



The Public's Voice in the Peace Process

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The Public's Voice in the Peace Process

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Foreword

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), the oldest German political foundation (founded in 1925), is committed to the core ideas and values of social democracy. FES maintains more than 100 offices worldwide, many of them in areas of limited or even contested statehood, and works towards peace and reconciliation in a number of post-conflict societies. Through studies, conferences and seminars, FES aims at building peace capacity and inclusive dialogue to help achieve sustainable stability and well-being for everyone.

In Afghanistan, which recently celebrated its 100th day of independence from colonial rule, the quest for peace appears to be a never-ending one. For some four decades, violence and war have affected everyday life for every family that chose to remain in the country or was not able to leave. The millions who emigrated to neighbouring countries and further abroad in part took the national war trauma with them. Protracted conflict as well as the ensuing destruction and displacement cast a shadow over Afghanistan, impeding development and the establishment of institutions that will provide services, justice and security.

FES opened an office in Kabul, Afghanistan in 2002, a crucial year for the war-torn country. Many international players had committed to stabilization and (re-) construction, most of them working towards a democratic and peaceful Afghanistan. Ever since, and especially today, FES provides a platform for inclusive peace-making to help Afghans in securing their achievements, adjusting to new challenges and breaking the cycle of mistrust and violence.

The international shuttle diplomacy, especially as conducted by government officials, Taliban representatives and a growing number of special representatives on Afghanistan from the United States, Germany, the European Union and Russia, has gained tremendous attention in the past year. Meetings between the conflict parties and negotiation efforts mediated by third parties

have taken place, inter alia, in Doha, Moscow, Beijing, Tashkent and Oslo. International support is critical because the weakness of state institutions and the permeability of Afghanistan's borders have made the country both highly dependent and exposed to external influences and interests. Moreover, as millions of Afghans continue to live abroad, dialogue and trust-building are as important on the local level as they are between former friends, neighbours and rivals in the countries surrounding Afghanistan.

To many observers, an agreement paving the way to peace and stability appears to be within reach. Others wonder, rightly so, what it might take to make an arrangement, carefully drafted by diplomats and influential politicians, truly transformative, worth more than the paper it has been written on. To address this very question, FES and the Afghanistan Policy Group launched the Public's Voice in the Peace Process project in early 2019. Hundreds of Afghans from all walks of life participated in surveys and roundtable discussions and generated dozens of recommendations, setting their own – a public – peace agenda. During the project, they expressed their concerns, hopes and ideas, providing a starting point for a comprehensive discussion among larger segments of society and between decision-makers and the wider public.

We extend our respect to the project convener and author of this brief, Faheem Dashty, and his colleagues at the Afghanistan Policy Group, for their unwavering commitment to their fellow Afghans and their peaceful future.

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The Public's Voice in the Peace Process

The Roundtable Series

In the past year, different parties initiated practical efforts to end the war and bring peace in Afghanistan. Several actors have taken or been given a role and the chance to contribute: The United States and its international partners, countries in Afghanistan's immediate and wider neighbourhood, the Taliban as well as the Government and some influential politicians. In one way or another, they all have been involved in various talks and meetings.

What all these initiatives have in common is that they are often perceived as lacking transparency and overly focused

on narrow issues, creating ambiguity, insecurity and concern in the minds of many Afghans. Another difficulty, experienced in other attempts to end insurgencies through political settlements, and risk for their success is the apparent lack of representation of the general public's demands and expectations of such initiatives while negotiations are underway. How can the people who would directly be affected by any settlement and failure of the talks be included? In other words, how can the views of those whose present and future destinies are at stake be heard?

We in the Afghanistan Policy Group understand that a peace process without a channel or platform for the

Figure 1: Afghan Provinces, where round tables and surveys were held between March and June 2019.

Source: iStockphoto.com



greater public to participate would be deeply flawed and doomed to fail. Hence, we conducted public and inclusive gatherings throughout the country, the content of which is reflected in the discussions and recommendations in this project brief. This project, named the Public's Voice in the Peace Process, gathered views on a wide spectrum of issues related to peace and reconciliation from a highly diverse group of people representing all walks of Afghan life.

March to June 2019, some 600 people, including women, youth and civil society activists, religious scholars, tribal elders, academics and media representatives, participated in project meetings in the cities of Balkh, Bamyan, Nangarhar, Kandahar and Herat. Facilitated by members of the Afghanistan Policy Group, each provincial meeting had a working group phase, including small group discussions on societal coexistence, security, economic development, education, justice and the country's immediate and wider neighbourhood. Afterwards, a group of representatives shared the outcome and recommendations with a wider audience. This project brief both reflects the discussions in the provinces and highlights the recommendations formulated by the participants.

