

# Local perspectives on peace and elections Nangarhar Province, eastern Afghanistan

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## ABSTRACT

The following statements are taken from longer interviews with community members across two different districts in Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan, one semi-urban and one rural, between November 2017 and March 2018, in which they were

asked questions about their views on elections, peace and reconciliation. Respondents' ages and ethnic groups vary. Data were collected by Abdul Hadi Sadat as part of a larger research project funded by the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

### Male driver

Security is very bad here. And in fact it is not only the Taliban who have deteriorated security. Illegal armed persons and groups are also one of the main cause of insecurity in our community, involved in different illegal activities. These are the guys who are involved in killing, assassinations, robberies and theft. Most of the time the Taliban are accused for the wrongdoings of such armed groups, which I don't think is fair.

I am not a supporter of the Taliban: their hands are also red with the blood of innocent Afghans. Most of time we see that the Taliban claim responsibility of attacks in which civilians lose their lives. However in my point of view the illegal armed groups which are mostly run by previous warlords and drug dealers are more dangerous than the Taliban.

I wish we had only one president. The international community really upset us by creating that two-headed government. The so-called National Unity Government is so unpleasant and unproductive. Reconciliation with Taliban in relation to the election is impossible because now the Taliban are in power in many districts. If the international community honestly wants to end this tragedy it is possible, but without the international community it is impossible. In the past the Taliban was not as strong as it is now. You know many people are taking their disputes for resolution to the Taliban. How it is possible that they will allow people to participate in the election?

International involvement is really needed in elections. With the help of internationals at least we have fifty per cent good elections. However this percentage will come down to less than ten per cent if we don't have the support and involvement of the international community. As long as the war criminals and drug dealers exist in our government we will need the support of the internationals.

### Male undergraduate student

Take a look of the current war in Afghanistan. Security is gradually becoming more disruptive every year. It is all because of the wrong individuals in power. The Taliban and some other insurgent groups are also human. They have families to support. They also want to live a peaceful life. They are tired of fighting. But looking at the corrupt government and then war criminals around it, those insurgents would rather fight than join a corrupt government.

Every single member of my community has experienced some sort of insurgent activity. I don't think there could be anyone who has not experienced insurgent activities so far. Bomb blasts, assassinations, kidnapping, suicide attacks on officials and their supporters usually happen here. I think elections cannot have any considerable effects on security. Improvements to the economy can have some impressive effect on security, but not elections.

Insurgents are not the product of Afghanistan. They are trained, organised, equipped and directed from outside. It is up to the international community whether or not they want

to suppress insurgents. If international community want they can have insurgents stop fighting in Afghanistan by bringing pressure on their supporters in the region.

One of the important goals of the insurgents is to sabotage the coming election to show themselves powerful. Currently our country's economy is directly under the shadow of insecurity. Security is more important than the election. First the government should have control over the province and districts.

### **Male elder**

We have experienced a lot of insurgent activity in our area. But you know it is not fair to blame only the Taliban and some other insurgent groups. Most of our officials are also not less than insurgents. On one side insurgents kill civilians by blasting bombs and suicide attacks in the city. Then on the other side our government kills civilians in bombardments and night operations. If insurgents make money through drugs and kidnapping then our officials make money by taking bribes and other corruptions. So both the government and insurgents have so many things in common.

I never hear about reconciliation with Taliban. Normally I just hear about how they are continuing their fighting. Even now the Taliban have extended their influence to the other districts as well. During the past election the Taliban were not as powerful as now. During the past election all people together participated in the election for a better future but until now we have not seen its impact.

### **Male labourer**

There are a lot of insurgent activities taking place undercover in our area. Suicide bombers, kidnapping and target killings are occurring so often here. Such activities barely hurt official people. Mostly only innocent Afghans get killed and injured. As the results of blasts mainly only civilian properties are damaged and destroyed. Recently my friend's taxi was destroyed in a bomb blast. The insurgents had attached a magnetic bomb to a fuel tanker. When it went off my friend's taxi which he had parked on the roadside was caught in the flames of the explosion. The taxi was his only source of income. Many people like my friend have suffered from the insurgents' activities here. And even now we don't know how much longer it will take before we can live in a peaceful environment.

