

No One is Asking Ordinary Afghans What They Want

By Sayed Aqa and Deonna Kelli Sayed

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Afghans are accustomed to "hoping for the best and expecting the worst." The fragility of the current situation begs for great care and concern not to repeat past failures of Western policy. Great care must be taken in any steps in formulating a post-Taliban Afghanistan that includes an acceptable government as well as provisions for development and economic stability. Most importantly, efforts must reflect the wishes of ordinary Afghans inside of Afghanistan in order to gain credibility and long-term stability. Sadly, these sentiments seem to be ignored.

Currently, there are two distinct discussions on nation building—one from Afghans in the West and the other from Afghans closer to home. The discourse on nation building by the majority of Afghans in the West desires to restore Afghanistan to what it once was by utilizing symbols from the past, as their vision remains embedded within an idea of what Afghanistan was at the time of exile. The other discourse, found mostly among Afghans inside Afghanistan, dramatically revises a future free from the baggage of the past and goes beyond politics and beyond fascination with "ethnic representation."

The proposal for a *loya jerga* (grand council or grand assembly) is filled with good intentions but remains highly problematic. The idea is endorsed by Afghans in the West, yet does not enjoy uncritical enthusiasm among Afghans inside the country. It is important to remember that no government or political system has been established through a *loya jerga* in the recent

history of Afghanistan. While *jergas* (councils) are very effective and will continue to work in the local context to solve land or intra-family disputes, one must proceed cautiously in advocating a *jerga* at the national level, particularly at one of the most politically sensitive and economically underdeveloped moments in Afghan history.

What Afghans need is substance rather than symbolism in terms of governance. Attempts by the international community to find symbols, be they in the former King or a *loya jerga*, may be useful in the short-term yet may violently undermine long-term stability in Afghanistan.

Policy pundits tread on fragile ground as ethnic composition unfairly dominates visions of a post-Taliban reality. This indicates the perspectives of ordinary Afghans who are not represented in policy considerations. Ethnicity was never a major issue among ordinary citizens as friendships and relationships have always formed across ethnic lines. For example, our own predominately Pashtun village in Logar has a Tajik as tribal chief. Ethnic representation is important but it is an unwise axiom upon which to base government structure. The current focus on ethnicity is primarily a post-Soviet phenomena perpetrated by a small number of politicians and warlords promoting their interests in the absence of any other justifiable cause.

The short-term goal of any process should be the establishment of a Council of Leaders consisting of representatives from the different regions of Afghanistan. The Council would be

selected through a transparent mechanism with the active involvement of an internationally diverse group of UN observers, including a large number of individuals from Islamic countries—including Muslim scholars and clerics. The observers can, for example, receive a list of 200 names presented by the local *jergas* from the eight regions of Afghanistan. The criteria for such lists would include a requirement that a small percentage—perhaps 10%—of the names on each regional list would be from that region and the remainder of the names be from other regions. This would encourage cross-regional coalitions and identify leaders with truly national appeal. Additional criteria for such lists might include percentages of tribal elders, credible former mujahideen, educated Afghans, etc. These lists would then be studied and names appearing in the majority of the lists would be considered to form the Council of Leaders.

This Council would provide transitional leadership for a specified number of years and determine how political development would proceed at the end of the Council's tenure. While this Council is in place, economic investments from the international community, along with monitoring of investments, must foster the economy to ensure stability. A mechanism to air grievances must also be part of this process.

There are certain demographics in Afghanistan that must be involved in any discussions regarding governance: tribal leadership, religious leadership, intellectuals, and those involved in

fighting against Soviets. There have to be certain criteria for potential participants. For example, General Dostum, currently with the Northern Alliance, is widely perceived as guilty of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. Many Afghans will find him an undesirable representative. It is important that representatives have local credibility inside of Afghanistan and are not extremely controversial.

In terms of development, the international community as well as Afghans in the West can assist with investments, institution building, and human resource development at this stage. It is important that observers are present during each step to ensure credibility and transparency. It is also essential that there are economic observers to account for the process of economic development and to counteract corruption. The World Bank, EU, UN, and other bilateral donors already have personnel on the ground who could play such a role.

This proposal differs from a *loya jerga* in two ways. The international community is involved at the local level to gather names from local Afghans and the role of the Council is not to discuss but to lead the country for a transitional period of perhaps two years. The presence of the international community is essential at this stage to ensure the fairness and credibility of the processes. Furthermore, such a process will inherently bring forth ethnically diverse representatives as well as those affiliated with different political groups, yet politics and ethnicity will not overpower local

credibility and acceptance of the representatives. The West must be ready to accept that many representatives may not be well known by Western intelligence agencies or by Afghans in the West. Instead, local preferences for Afghans will be prioritized in this process. Furthermore, the Taliban cannot be completely sidelined in this process.

A creative discourse of care and concern must emerge from the international community. Ordinary Afghans, those who have lived through twenty years of war and have remained relevant to current realities, must have an opportunity to determine their future.

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