

## **Backward or forward, that is the question.**

A researcher's reflection in a conflict/post-conflict context

By Huma Saeed

*Acknowledgment: This trip was financially made possible thanks to funding from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues at the Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO) who generously allocated office space for me when I needed a quiet corner and offered me support throughout.*

I just came back from a two and half month trip to Kabul, which was organized around my Ph.D. fieldwork. I am a student of criminology at the Leuven Institute of Criminology, University of Leuven, where the core of my research entails a study of state crime in relation to the violation of socio-economic rights in the context of transitional justice. Notwithstanding this background, however, there is always a latent 'anthropologist' within me, no matter where I go or what I do. It fascinates me to observe my surroundings, absorb it and contemplate upon it subsequently. This reflection therefore involves side observations from my stay, which I believe become an inseparable part of any researcher's work and may, inevitably, have implications for our work no matter how "objective" we tend to remain.

The experience was very intense throughout, precarious at times, and exciting all along. It was intensive both because there was much to be done in a short time but also it happened during a particular and important moment in the recent history of the country, namely the problematic presidential election and its ultimate result that eventually was announced after four months of scuffle between the two candidates. The political intensity and uncertainty was so obvious it could be seen in the eyes of a shopkeeper, a schoolgirl, a taxi driver, a government official and an international aid worker, among others. It created a lot of uncertainty and anxiety among all Afghans, but also an opportunity to gauge the past few decades of conflict. Among the elites (politicians, civil society activists, the MPs, etc.) the pessimists were talking of the occurrence of yet another civil war, like the country experienced in the 1990s. The optimists, on the other hand, believed that Afghanistan and its people had reached a level of political maturation that would not allow the wheel of history to go back, yet again. Such debates were ongoing in electronic and printed media that have been burgeoning in the country and which are being considered as one of the hallmarks of the Karzai administration. The ordinary Afghans, however, did not seem as divided in terms of their views of the future. Most people simply seemed so fatigued by decades-long conflict and political disagreements, so concerned with earning daily bread that all they desired was peace and stability, a government that could provide them with the basic services such as an income, health, education and shelter, no matter who eventually seized the seat of power.

This sentiment and response was most obvious when millions of eligible Afghans went to the polls on April 5<sup>th</sup> and again for a run off on June 14<sup>th</sup> 2014 to cast

their votes. They did so while being wary of the dangers it entailed. The insurgents had issued warnings about attacking and bombing the polling stations and the voters. In the western Herat province the blue colored fingers of a number of elderly men were chopped off. Nevertheless, ordinary people showed an unprecedented willpower and resolve not only to say 'no' to the insurgents, but also to demonstrate their level of political maturation, in particular their appreciation of modern and representative democratic institutions and the electoral process. Alas, many voters felt they were let down despite the risks they took to vote and became disenchanted with the post-election power plays that preceded the eventual selection of the new president. On a number of occasions, I heard fellow Afghans stating that they felt so proud when millions voted, and prouder yet for the ability of the national security forces to protect them during voting. The voting process received wide national and international coverage, but with everything that happened afterwards many felt disappointed and even embarrassed for the nation. The latter was in part due to what many Afghans perceived as interference by John Kerry and other American officials on a number of occasions, suggesting that Afghans could still not resolve their own disagreements.

However, the post-election mood changed almost overnight when Ashraf Ghani was declared as the new president, despite the fact that the exact number of votes casted for each candidate, counted and re-counted under the supervision of national and international observers, had not been announced. Though there are many concerns regarding the formation of the new unity government, and chief among them is security, people felt relieved when the deadlock was at last broken. After all, many decisions in everyday life of people had been put on hold, awaiting the outcome of the elections. Some had had job interviews but were told they had to wait until the result was announced. A number of local NGOs with whom I talked were not certain about their funding situation and thus the future of their work because their international donors had told them that all funding decisions were on hold. National and international investors and the business community were not making decisions. Prices of certain key commodities had shot up while the Afghan currency lost value against the dollar and other key currencies. The Ministry of Finance announced that if the political situation did not improve soon, the government would not be able to pay its employees. These side effects of the inconclusive elections compounded the uncertainties many people felt and added to an already palpable sense of insecurity.