Afghanistan Policy Group

The Afghanistan Policy Group was established in late 2011 by senior and renowned representatives of Afghan politics, media, academia and civil society, with the support of the FES Foundation, to promote sustainable peace through an enhanced dialogue between Afghanistan and its neighbours and between decisionmakers and the greater public. The Afghanistan Policy Group and its counterparts in India and Pakistan organized bilateral and multilateral meetings with more than 60 officials and non-government experts from Central Asia, Islamic Republic of Iran, China, Russia and Turkey. Their first report in 2013, *Envisioning Afghanistan Post 2014*, focused on the root causes of problems in Afghanistan and its neighbourhood and provided recommendations on how to redress them appropriately. To incorporate their proposals into national, regional and global policies, the report was widely shared with audiences in Kabul, Delhi, Islamabad, New York and Brussels.

In 2018, the Afghanistan Policy Group and FES reinvigorated their cooperation, which resulted in structural changes and a larger mission for the Policy Group. We now conduct policy dialogues and develop policy proposals on security-related, political, economic, media and migration issues for the national and regional levels.

Attitudes towards the peace process – A (non-representative) survey

Under the principle of discretion, some 400 project participants took part in an anonymous survey asking for their personal assessment and attitudes towards the peace process and its main actors, as well as their concerns about the effect of any agreement on peace and security in Afghanistan and the values they hold dearly and do not want sacrificed by negotiators.

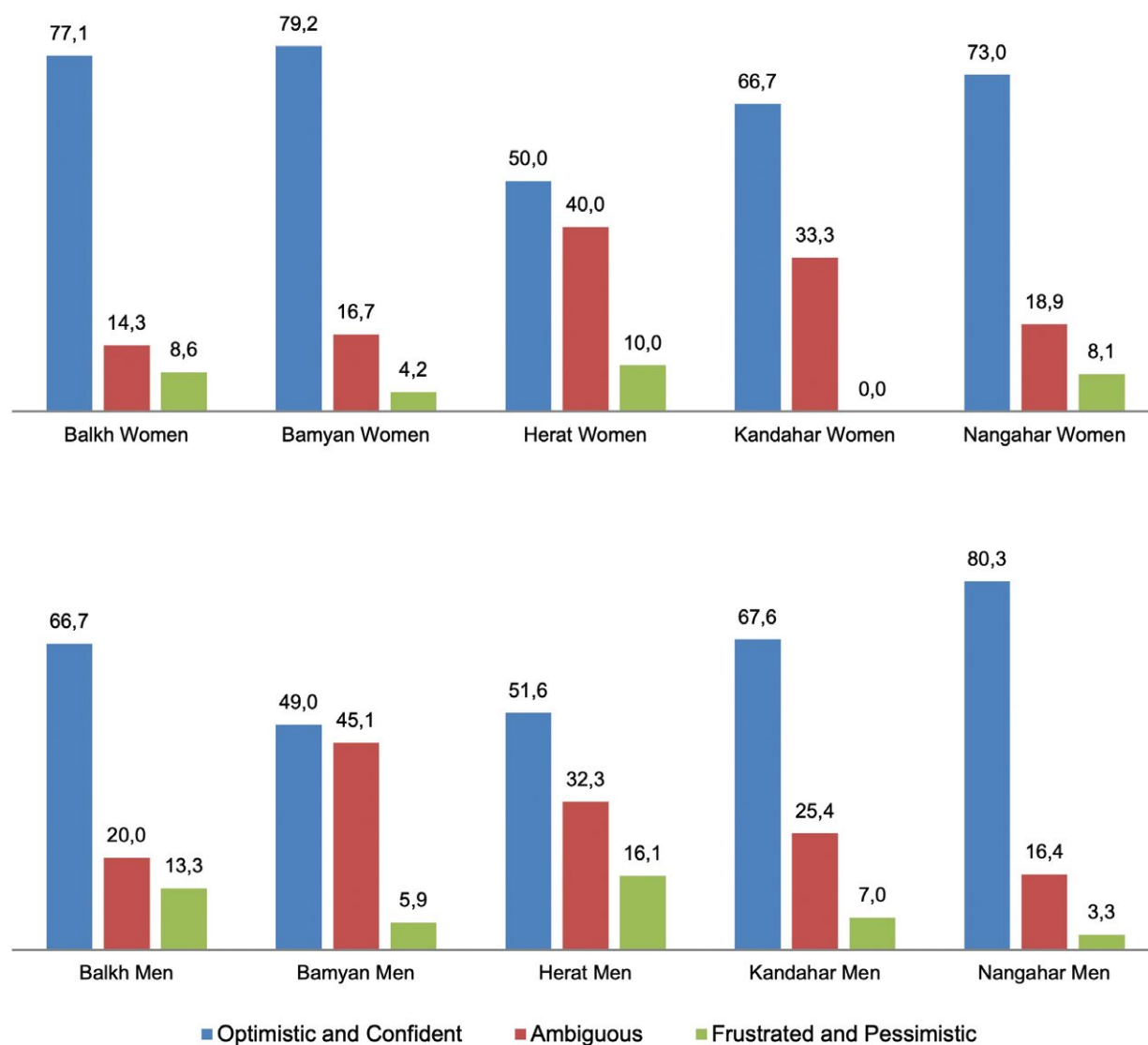
When asked what they think about the current peace negotiations, around 50 per cent of the survey respondents in all provinces mostly expressed optimism and confidence. And yet, there were considerable differences between Nangarhar, where the respondents were the most optimistic, and Herat, where more than half of them expressed feelings of ambiguity and frustration or even pessimism. In Balkh and Bamyan,

Figure 2: A survey for all participants was distributed to assess personal thoughts about the negotiation processes during the Public's Voice in the Peace Process conference in Kandahar city, April 2019.

