



RECONSTRUCTION AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE NEW AFGHANISTAN

By Neamat Nojumi

The collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in December, 2001 marked the end of one of the last despotic and dictatorial theocracies of our time. Women's rights activists, humanitarian organizations, and the U.S. government alike hailed the event as the beginning of a new era in Afghanistan. Religious freedom advocates were especially hopeful that, after five long, disastrous years of Islamist totalitarianism, a civil society of religious tolerance, equal treatment, and freedom of belief and conscience might be on the horizon for Afghanistan.

Over a year later, however, the work of reconstruction has only just begun. Among the media, much has been made of the failure, so far, of the U.S. government and the international community to make good on promises of material assistance. The historical analogy of choice has been the Marshall Plan, and indeed nothing short of a Marshall Plan-scale effort is needed and needed now.¹ But in focusing on the *quantity* of international assistance, Afghanistan's advocates should not lose sight of the *quality* of assistance. In order for Afghanistan to become a model Islamic state—moderate and pluralist—reconstruction must take account not only of bricks and mortar, but also of hearts and minds.

To get it right, it is essential that efforts to improve governmental and civil society institutions be culturally and historically sensitive. In particular, it would be a mistake to artificially superimpose on Afghanistan any stock frame (most likely, one drawn from U.S. experience) for religious freedom. Most would readily concede this point, but few understand fully why it is a mistake. It is not just that naïve, culturally incongruous attempts to remake civil society risk a (potentially violent) backlash. Rather, Afghanistan has indigenous cultural resources that supported a religiously tolerant nation in the past, and they should be part of reconstruction now.

Before the Taliban: Afghanistan's Islamic and Pre-Islamic Traditions

In the pre-Taliban era, Afghanistan was an Islamic country that embraced a diversity of Muslim and non-Muslim groups. Peaceful interaction between religious groups has strong

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roots in the country's history. Afghanistan was for centuries a crossroads of civilizations, connecting nations and faiths. Located on the ancient Silk Road, which connected the Far East to the Mediterranean, Afghanistan was once the meeting point between Greek, Chinese, and Indian civilizations; in turn, Afghanistan was influenced by these cultures. The country became the hub of the Greekobkhterian's art (a unique mixture of Greek and Indian arts) and culture (135-250 B.C.). It also became a magnificent center of Buddhism, a history the Taliban tried to erase by destroying the famous Buddha statues and other cultural treasures.²

Islam was brought to Afghanistan in 642 A.D. by Arabs. Though the largely Buddhist and Hindu population resisted conversion at first, a particularly Afghan form of Islam soon took shape which integrated the Muslim faith with traditional Hindu and Buddhist teachings. Emphasizing the spiritual aspects of Islam, most Afghan Muslims embraced the equality of all people before God, regardless of religious differences. Afghan Muslims were thus able to resist the caste system (the segregation of social groups) that became so prevalent in India. In 754, Afghan Muslims led a revolt against the brutality of the Arab Muslim Khalifahs and caused the subsequent downfall of the Amawiad dynasty in the Islamic heartland.³ After a half-century of armed clashes between Arab armies and the Afghan resistance, the more moderate Islamic faith spread over much of present day Afghanistan.

This uniquely peaceful Islamic expansion in Afghanistan allowed for the irenic spirit of Islamic mystics and Sufis to have great influence in vast regions of the Middle East and South and Central Asia. Islamic mystic leaders like Ha'fiz, whose book came to be seen as the second holy book (after the Koran), encouraged peace, tolerance, and understanding. Rumi, the Persian Sufi poet and philosopher, argued that a person might only enter into the territory of infinite truth, where God's kingdom lies, if he is able to reach the highest level of love for God. In this case, God is seen as the ultimate truth, reflected in His creation. Loving God means

loving His creation, and one may reach the highest level of love for God only by making peace with all those who belong to Him.⁴