But the intensity was not just political; it was as much social and cultural as well. Kabul is a city originally made for one and a half million people. The current inhabitants, however, reach up to five million. The population density also means vehicle and transportation density. Private cars, which once used to be a rarity only belonging to the well off, nowadays have become a property of most families. This creates a lot of atmospheric density that also makes the 'going around' experience very intense. Moreover, although once upon a time there used to be people labeled as the 'Kabulis', today's Kabul is a heterogeneous mix. While most of the Kabulis have fled to the Western countries, the city today is filled with people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, internally

displaced persons (IDPs), and the returnees. This demographic heterogeneity has also led to cultural diversity. In Afghanistan, there has always been a stark cultural divide between the rural and urban parts. However, that now collides in Kabul. Moreover, the returnees from Pakistan and Iran have brought with them elements of those cultures, thus introducing new shades and colors to the existing one, which are sometimes accepted and other times labeled as either too radical or too conservative. A process of acculturation indeed is taking place, which is evident in every office space, from government to NGOs, in every home, at educational institutions and in the city at large. But is it new to the country? A cross road between Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, Afghanistan has always been a melting pot for different cultures across centuries. Arguably, it is more the degree, the players, the shades, the means, in short the content that changes, not the context.

The landscape and architecture of the city has also changed substantially. Savagely destroyed during the civil wars of the 1990s, under the Karzai administration, many returnees attempted to rebuild their homes, if they were lucky to get their land back in the first place and had the means to do so. Over five hundred kilometers of roads have been paved, or repaved. However, what is most striking is the construction of numerous little cities or *shahrak* as the locals call them. This phenomenon has skyrocketed in the last ten years, most of them built illegally; that is without the government's approval. Furthermore, more often than not, they are made without consideration of construction norms and standards, let alone the aesthetics. They were erected as a response to the millions of returnees who found themselves shelterless, and for whom the government had no plans, but most significantly they have become an important feature of land grabbing in Kabul and elsewhere in the country, a phenomenon as rampant as corruption itself, or perhaps because of it. Other mansions have also been built thanks to the revenues from endemic corruption and narcotics. Most of them, which are built with an appalling taste and are sometimes labeled as narcotecture or poppy palaces, are rented by international organizations and sometimes embassies.

The physical appearance of the city creates a stark contrast, encompassing the dichotomous relationship among its inhabitants: the extreme rich vs. the extreme poor, the national vs. the international, the educated and cultured vs. the non-educated, and so on. On the one hand we witness the gated and enormously protected communities that are built for the internationals, the high-ranking government officials and anyone with money, basically. On the other, there are numerous settlements that shelter thousands of IDPs and returnees, who have to bear extreme heat and cold in their unprotected tents. Is this sharp contrast a result of the economic policies and practices underpinned by the neo-liberal credo? Is it perhaps part of the liberal peace building agenda that the country has been experiencing since the fall of the Taliban? Is it maybe time to ask what went so wrong despite billions of dollars that came into humanitarian aid to the country? Or is it too late?

In short, all this political, cultural and social intensity sometimes gives the feeling that the city is at the verge of bursting; as if it wants to give birth. To what, however, we do not know.

The trip was also precarious. The precariousness could be felt at an individual level but also institutionally. For any given person, life can be there one second and not the other. With bombs going off frequently around the city, there is no certainty that one will return home safely. As I am working on this piece, I got the news of yet another attack that took place on a crowded main road in western Kabul. The explosion was so powerful that it shattered all the windows of the office of a human rights organization whose members I know very well and where I was frequenting during my stay. Despite this, life goes on. Once inside, no one thinks about this imminent danger. This is out of anyone's control. Luck, and sometimes caution, have much to play here. However, for many this precariousness means that life indeed is 'nasty, brutish and short.' They are some of the poorest of the poor, who live in the margins of the city with little food, sometimes no shelter and no other survival means. Unlike the previous scenario, where the insurgents often claim responsibility for their deadly attacks, the rulers can prevent this from happening, if there is sufficient political will and planning. But are they not too busy with their own political rivalries and economic gains? And then comes the institutional precariousness, which is the fear of losing what has been gained so far. Chief among them is women's rights, which is hailed to be another hallmark of the Karzai administration. Many women that I talk to, whether as activists or professionals, expressed this concern. Some went as far as fearing the loss of their rights as it happened under the Taliban. Others expressed more optimism, stating that the women's movement in Afghanistan is at a different place today, which will not allow such a return. Indeed, it came as a relief to many women when Rula Ghani, unlike the ex-president's wife, came out publically. Media and educational sectors are other institutions where this precariousness could be felt, both of which have had substantial gains in the last decade.

