

On elections and peace

Dr Habiba Sarabi

Dr Habiba Sarabi is Deputy Chair of the High Peace Council and Adviser to the Chief Executive Officer of Afghanistan on Women and Youth affairs. She was appointed as Governor of Bamiyan Province by President Hamid Karzai in 2005 – the first Afghan woman to become a governor of any province in the country.

She previously served as Minister of Women's Affairs as well as Minister of Culture and Education. Dr Sarabi has been instrumental in promoting women's rights and representation and environment issues.

ABSTRACT

Dr Habiba Sarabi, Deputy Chair of the High Peace Council in Afghanistan, discusses some of her thoughts on elections and peace in Afghanistan. These are taken from a conversation with Anna Larson in November 2017.

Dr Sarabi describes frustrations with the pace of electoral reform. Voter registration at polling centres will facilitate a more effective ballot and strong civil society monitoring could play an important role.

Fresh leadership and a new strategy in the High Peace Council (HPC) have meant that motivation to work for peace is high, especially among women on it. Afghan women have two central roles to advance peace: observing political negotiations to ensure achievements are not lost; and at grassroots level, to play a social role to convince male members of families and communities not to fight. A voluntary network has been established for women to contribute to peacebuilding in this way. All Afghan leaders are men; the majority of candidates in elections will be men. International partners can help by focusing on women's participation.

Preparations for elections

Reforms have been delayed and we are not satisfied with this. The Special Electoral Commission (SERC) took a lot of time, and the people are not satisfied with its outcome. They appointed new commissioners but people were not happy, they were not capable people. Also it is not only about expertise, but about commitment and management. There has been so much doubt about the date, and the time for preparation before then – this is an example of elections not being managed in the correct way. The procurement process itself has been controversial. And now, the initially specified date of 8 July is no longer possible. If it is delayed [to October 2018], then I think that would be best – but holding parliamentary and presidential elections together would be a disaster.

Single Member Districts are the government's way of manipulating MPs and a way to have control over the whole process. It is better that people stand for whichever district they choose to stand for.

Voter registration at the polling centres will help a lot technically. We should also have a strong monitoring

team from civil society who should check all the lists. At this point we cannot use modern technology to do this. But we need to lock all the doors against fraud that we can. In the counting process each team should go to each polling centre and take photos of the initial results. While international observers cannot go to each polling centre they can still help by putting pressure on the government to collate photos of each results list.

Bad elections will result in security deteriorating. And if we have bad governance, then there will be a bad election. We will have a problem if the result of the election is not satisfactory for everyone. Fraud will create further conflict among the people.

Progress towards peace

Fortunately, with our new leadership in the High Peace Council (HPC) and new strategy we have a lot of motivation to work now, especially women on the HPC. We have been meeting with different *mujahidin* leaders across the country. Afghan women can have two roles in peace. In political negotiations they can play a big role, they can observe to see what is going on in the negotiations and

make sure that our achievements are not lost. At the grassroots level they can play a social role, convincing male members of their families and communities not to fight. We have started a voluntary network for women to contribute to peacebuilding in this way.

The majority of the HPC are tribal elders and they don't believe in women's rights. They look at me very strangely. The total number of HPC delegates is 63 and of these 12 are women. It is very difficult and sometimes they do not listen to us. It is difficult but it is not impossible. The big challenge is their mentality, even from the leadership's perspective.

The Taliban are very conservative, but it depends. According to my knowledge, from the MPs' meeting with the Taliban in Oslo, at the beginning the Taliban covered their faces as they didn't want to see women, but at the end of the meeting they were talking to them. Their statements have become less opposed to our government's ideology.

No matter how high the mountain, there will always be a way up! (*Dari proverb – Koh harche beland basha, sir khud, yak ra darad*)

A group of us recently made a visit to Moscow and we disagreed with each other on the subject of a *Loya Jirga* as part of a peace process. I think it is not a good idea to go backwards. A *Loya Jirga* is an old method, an old system and an old ideology. People who are in power will bring their own people and the poor will be excluded.

We cannot fix a date or time for peace. There should be a balance in our approach, and the military can help with



Habiba Sarabi, Deputy Chairperson of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, briefs the Security Council meeting on the situation in her country in March 2018. © UN Photo/Loeys Felipe

this balance. If President Trump's strategy can push supporters of the Taliban to stop fighting then maybe we can see a way forward.

We will need consultative groups for the victims of war. Although some people think it is better to ignore these things and move forward.

If international partners can focus on women's participation, this would be good. All our leaders are men, most of our candidates will be men. The international community can help in this regard.