Most Afghan Muslims are the followers of Islamic mystics and Sufi groups such as Naqshbandi, Qattalli, Khosrawi, Cheshti, and Suhrwardi. In fact, Afghanistan was the birthplace of many Sufi teachings that later found their way into the broader Islamic world. The Islamic mystic teachings emphasize reason in human thought and the importance of life on earth. Living according to humane principles is the task that allows believers to keep their souls out of the domain of the devil and enjoy freedom in wisdom. As Rumi writes:

Knowledge is the seal of the kingdom of
Solomon: the whole world is form, and
knowledge is its spirit.
Because of this virtue, the creatures of the seas
and those of hill and plain are helpless
before Man.
Of him the tiger and the lion are afraid; the
whale of the great ocean trembles.
From him angel and demon take refuge, each
lurks in some hiding-place. There are hid-
den beings, evil and good: at every moment
their blows are falling on the heart.
The pricks of angelic inspiration and satanic
temptation come from thousands, not
only from one.
Wait for your senses to be transmuted, so that
you may discern these occult presences.
And see whose words you have rejected and
whom you have made your captain.⁵

Through the course of Afghan history, Islamic mystic teachings (also known as *Erfan*) have impacted the ethics and morality of local communities, exerting pacific effects on social behavior. The notion that good and evil, hidden in every moment of life, must be sought out and discerned encourages people to value knowledge. This has, in turn, allowed Afghans to be open to new ideas and to live in a mixed social environment with other faiths. One can argue that this is the main reason why many of the pre-Islamic traditions remain preserved in the overall

culture, such as the Afghan celebration of the New Year (a tradition of ancient Aryans).

Another such legacy is *Pashonwali*, a tradition based upon hospitality, honor, and revenge as a form of social contract. The hospitality principle is a social leveler. If you go unarmed to any household, they will feed you and sacrifice their well-being for your protection, because you are their guest. It is an accepted norm; under the code of hospitality, they or others are not allowed to harm you. I once went with a group of French and Dutch journalists to a small village in Afghanistan. The village had been bombed just fifteen minutes before we arrived. When we entered, the head of the village staggered up to us, bleeding so heavily he could hardly walk. Still, he approached, saying: "You are welcome in our village." As an Afghan, this was his obligation of hospitality.

It is also important to note that a key dimension of the honor principle is respecting women. In the history of Afghanistan, there is no tradition of norms under which women may be disrespected, beaten, and executed, as the Taliban were infamously known to do (while forcing onlookers to cheer about it).

Among other reasons, this is why the Taliban were so despised by most ordinary Afghans.

Another dimension of *Pashonwali*, "revenge," is a very simple principle—if someone is harmed, perpetrators will not escape justice. In the Afghan cultural context, the conception of revenge has very strong connections to consequences for dishonesty.

If one is dishonest, they cannot run away from the consequences of that dishonesty.

There are, in short, historical and cultural wellsprings of civil society indigenous to Afghanistan. Virtues of tolerance, peace, individuality, respect, and justice are not so alien after all. Even a cursory review of the history of Afghanistan's principal religious minorities suggests strongly that the culture is not somehow

inevitably hardwired for inter-religious violence and theocracy.

Consider the case of Afghan Hindus, who have a long history in Afghanistan as a numerically small, but not insignificant, minority. Hindu numbers increased during Indian struggles for independence from the British Empire, in which Afghan nationalists known as Patans participated—on the side of India against the British. This had the effect of strengthening Muslim-Hindu relations and catalyzing national solidarity of Afghans with India. Afghanistan provided training and assistance to the Indian liberation activists and allowed Indian families to immigrate to Afghanistan and obtain citizenship. Moreover, Afghanistan was among the first states to recognize India's independence from the British Empire and to open a wide range of communication and interaction with the Indian state. The interaction extended to cultural matters as well. For instance, the celebration of the annual Hindu religious holiday in the eastern province of Nangarhar was once one of the country's most famous national ceremonies.

