

Local perspectives on peace and elections Ghazni Province, south-eastern Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

The following statements are taken from longer interviews with community members across two different rural districts in Ghazni Province in south-eastern Afghanistan between November 2017 and March 2018. Interviewees were asked questions about

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

Female NGO employee

Government officials and the IEC [Independent Election Commission] are not capable of talking with the Taliban regarding the election, but community representatives can convince them not to do anything to disrupt the election and even encourage them to participate in the election process.

Female youth, unemployed

I don't know for sure whether the Taliban will allow elections to take place here or not, but in those villages where the security is low the Taliban will not let the people go to the polling centre. In the past election there was a rumour that the Taliban had warned the people that if they vote and get ink on their fingers they will cut their fingers off, but I didn't see anything like that in this village or district.

The election process is quite different in Kabul than in our district. People in Kabul can freely go out and vote for their desired candidates and I don't think that they vote more than once. But in this district people will feel worried on the way to polling centres and if they find opportunities then they vote more than three or four times. Most of the candidates force the people to vote for them here, but I don't think that people experience such things in Kabul.

I don't think that the Taliban will sit around the reconciliation or peace table, they will not reconcile with government. But in this district people say that if the election candidates are educated, honest and hardworking enough then the neighboring districts where the Taliban rule will reconcile with them, because they also want their districts to be improved.

I think the international organisations' involvement is very vital and they have an important role in elections, but I don't think they will have an important role in reconciliation with the Taliban because they themselves do not want Afghanistan to be in peace. If they wanted this we would have better life. They have the power to force the Taliban to reconcile with Afghanistan government.

Male village elder

For decades we have been experiencing war so all people are very tired with fighting, killing and bombing. We all have families and children. And our children have a future: our people do not want war, we all want safety and security that is why all people broadly participated in the elections in the past. As far as I know the Taliban are also residents of the district. They have children and maybe they are also tired of war and they will allow people to participate in the election.

I can say that the district centre was very safe in 2013–14 but after the election security deteriorated and the insurgents speedily extended their control to other areas. Maybe that was the impact of internal challenges within the government. If the government resolved their internal problems I am sure the insurgent activities would decrease.

In our village there is a checkpoint and military forces govern, but we don't feel secure. Because every day we experience war and conflict our people do not have a chance to go about their daily activities and they do not feel safe.

During this year we experienced a lot of clashes. The Taliban attacked the checkpoints in our village and other



Old Ghazni City, Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, 2010. © US Air Force

villages several times. Once about 300 Talibs attacked the checkpoints which caused a lot of injuries and deaths for both sides, for the Taliban and military forces.

Most of the villages are under the Taliban control and they ask for taxes from all the villagers where the Pashtuns or Hazaras live. They ask people to pay taxes from their fields, gardens and water pumps, and no one is able to prevent them from this action, not even the government. The truth is we have just a symbolic government. Most of the provinces are under the control of the Taliban and the government authorities cannot go there.

Most people take their disputes to the Taliban and they solve the cases very quickly without bribes or corruption. The people who have cases or serious problems or even problems to do with fields, lands or gardens take their cases to the Taliban and after some investigation the Taliban solve them very soon. A few cases which need recording are issued to the governmental officials, but that costs a lot and takes a lot of time.

Male farmer

My brother, have a look. Foreigners occupy our country. Some elders who have job in government say 'oh the government are really serving the people'. But it is exactly not true. Elders of both sides are just looking

to their own benefit. Elders do not have ability to reconcile between Taliban and government. It is the job of government to resolve big [national level conflict] problems but the elders can resolve disputes between two families or two people. And right now, most of the people at the local level take their disputes to the Taliban because they are very serious.

We don't have any expectation of the government because the it has lost its credibility and cannot do anything for us. We cannot solve even a small conflict or case through government. It takes years and and creates a lot of other problems. Government officials ask for money for even a small work. If you have money or influence with the government your work is done on the spot. They turn or change the right to wrong and wrong to right. How should we believe and trust the government?

Male civil society activist

The election process is different in Kabul than here, a distant rural district. People in Kabul will participate in polling centres without any worries, but most of the people in the remote villages here feel afraid of participating. Reconciliation with Taliban is a waste of time. The Taliban do what they want and everyone knows that they do not have the power to rule the country or send candidates to stand in the election process. Since people do not permit the

Taliban to interrupt the election process, especially those candidates who have great popular influence, the election might go ahead. But there could be some challenges like transferring ballot boxes from one place to another.

The government and the IEC [Independent Electoral Commission] lack credibility and prestige because they do not stand by their words. And all previous candidates who nominated themselves in presidential, parliamentary or provincial council elections and won a seat didn't do or act what they had shouted or promised to people. They just wanted to win the seat and work for their own benefits and forgot the people who voted for them.

But I am positive about elections. I participated in the past elections and will participate in the coming election too, because I hope the next candidates learn from the past and work for the people. I think that especially the provincial council candidates do not know about their responsibilities.

Even though most people in the community do not think that their votes directly affect the elected candidate, they still hope things will change. People we have talked to on social activities say that they are still hopeful. Most of the people want the government and candidates to provide good living conditions and job opportunities, especially for youths.



Map of Ghazni Province, Afghanistan.