

Local perspectives on peace and elections Balkh Province, northern Afghanistan

Interviews conducted by Abdul Hadi Sadat, a researcher with over 15 years of experience in qualitative social research with organisations including the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation

Unit (AREU), the Center for Policy and Human Development (CPHD) and Creative Associates International. He has a degree in journalism from Kabul University.

ABSTRACT

The following statements are taken from longer interviews with community members across two different rural districts in Balkh Province in northern Afghanistan, 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.

Female teacher

The current political situation is unpredictable and it is very difficult to imagine that the government and the opposition parties will compromise over power! The government is blamed for its misuse of power. But I think the internationals are playing a two-faced role in the political instability of the country – they provide financial support to both the government and the opposition bodies at the same time. We in northern Afghanistan are very concerned about our future. The insurgents will take advantage of the disputes between the Balkh governor and the government and will influence the communities and local government.

The community elders have a very prominent role at the local level, in some cases they can take relatively successful steps in solving social and conflicts resolution. We live in a traditional community and the elders' role is vital. I remember during the past election elders motivated people to go to the polling stations. Before the 2014 election the district IEC [Independent Election Commission] branch invited elders to the office, and the IEC motivated them to support the election and to motivate villagers to participate in the election.

Female community mobiliser

It won't be an inclusive election at all since the government does not have control of almost 35 per cent of the country. If the election is held on the announced date in such a bad security situation, do you think the people who are living under the control of Taliban will be able to vote? Those people also have a right to have access polling stations. Before the election the government and political parties

should first think about the security and how to put into practice a proper electoral system.

The international community and donors follow their own interests in Afghanistan. If their interests do not match ours then the situation gets even worse. Do you think that the Taliban has the power and ability to launch suicide attacks on secure locations on their own? It seems that some internal and external people are involved. It would be wise to come to an agreement with the international community on mutual interests.

Community elders are the most useless class in our society. They are the closed-minded, illiterate, corrupt people. There is no chance they can make any difference. They have influence in the community, but reconciliation is a national level issue. As our country has experienced 40 years of war, I do not think that there are any impartial elders in the community. If the elders can do anything regarding the election, maybe they can inform insurgents to allow voters to vote for their desired candidates.

Female trainer

We have influential elders throughout the district but in fact the elders also belong to one of the parties. Some elders are supported by Muhammad Atta Nur, some others are following the government. So independent elders are very few and they do not have power. As I am among the community, I see that the Jamiat[-e Islami] party is not willing to reconcile with the Taliban and other insurgents. This is really important not only for the parliamentary election but for the long term. Our people need a durable solution and peace.



Map of Balkh Province, Afghanistan.

Female nurse

Peace talks should be started with our neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Iran – not with a puppet group of people who don't know anything and don't have any clear goals or objectives. This issue should be solved through regional cooperation.

Also reconciliation in relation to the election is possible with the honest support of the international community. The international community has influence over the Taliban and other insurgent groups. The public has been always supportive of these kinds of processes. They have always played a positive role and again people will contribute to the upcoming elections in order to practice democracy in the country. The people of our country are compelled to vote because they do not have another way.

Our community is safe and there are no insurgent activities but in the rest of the Afghanistan everyday people are dying. I think this will be ended by casting votes and practising democracy and choosing the best possible candidates as representatives of our communities – to further represent us and fulfil our needs and fight for the problems that our community is faced with. Physically our village is safe but our district is located in the border of [an insecure] province. Sometimes the insurgents are coming to the border villages. Recently we received news that people across district should take care because the Daesh [Islamic State in Khorasan] group has become active in the northern provinces.

The elections are possible! But there are some conditions. There should be the best possible reforms brought to the election commissions – they should be committed to the national interest of the country. Then they can contribute to the elections and we can practice democracy. People who live in insecure areas I know will be deprived of the franchise of their votes in the election. We have no choice but we should have the election in the coming year.

Male teacher

We need two types of reconciliation, long term and short term. In the long term Afghans need peace and stability. This would benefit both sides – insurgents and government. For 40 years we have been dying, so for how long will this continue? And we can have short-term reconciliation, where community leaders can really play a very important role. If the government supports community leaders they can contact insurgents and ask them to allow the election.

People think that the election is a welfare programme, but actually it is a political process. If the insurgents allow the election maybe they will ask for some privileges, and this will not be good for the legitimacy of the government.