The Jewish experience in Afghanistan also bears witness to a more tolerant legacy that might be reclaimed. Historically, Jews lived in Afghanistan since before the Islamic era, when large numbers were concentrated in the northern cities. Unlike many other Islamic countries, Afghanistan has no history of a state campaign for the conversion of Jews. In the early 19th century, sectarian violence and conflicts between

religious groups in Persia (present-day Iran) forced thousands of Jews to seek refuge in Afghanistan. Around the turn of the century, the Jewish population reached about 40,000.

Most emigrated when the state of Israel was established in 1948.⁶ Circa the Soviet invasion in 1979, only about 5,000 Jews were left in Afghanistan. This minority, though small, was both economically successful and relatively well-

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respected in the society at large. Afghan Jews enrolled their children in the public educational institutions and conducted religious ceremonies freely. Even at the height of the Arab-Israeli conflict during the 1960s, Afghan Jews were protected and treated as an important part of Afghan civil society. Though the Afghan Jewish population was reduced even further after 1979, the Jewish synagogues in Kabul and Herat still stand today and, remarkably, have been preserved through years of war and destruction by the Muslim majority.

State and Religion

Through much of its history, the social and cultural setting of Afghanistan allowed secular political leaders to run the government with an appreciation for the role of faith in the life of its citizens. As a result, the separation of mosque and state was an accepted practice in the country until as recently as the late 1970s. In contrast to some countries with secular governments and Muslim populations, such as Turkey and Egypt, the separation of mosque and state in Afghanistan had been the outcome of social and cultural development rather than government-enforced measures.

This sets Afghanistan apart from its neighbors as well as the Middle East and North Africa. Historically, religious leaders never ruled the country. State leaders were in charge of public affairs, while religious institutions were managed either independently or under the auspices of the state. In most cases, the state authorities were in good-faith relationships with the religious institutions, and the religious institutions were supportive of the governmental leaders in times of crises.

Such a relationship between mosque and state was reflected in the pre-1979 Constitution. In 1964, the Afghan national assembly known as *loya jirga* declared Afghanistan a constitutional monarchy through the formation of a modern constitution. Article II of this Constitution guaranteed freedom of worship to non-Muslims while Afghan Hindus were granted representation in the national assembly. Under Title III, the Constitution laid down the fundamentals of social justice, equality before

the law, personal liberty, protection of private property, freedom of thought and expression, the right to educational and health facilities, and the right to form political parties. Non-Muslim Afghans were given the freedom not only to conduct their religious practices openly, but also to expand their religious activities and maintain their places of worship in many different parts of the country. Like Muslims, Afghan religious minorities were given access to higher education and public health facilities, and were able to serve in the armed forces and other public sector positions.

Islamic Radicals and Religious Freedom

The communist coup in 1978 and the Soviet invasion in 1979 thrust Afghanistan into a complex crisis that impacted the normal pace of social, political, economic, and cultural orders. The Afghan communist party and its Soviet supporters attempted to mobilize Afghan society, according to its ideology, under the banner of anti-religious slogans. The program entailed a violent campaign against the religious and traditional values of the Afghan culture. Ironically, this merely encouraged most Afghans to hold more tightly to their cultural and religious values and national traditions in order to resist the communist regime and the Soviet invaders. As a result, another layer was added to the military and political conflicts between the Afghan masses and the pro-Soviet regime—a war of cultures and ideologies.

In the midst of this ideological struggle (and just after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran), Afghan radicals who were following the political ideology of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were armed and financed by external sources. This political and military development created momentum that allowed Afghan and non-Afghan radicals to influence politics in Afghanistan. Groups like the Islamic Party of Afghanistan, led by Gulbadin Hekmatyar, received the lion's share of the international aid channeled to the Afghan Mujahideen. Because of their fierce opposition to communism, these extremist groups garnered strong regional and international support from

the Persian Gulf states, Pakistan, Iran, and the United States. Soon they were able to mobilize forces across Afghanistan as well as among the Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran.

