, Saudi diplomats, EU political officers, military officials and intelligence operatives. However, as the recent London conference was taking place activist's from Afghanistan's civil society groups expressed their concern that they were being sidelined. In their opinion there exists a real "threat that the international community is about to sacrifice the rights of the Afghan people on the altar of political and military expediency".⁶ In particular, it is argued that Afghanistan's women and children will suffer the most from narrow consultations on the direction of the reconciliation plan.

Within Afghanistan reintegration and reconciliation has historically been pursued under the Program Tahkim-e-Solh (PTS), which has enjoyed support from the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) since 2007. However, suffering from a leader

⁴ Keane, J (1998). *Civil Society, Old Images, New Visions*. Cambridge, Polity Press.

⁵ Kaldor, M. (2003). *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*. Cambridge, Polity Press.

⁶ Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International Asia-Pacific Director. <http://www.undispatch.com/node/9515> (22/03/10)

lacking in political capital amongst anti-government elements and, in the case of Musa Qala, shown unable to protect former insurgents from reprisals, the programme has met with little success to date and been accused of misreporting its own progress. Furthermore, past attempts failed to cultivate widespread endorsement from the international community, regional players and Afghanistan's civil society.⁷

It is apparent that the process has two distinct elements; reconciliation and reintegration. Successfully reintegrating insurgents poses a unique set of problems for policy makers that have been examined in depth by Eric Jardine writing for the *Small Wars Journal*.⁸ They include the creation of perverse incentives for ordinary Afghans wishing to access the programme's opportunities and the difficulty of protecting inductees from reprisal attacks; incidentally, the obstacles experienced to date. Yet, as it will be argued, to stand a good chance of succeeding, in both the short and long term, it is crucial that reintegration comes second to a reconciliation plan supported by the majority of Afghanistan's population.

History illustrates that within Afghanistan 'conflicts considered to have been resolved can reappear and jolt the social climate in the national and international arena'.⁹ Both the Soviet's support of the Najibullah government following their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and the Western coalition's partnerships with warlords following the Bonn Agreement in 2001 created the conditions for a return to violence. The former episode witnessed the *Mujahedeen* seize power from the Soviet's puppet regime only to be ousted by a grass roots movement rallying against persistent infighting, corruption and human rights violations several years later. The movement, contemporarily known as the Taliban, mobilised a mix of students, teachers, tribesmen, Pashtun nationalists and foreign jihadists to wrestle power from Afghanistan's rulers. In hindsight, it is arguable that in all but name the Taliban were a creation of Afghanistan's exhausted civil society.

The later episode allowed the same group to rebuild its support base over 2002-5 by once again promising an alternative to a corrupt, foreign installed, government comprised of re-empowered warlords.¹⁰ The irony of the reason for the Taliban's initial rise and subsequent rebirth is not lost on Afghanistan expert Michael Semple who describes elements of the contemporary insurgency as working at "cross purposes" to international forces.¹¹ Furthermore, contemporary indications that warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami may be accommodated by any reconciliation process suggest policy makers have not learnt their lesson from history.¹² Within this context, the fears of civil society groups over the place of human rights and the future role of women in any post-conflict settlement should be taken to sound the county's prospects of long term stability.

⁷ Page, J, Giustozzi, A & Masadykov T, [2009], 'Negotiating with the Taliban: Towards a solution to the Afghan Conflict', *Crisis States Research Centre*, DESTIN LSE, Working paper no. 66, January.

⁸ Jardien, E, [2010], 'Buying the Enemy: Demobilisation Programmes in the Midst of Counterinsurgency', *Small Wars Journal*, March 10. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/384-jardine.pdf> (18/03/10)

⁹ Nets-Zehngut, R, [2007], 'Analyzing the reconciliation process', *International Journal on World Peace*, 24.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch [2002], 'Afghanistan's Bonn Agreement One Year On: A catalogue of missed opportunities', Briefing Paper, December. <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2002/12/04/afghanistans-bonn-agreement-one-year-later>

¹¹ Michael Semple, speaking on the future of Afghanistan at LSE's 'Brahimi Panels', 9/03/10.

Simultaneous Surges

Paraphrased into something akin to *clear, hold, protect, build and negotiate (and perhaps quietly leave)*, the international community's current strategy for Afghanistan has borrowed heavily from historical sources: Obama's commitment of 30,000 extra troops over the course of 2010 invited numerous comparisons to the trajectory of Iraq's troop surge. This is further evidenced with the current belief that the extra boots on the ground and the sharp rise in drone attacks in Pakistan have put the insurgent leadership on the back foot. The strategy also mirrors that used to in Northern Ireland to bring insurgents to the negotiating table in 1994; a military presence designed to prevent anti-government forces from reaching the population, complemented with an offer of a role in any proposed political settlement. However, it will be argued that although expressed in vastly differing ways, in both Northern Ireland and Iraq the authorities' strategies enjoyed a broad amount of popular support. Disillusioned by the inability of violence to effect change, civil society was intimately involved in bringing about the conditions for stability and delineating who was eligible for a seat at the negotiating table.

