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The Illusion of Inclusivity in Afghan Peace Process

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A critique of youth exclusion from the Afghan peace process, arguing that sustainable peace requires the meaningful participation of young Afghans and civil society.

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When it comes to the peace process, young Afghans are frequently seen as less experienced, less educated, somehow emotional, and trouble-makers. This is both unfair and dangerous. The Afghan youth can play a positive role in the country's peace process; both in the impeding intra-Afghan talks and in supporting Afghanistan's perilous journey to reconciliation.

The most important element of the Afghan peace process, the intra-Afghan negotiations between the government and the Taliban, is yet to begin. It is expected that a group of men and women representing the diverse political and ethnic spectrum of Afghan society will soon engage informal conversations with the representatives of the Taliban. However, and from the very outset, young Afghans, the country's future leaders, have been largely excluded from this peace process.

This is not only counter-intuitive; it also goes against the U.N. Security Council resolution 2513 in March 2020 when it emphasizes on the "importance of the effective and meaningful participation of youth in the peace process" and states that "any political settlement must respond to the strong desire of Afghans to sustain gains achieved since 2001."

In Afghanistan, this lack of inclusion matters even more than in most countries. The Afghan youth, defined as aged 18-35 years old by the country's National Youth Policy, constitutes more than 67% of the population, with a national average age of 18.4 years old, making Afghanistan one of the world's youngest countries.

Since the beginning of the peace talks - between the United States, led by the U.S. special envoy, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Taliban's representatives in Qatar - young Afghans have been making efforts to raise awareness of the peace process among the younger generation and to engage them in this process as committed stakeholders. Yet so far, the Afghan government has turned a deaf ear to this public plea.

Afghan youths are often perceived as volatile, less experienced, emotional, and often regarded as nuisances when involved in significant decision-making processes. As a result, the default thinking about youth and peacebuilding in the country tends to be overwhelmingly negative. And to add insult to injury, they are also viewed as vulnerable, powerless and in need of protection, especially those who live in rural areas.

Despite Afghan youth's role to strengthen Afghanistan's fragile democracy, they still face a protracted lack of space for meaningful political engagement with the government in Afghanistan.

With the right tools and space young Afghans - whom again, form the vast majority of the population - would have the ability to transform the country by affecting positive change into their communities, and by extension, into Afghanistan as a whole.

Afghan youths are an essential source of creativity and an engine of forward-looking social change. Recognizing and including their perspective and needs should not be neglected, as it is now, but made a central piece of the ongoing peace process and the country's future.

If down the road Afghanistan descends into renewed chaos and intensified bloodshed, it will be argued that one of the contributing factors was the absence of young voices into the 'peace equation.' We are still on time to avoid writing on the wall.

As victims of an imposed war we, young Afghans, are understandably worried about our future. Many of the achievements accomplished over the last nineteen years - such as the respect of democratic values, the establishment of a constitution, the upholding of civil rights, and the consolidation of a vibrant free media - have been gained with the sacrifice of the country's young citizens.

These hard-gained successes cannot be deserted - whatever the result of the current peace process is. Underpinning these institutions into the country's future is the only way to ensure a harmonious, rule-based, and stable future for Afghanistan.

Considering the absence of Afghan youth's meaningful participation in the peace process, a group of around 240 youth organizations and civil society activists from all the 34 provinces of Afghanistan formed the "National Youth Consensus for Peace." A two-fold mechanism aiming to: 1) raise awareness about the barriers to bring about peace in Afghanistan while voicing the demands of young Afghans in the run-up to the intra-Afghan peace talks; and to 2) present a mechanism, containing a set of constructive guidelines, to the government of Afghanistan and international community for engagement of youth in Afghan peace process.

Afghan youth are aware of their responsibilities and they are awakened to the undeniable reality of embracing a new era in Afghanistan's history; therefore, they are determined to collectively call for their voices to be heard and their meaningful participation to be recognized in all peace building efforts.

The ultimate purpose of the peace process, the peace talks, in particular, is specifically defined as being to advance the welfare of society, which requires the substantive inclusion of society, hence a sustainable peace would only be realized by the active and meaningful inclusion of Afghan youth in the peace process.