This mobilization delivered a body blow to progressive movements, such as Mahaz-meli, Nejat-e-meli and Shura-e-enqelab-e-meli, within the Afghan Mujahideen. It gave a green light to the Islamic Party and its allies to engage in bloody armed clashes against political opponents. As a result, the progressive forces of Afghan Mujahideen—whose ranks once included this author—were forced to fight on two fronts simultaneously: the Afghan Islamic radicals, and the Afghan communist and Soviet forces. Under the influence of Afghan Islamic radical groups in Pakistan and Iran, large numbers of progressive Afghan leaders, such as Shamsadin Majrooh, were assassinated. Many more were forced to flee to Europe or the U.S.

The political ideology of the Islamist fanatics was not rooted in Afghan political and cultural traditions, but was heavily influenced by outside elements. This is why Islamic radicals in Afghanistan ran a massive campaign of terror and hate crimes, not unlike those of the Afghan communists.⁷ On a national level, this terror campaign created a social environment filled with fear and suspicion, reducing cooperation among divergent Afghan groups and depriving Mujahideen forces of open and democratic dialogue about military and political strategies against the Soviets. Furthermore, it prevented the development of an organized national leadership competent to pull the country out of years of war and destruction. This dearth of leadership among Afghan Mujahideen contributed greatly to the power vacuum that was left in the wake of the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan in 1988.

Along with their regional allies, Islamic radicals were engaged in sectarian violence and hate crimes throughout this turbulent period. Moderate and democratic-minded Muslims were under fire from

radical groups among both Sunnis and Shias. Even though the non-Muslim Afghan religious groups were active in the struggle against the Soviet invasion, they were constantly harassed by Islamic radicals. These minorities supported the Afghan resistance financially and provided medicine and medical support for the wounded fighters. Many members of these groups were killed or forced to pay ransoms and then leave the country.

In 1992, Afghanistan slipped into a bloody civil war when Hekmatyar's armed groups, with the support of Pakistan's military intelligence, attacked Kabul, completely destroying the city and killing 5,000 civilians. Armed radical units, particularly those of Hekmatyar and Sayyaf forces, killed many people in the Hindu and Sikh communities.⁸ They also forced many religious minorities out of their houses and looted their businesses. Armed conflict soon spread all over the country. This situation worsened the power vacuum in Afghanistan and provided an opportunity for the Taliban movement to rise in southern Afghanistan in 1994.

The Taliban and Religious Freedom

The establishment of the Taliban regime (known formally as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) in 1996 marked the beginning of theocratic dictatorship in Afghanistan. For the first time in both ancient and modern history, a group of radical Islamic clerics seized political power and took control of the government. Taliban leaders introduced their own interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law), which was disputed by many Islamic scholars and religious leaders. According to this interpretation, Mullah Omar, the Taliban supreme leader, was the living Khaliph on earth and the Emir of Muslims in Afghanistan.

They argued that all Muslims and non-Muslims who lived in a territory under the rule of the Emir were obligated to obey him as the representative of divine power on earth. Obeying the Emir-ul-Mumineen was *fardh*

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(God's demand that must be practiced). And because obeying the Emir was fundamental to the law of God, anyone who refused *bai'at* (oath to obey), and opposed him, "would be called a rebel according to Shari'a. It would be a *fardh* to execute him [or her]."⁹ Moreover, if the Emir were to call the people to jihad, it would also be *fardh* for all qualified Muslims to follow his order and bear arms against those who are enemies of the Emir.