In Ireland's case this is denotable in the creation of Initiative 92 which described itself as a citizens' inquiry comprised of civil activists that collected opinions from the community and political parties. They were joined later by a dialogue facilitating coalition of business leaders known as the G7. Civil society's desire for an end to violence was also evident in the construction of the multi-party Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in 1994 and in the establishment of the Northern Ireland Forum in 1996, both of which contributed to the Good Friday Agreement. Although these bodies were not responsible for the technical challenges posed by negotiations and operated alongside backchannel talks, they included public representatives and involved ordinary people in the negotiations in an indirect and sometimes direct way. It is also noteworthy that the electoral process for selecting the representatives to take part in negotiations provided an opportunity for over ninety percent of the electorate to choose the actors who took part.¹³

Within Iraq's far more militarised and violent context, 2005 witnessed the emergence of Sheik Abdul Sattar Buzaigh al-Rishawi's 'Anbar Awakening Council'. It provided a localised pacification model that eventually spread throughout the country. Although outside support and foreign money proved pivotal, this localised civil society movement heralded a sea change in ordinary Iraqi's appetite for continued insurgency. By 2008 the America military was in a position to hand over the running of the Awakening's militias to the national government and the following year 62 per cent of the population voted in the Iraq's second election since the fall of Saddam.

Sceptics contend that it was simply case of replacing the monopoly of violence by one section of society in favour of another and that bloodshed only dropped once Shia militiamen had achieved the sectarian cleansing of Iraqi cities. However, by choosing not to capitalise on their strength of arms and impose their will on a beleaguered population the militiamen can be viewed as extensions of the people's desire to see a return to ordinary politics. Moreover, although the preferred option, it is surely fanciful for commentators to expect populations overtly familiar with violence, used to the absence of the rule of law and living under comprised civil

¹³ Clem McCartney [1999], 'The Role of Civil Society', *Accord*, Conciliation Resources, December. <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/northern-ireland/contents.php> (19/10/03)

institutions, to trust in the ability of central authorities to counter the extremists that plagued Iraq's society in 2005.

In both cases it has been shown that a military surge met a secondary, and most likely simultaneous, surge from a civilian population united in their opposition to continued violence. Viewed against Afghanistan's cyclical history and the willingness of the population to independently remove unpopular overlords by arms, it is clear that civil society must be partners to any serious attempt at reconciliation. Many believe the west has found its partners in Afghanistan's tribal society.

Afghanistan's Tribes and New Wars

In recognition of the need for a large measure of popular buy in, much attention has been given to the inclusion of tribal leaders in any peace talks. Premised on the belief that tribesmen living in the Pashtun belt make up the majority of the insurgency's recruits, the tribal elder is posited as Afghanistan's equivalent of an Irish civil society spokesperson or awakened Iraqi chieftain. It is to him that policy makers will turn when looking to consult ordinary Afghans on plans for reconciliation. A diverse range of figures such as British Foreign Secretary David Miliband at the international level, Afghan President Hamid Karzai domestically, US Special Forces Major Jim Gant tactically and historian Steven Pressfield academically support versions of this idea.¹⁴

Afghanistan's current conflict manifests itself in a myriad of different ways across the country's thirty four provinces, multiple ethnic groupings and varied landscapes. As outlined earlier, violence has roots in events before the coalition's invasion in 2001 and has since spread across the country's porous borders into neighbouring Pakistan. Globalisation has internationalised and intensified Afghanistan's conflicts, with a variety of actors contributing to the turmoil. Viewing Afghanistan as an arena in which to conduct proxy wars, garner profits and set up base, outsiders provide ideologies, funding, arms and manpower.

The war economy that has built up over thirty years of conflict has blurred easy distinctions between farmer, opportunist, petty criminal, smuggler, narcotics dealer, mercenary, warlord, insurgent and transnational jihadist. Moreover, the contemporary insurgency is indescribable as a homogenous phenomenon and must be carefully examined in each locality it arises. Combatants fight for reasons as different as adventure and revenge, economics and honour codes. This complexity, captured in Mary Kaldor's concept of 'new wars', lends weight to the argument that the label of Taliban is something of a misnomer when applied universally to anti-government elements within Afghanistan.¹⁵

Although ethnographic concerns remain over the wisdom of a Pashtun centred approach, it is David Kilcullen's extensive experience of the insurgency throughout the Islamic world which is most problematic for proponents of the tribal thesis.¹⁶ Kilcullen's analysis suggests that tribal society has been severely ruptured by the 'hybrid' nature of Afghanistan's new war. His

¹⁴ David Miliband - <http://www.maximsnews.com/news20100311UKDavidMilibandaddressAfghanistan11003110101.htm> (22/03/10)

Major Jim Carter, 'One Tribe At a Time' -

http://blog.stevenpressfield.com/wpcontent/themes/stevenpressfield/one_tribe_at_a_time.pdf (22/03/10)

Steven Pressfield - <http://blog.stevenpressfield.com>

¹⁵ Mary Kaldor [1999], *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge, Polity.