Such accounts thus far have presented the troubles only, a notion that has become synonymous with the country itself, thanks to the media reporting. However, I saw the more hopeful side too. I was thrilled, first and foremost, because change, as an abstract concept, could literally be felt. Despite everything that goes around, or perhaps because of it, there is struggle, resilience, perseverance and tenacity particularly among the young generation who want to have a different life, and who know full fledge their potential and role for achieving it. Most of them are caught between conservatism and modernity, between coming to terms with the past and building a future, between not just how things are, but how they would like them to be. The city is indeed going through a social upheaval that, while it may be a response to the force of history, it is, at the same time, a refreshing prospect. This somehow was embedded in the city--surrounded by mountains above which a turquoise blue sky was glowing, every day.

This can be seen in a number of ways. A visit to Kabul University was a most uplifting experience. It was full of students, both young men and women, walking

around, studying, eating and drinking at the cafés, laughing, and enjoying life, so it seemed. I was even surprised not to notice a single stare by a man towards a young woman, a phenomenon that used to be much more common, particularly immediately after the fall of the Taliban. This to me indicated a good sign, a healthy one somehow. As if, finally in the minds of those young men, the other sex is not just a commodity, not only a precious “thing” to look at, but a cohort; those who are there to equally replenish their brains. Cinema is another area where this positive progress can be observed. Although slow and still at its nascent stages, an experimental and critical cinema seems to be emerging. Such experiments are performed in the forms of documentaries, short films, animations, and even feature films, including a number by female directors. Topics often stem from the realities of the society, including the taboo issues of gender and sex. But what remains to be important is the “other” perspective, the critical perspective, one that says enough is enough--to war, to violence, to ignorance and backwardness; one that welcomes and portrays creativity, and the daring act of stepping outside the box.

As part of my trip, I also visited Herat, a western province in Afghanistan; rich in history and culture, legends, warm and hospitable people and delicious fruits, dry and fresh. The layered history of this city is reflected through a number of historical sites and monuments, like in any ancient place in the world, but also the way in which people dress, talk, carry their legends, and tell stories. I visited the mausoleum of a 14<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> century empress, Gowharshad, during the Timurid Period, and was stunned by the important contributions she had offered to the cultural life of the city, especially towards enriching the Persian language and establishing an educational center. I was also stunned by the beauty of the sunset behind her tomb, a rainbow sunset. Contemplating upon that beauty, I was thinking that alas the sunset of the Karzai administration was not as colorful.

Quite to the contrary, Karzai’s mission ended leaving behind major chaos, in particular an entrenched and endemic system of corruption, grand and petty, at different levels and layers of society. Many ordinary Afghans reported that despite everything, Karzai administration scored well in comparison with other regimes during the last four decades. However, a few highly educated Afghans with good understanding and analysis of the country’s political development told me quite the opposite. Referring to the level of corruption, nepotism as a system of “governance”, and his willingness to compromise unequivocally with warlords and human rights violators, they maintained that his administration has left one of the darkest scars in the history of the country, and one which will not be scrubbed easily. Perhaps in part due to this legacy, the new administration is facing major dilemmas. After two and half months, there is no cabinet in place; the economic condition remains to be grim; and, above all, the security situation seems to be getting worse day by day.

“Someone is coming” for sure, but who is it we do not yet know. Moving backward or forward continues to remain a central question in the anxious minds of the majority of Afghans.