I believe if true and transparent elections take place then truly reliable and trustworthy representatives will come into power. The old fraudulent and criminal ones will not be able to get important seats in government. Then it is clear that elections can eventually have positive effects on security.



Map of Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan.

Most of the current leadership and members of the national reconciliation programme were involved in fighting with the Taliban in the past. They have a long history of hostilities. That is also one of the reasons that why the Taliban are unwilling to solve their problems with the government by negotiations.

### **Male farmer**

The government's night attacks and operations have alienated people from the government, and so they settle their disputes with the help of insurgents. If you refer your issue to the Taliban they solve it in a short period of time, while it takes months or sometimes years to get the same issue solved in government courts. The government should be careful not to destroy everything like the Taliban does because people expect their government to protect them, not to exacerbate the problem or war. If the government took more care during night raids the elections would take place safely.

I was disappointed by the last election but this does not mean that I will not participate in the next one. But I want to vote for an honest person who has served us, and to support the peace process in order to bring peace to our area. I will not vote for those who have no commitment to the people and country. Because we are villagers we do not have another way without elections. I will encourage all people to vote and support the election.

### **Male farmer**

Community elders have influence in our district but now the situation has totally changed. In the past the elders had

the same influence in all villages but now it is different in different villages. The two insurgent groups are different from each other. Daesh (Islamic State in Khorasan) kill elders in areas they control and do not have any respect for the elders. The Taliban is better than Daesh because the Taliban at least respect elders and do not kill them. But the community leaders do not have effective roles among Taliban. So the community elders do not have the same role as they had in the past.

### **Male former driver – unemployed**

If we look at our economy we will see that the Afghan government has gained some significant achievements in the last three years in spite of the problems. For example the project of the Salma water dam was successfully accomplished. The dam will not only help in irrigation but will also provide electricity to surrounding areas. Chabahar international port was opened in Iran, which will work as a bridge between India and Afghanistan.

Despite these achievements, terrorist groups like Daesh have unleashed merciless attacks against ordinary Afghans and their government. Wherever that group has reached it has started killing innocent Afghans and has destroyed their homes.

In the previous election some community elders walked to some closed villages and they motivated other people to participate. Two days before the election our village elder came to me and he asked me, 'are you aware about the polling station?' I told him no so he told me the polling station is in [X] village and that I should go there and use my vote for Ghani. I asked him why Ghani, and he told me because he is not involved in fraud, corruption and killing of innocent people. I accepted his idea and also I discussed the election with my wife. She works for one of the NGOs [non-governmental organisations] so she knows better than me. She also recommended that I vote for Ghani.

Security was not that good at the time but it was better than now. Now the security is getting worse day-by-day and some new insurgents have emerged in our province. Especially in some districts like Pachiragam, Ghanikhil, Haskamena, Shinwari, Khogyani and some others. People hope that government will control the security situation.

Illiteracy has created real problems for us. It is hard for a woman to go outside of her house for work. If our people

were educated then they would know about the equal rights of men and women and we wouldn't have as many problems that we have now. Bomb blasts, suicide attacks and many more activities are usually carried out by uneducated people. It is hard for an illiterate person to find work and therefore they become the prey of insurgents. Insurgents use such illiterate people for terrorist activities in return for a little bit of money.

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If transparent elections happen and a good government comes into being it will have good outcomes. If the government honestly works to eliminate illiteracy from the country then I hope one day will come when we will have a peaceful country and good economy like other countries. I think community leaders and some other influential individuals should work on the district level to motivate insurgents to hold peace talks with the local officials. Once that link is created then it will help peace talks on the high level too.

The deal that took place between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah [in 2014] was a huge mistake. Reconciliation with Taliban is not easy. The government together with the international community should keep regular contact with Taliban leaders to convince them to allow people to vote in elections and to convince the Taliban to nominate themselves for the parliamentary election. Today the Taliban are controlling a large number of districts. If the Taliban does not reconcile or does not allow the people to participate in the coming election, the number of voters will be very low.