In keeping with their strict, truncated interpretation of the Koran, during their first year of rule in Kabul the Taliban closed schools to girls, and women were required to cover themselves head-to-toe. Broad and stringent legal decrees were imposed across the board. In September, 1996, Radio Kabul announced:

In the areas under the Taliban government every kind of wickedness and immorality, cruelty, murder, robbery, songs and music, TV, VCR, satellite dish, immodesty, traveling women without a *mehram* [immediate blood related person], shaving-of or trimming the beard among male adult, pictures and photographs, interest, have all been totally banned.¹⁰

The establishment of a dictatorial theocracy was contrary to the traditional politics of Afghanistan in which *jirga*, the council both on a local and national level, was the epicenter of decision making. Traditionally, people solved their local grievances (such as disputes over water and land, family disputes, etc.) via these consultative assemblies where members of the communities or their representatives expressed their opinions freely. On the national level, *loya jirga* was the accepted mechanism to support the government's decisions on critical issues such as ratification of the Constitution or management of national crisis. Within the mechanism and process of *jirga*, Afghans were able to enjoy a measure of individual freedom and communal autonomy.

What the Taliban failed to recognize, and what most outsiders still fail to appreciate fully, is that individualism and autonomy are deeply rooted in the social psyche of the Afghan peo-

ple. Long-standing cultural mores give a person his or her own space to deal with both familial and personal issues. Assisted by the geography of Afghanistan, ethnic groups and local communities also preserve their own sense of space wherein they share issues of concern and interest with their members. Historically, Afghan central authorities often attempted to break the ethnic and communal autonomies in different parts of the country, but they faced resistance. Inevitably, they accommodated the traditional local culture and government.

Taliban decrees, however, attacked the foundation of traditional Afghan politics. The Taliban were not able to understand (or simply did not want to understand) the history of the Afghan people and the craft of governance in this context. The absolute rule of the Taliban supreme leader as the Emir was in conflict with the concept of *jirga*. Restrictions on men's beards and women's dress were a direct violation of the traditional social code of autonomy and honor. Taliban involvement with non-Afghan radicals such as Osama bin Laden's network was a further violation of individual freedom and communal autonomy. The Taliban campaign of cultural terrorism, which destroyed the Buddha statues and many archives in the national museum, was an attack on Afghan cultural treasures. It was, in short, one of the worst cases of cultural terrorism in the past century.¹¹

Under the Taliban, Afghan religious minorities (Muslim Shias as well as non-Muslims) suffered the most severe discrimination and harassment. Muslim Shias were massacred in large numbers, while Hindus were forced to wear yellow armbands in public. Many religious minorities were forced to leave their homes, and their houses and shops were looted or burned. Young girls of ethnic and religious minorities were sexually abused at gunpoint; large numbers were kidnapped by the Taliban and al Qaeda fighters and never returned to their families.

Reconstruction, Revitalization, Religious Freedom

After years of armed conflict and warfare, the end of the Taliban regime in December, 2001 opened the road to peace and freedom in

Afghanistan domestically, and to participation in the processes of global politics. After years of isolation, Afghans have gained the opportunity to open their doors to other nations and once again become a peace-loving member of the international community. Lasting peace and normalization of international relations, however, are contingent upon the revitalization of an Afghan civil society whose default setting is religious tolerance, not religious tyranny.

While some of the urgent and ongoing reconstruction priorities are economic, cultural and economic revitalization are inextricably interwoven. The collapse of the national economy and the social infrastructure have forced millions of young boys and girls aged six and older to work from dawn to dusk to help their families survive economically. Under the Taliban, an entire generation of Afghan girls was forced out of schools, and although girls are now allowed back in school there are not enough schools, books, teachers, classrooms, and other educational facilities to accommodate them. Even if there were, families could not afford to have their children leave work to go to school. The expansion of primary education and secondary education can take place only when families have food and the financial means to purchase their daily needs. Cash intervention and targeted food aid are essential to the education that is needed to establish a civil society.