¹⁶ David Kilcullen [2009], *The Accidental Guerrilla*, Hurst and Co, London.

depiction of the exogenous factors operating upon tribes in insurgencies explains his ‘accidental guerrilla’ thesis and subsequent assertion that 90 per cent of insurgents within such conflicts are reconcilable. For Kilcullen, the tribal elders’ positioning as a civil society spokesperson has been comprised by the nature of the challenge posed by *Takfiri* inspired global insurgency and the presence of Western forces.

On one hand traditional tribal society has been broken by the infiltration of a virulent extremist ideology peddled by emboldened local *mullahs* and foreign jihadists promising adventure, an end to corrupt local officials and a semblance of basic governance. This manifests itself in the establishment of law courts and rudimentary dispute resolution utilising principles of *Sharia* law. Dissenters, unable to protect themselves with force, money or appeals to local authorities, face the prospect of extreme brutality. On the other hand, socialised by years of warfare, tribal leaders have to contend with a collateral damage prone International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) trumpeting a corrupt central government and a circus of intrusive development projects. Engagements with such actors must be checked against an inherited value system based on principles of *Ghayrat* (honour), *Dod-pasbani* (cultural autonomy) and *badal* (revenge).

Appreciating the oscillation of Afghanistan’s tribal leaders between the Afghan central government (backed by coalition forces), their own interest and extremists should give pause to those designing consultations for Afghanistan’s reintegration and reconciliation programme.

Furthermore, the difficulty of utilising a tribal focus in reconciliation discussions has also been illuminated by a US spy chief authored report stating that the intelligence apparatus in Afghanistan “could barely scrape together enough information to formulate rudimentary assessments of pivotal Afghan districts” and was “only marginally relevant” to NATO’s overall plan. It continues by citing a US officer’s assertion that the international community is ‘no more than fingernail deep in our (*its*) understanding of the (*Afghan*) environment’.¹⁷ The establishment by the US military of two dedicated ‘Afghan Hands’ units to increase understanding of the operational context Western forces find themselves in also points to a large gap in knowledge.¹⁸ As highlighted in Bob Woodward’s new book, evidently, the West is playing catch up with regards to its understanding of the social and political environment in Afghanistan.

Crying ‘It’s the Tribes Stupid’ and trawling history for counter insurgency templates applicable to tribal societies has it benefits.¹⁹ It suggests centralised authority is unlikely to be accepted in the near future and that insurgents know they simply have not to lose to win. However, it cannot account for the interplay of globalisation, new wars and *takfiri* ideology on the tribal system. It also fails to acknowledge that the aspirations, grievances and needs of Afghanistan’s civil society exist within the same space. As Kilcullen points out, the Pashtun belt is the ancestral home of the ‘accidental guerrilla’ and, unlike in Iraq, the region’s tribes have a long history of interacting with outsiders advocating violence against central authorities. Moreover, tribal leaders have not proven averse to throwing their lot in with a variety of foreign elements when the situation suits them. Criminals, smugglers, spies, rebels, insurgents and even Kilcullen’s irreconcilable 10 per cent have all found allies among the elders. The failure of the

¹⁷ Major General Michael T. Flynn, Captain Matt Pottinger, Paul D. Batchelor, ‘Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for making intelligence relevant in Afghanistan’, *Centre for a New American Security*. <http://www.cnas.org/node/3924> (22/01/09)

¹⁸ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125479517717366539.html> (22/03/09)

¹⁹ <http://blog.stevenpressfield.com/ep-1/> (23/03/10)

current insurgency to fully unite Afghanistan's tribes under the banner of opposition to Western forces should not be taken to signify a rejection of violence and a desire for a holistic reconciliation plan. Instead it should merely serve as a reminder that elders are willing to accommodate the wishes of whoever fits their interests at any given moment in time.

Conclusion

In the rush towards a negotiated reconciliation and international drawdown an intelligence community unfit for purpose, coupled with an idealised view of tribal elders' ability to act as enlightened powerbrokers, must not be allowed to dash chances for a lasting peace in Afghanistan. The necessity of understanding Afghanistan's social context and canvassing ordinary Afghans' opinions at the sub tribal, at the very least sub *loya jigra*, level is revealed in light of examples from similar conflicts. Encouragingly, such work is already being conducted by a variety of organisations and researchers interested in locating Afghanistan's civil society. A failure to peel back the complex layers of Afghanistan's new war and engage beyond men with guns not only risks the subordination of civil society's voice and a return to warlordism, but the potential of historical repetition and many more years of violent instability.

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