Years of war have destroyed many villages, in the process eliminating their traditional safety nets. Rebuilding villages is necessary for the rehabilitation of a social safety network, especially for Afghanistan's children. Furthermore, programs to demilitarize and enroll children and young adults in educational and technical training for the market place are crucial. In order to meet basic needs, large numbers of Afghan teenage boys had, until recently, few options other than joining armed groups. Too young to even carry a gun, these young people were for all intents and purposes drafted. As a result, they were forced to engage in violent confrontations against different ethnic and religious groups. The use of violence and hate crimes under the banner of religion has

left deep traumatic scars on these young men. In most cases they need moral, ethical, and educational support. Since the teachings of the Islamic mystics and Sufis have strong roots in the history of Afghanistan, they could be very helpful, if utilized appropriately, in the process of re-socializing Muslim boys and young men.

Then there are the refugees. The millions of refugees in Pakistan and Iran who are waiting to return home, as well as millions of internally displaced men, women, and children, have lived in deep trauma and desperation for many years. The process of returning to homes that have been destroyed, and of recuperating from long-term trauma, is beyond the local capacity of Afghans. Massive destruction of the physical infrastructure has undermined the environment for civil dialogues between different ethnic and religious groups, not to mention the havoc unleashed in social institutions. The educational system, press, art and music academies—all are in need of revitalization.

Efforts to consolidate and reform governmental institutions under Hamid Karzai must be attentive to the overall socio-religious context. In particular, the international community must multilaterally promote a healthy legal system to promote security and protect human rights and individual freedoms. The Constitution of Afghanistan should—in

fact, as well as on paper—guarantee equal rights to ethnic and religious minorities. Success in the development of a functioning judicial system will be much more likely if leaders draw on indigenous cultural templates, such as the traditional *loya jirga*.

More broadly, the international community should encourage dialogue between different religious groups within Afghanistan via all viable means of communication and cooperation. This will require the active participation of Afghan religious leaders in a national forum to improve relations between different faith groups and heal the wounds that were created by years of war and violent confrontations. It is important that religious leaders come into the public

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eye and encourage their followers in tolerance, respect, and friendship.

Indeed, human rights and religious freedom must go hand in hand with the reconstruction of the shattered civil society of Afghanistan. The disappearance of the black-turbaned religious police from the streets of urban centers is a necessary but insufficient condition for freedom of faith. People can worship freely only when they are able to understand their differences and tolerate—even respect—one another. And peace can be achieved only when human

rights and religious freedom is the keystone of social revitalization. In the case of Afghanistan, many cultural resources already exist for a tolerant, civil society. The international community should embrace the rich traditions that have been oppressed in the recent past and provide the practical assistance that is needed for them to flourish. In short, international supporters should recognize that an effective “Marshall Plan” for Afghanistan must include a long-term commitment to the reconstruction of a culturally relevant civil society. ❖

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 2. Ghulam Mohammed Ghoobar, *Afghanistan on the Road of History* (Kabul: National Press, 1978), pp. 40-49.
 3. Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War and the Future of the Region* (New York: Palgrave/St. Martin Press, 2002), p. 4.
 4. Reynold Nicholson, *Introduction to Rumi*, trans. Ovaness Ovanessian (Tehran: Nashr-e-Nay Publication, 1987), p. 247. Cited in Nojumi, p. 224.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Laura King, “Kabul’s Two Jews Celebrate Hanukkah,” Associated Press, December 9, 2001.
 7. Rashid Abdul, “The Afghanistan Resistance,” in *Afghanistan, the Great Game Revisited*, ed. Rosanna Klass (New York: Freedom House, 1987), p. 209.
 8. To take just one instance, during a visit to the Sikh community in Kabul in January, 2002, Majboor Inder Singh told me, “Ninety of our people were killed during the Hekmatyar attack on Kabul.”
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 10. Muhammed Moosa, “The Taliban Movement and their Goals,” from *Darul Ifta-e-Wal Irshad*, Peshawar, Pakistan, 7th Moharram 1417 (June 20, 1998).
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