Source: Photo © FES Afghanistan.



Figure 3: How do you feel about the ongoing negotiations? (in %)

Source: Afghanistan Policy Group, *The Public's Voice in the Peace Negotiations Survey 2018*.

women were significantly more optimistic than men, yet less so in Nangahar, where the overall level of positive responses was higher than elsewhere. Ambiguity and pessimism were greatest among men in Bamyan and Herat and women in Kandahar and Herat.

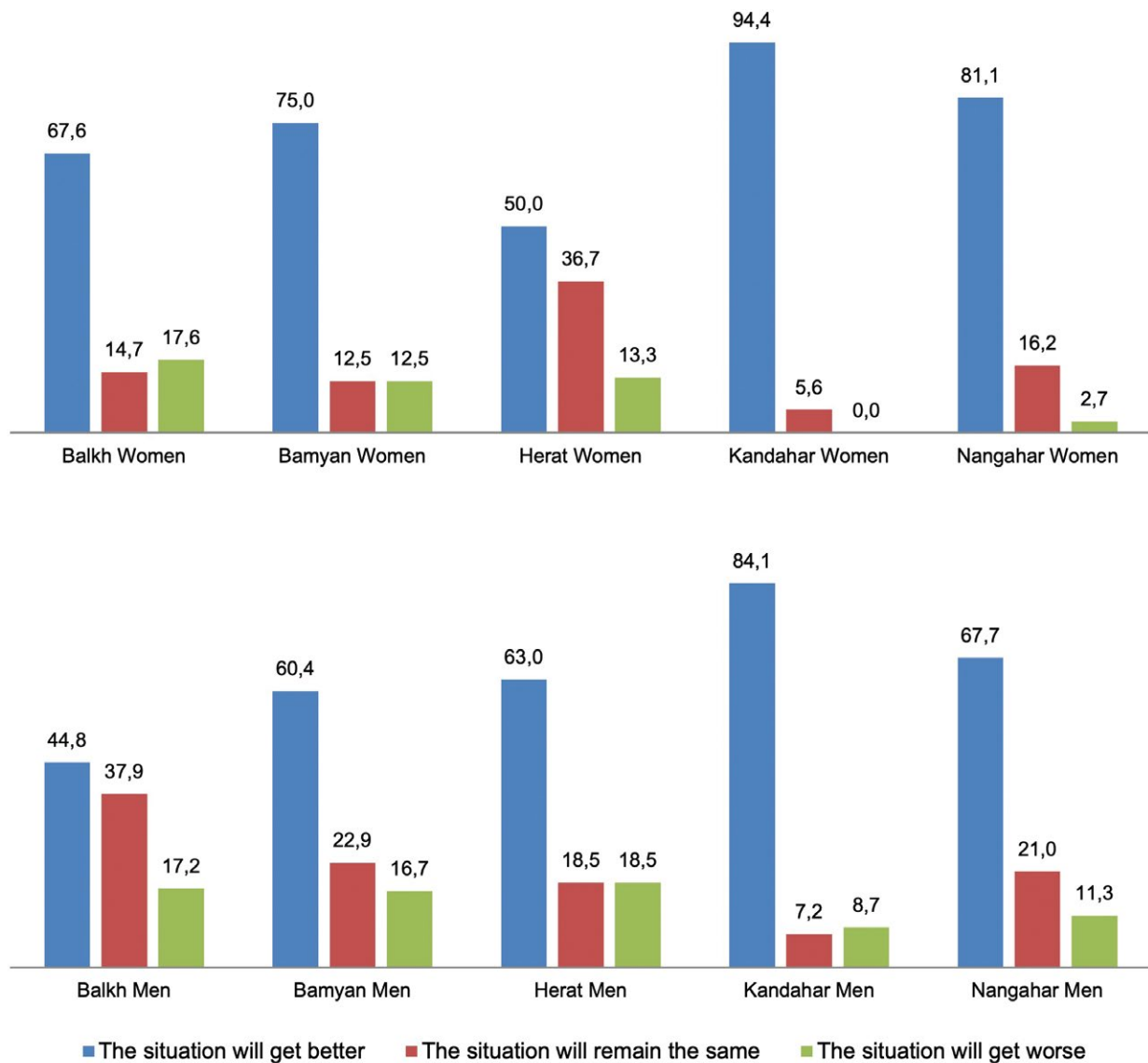
More than 70 per cent of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the government's role in the peace negotiations. Women tended to see the government more positively than the men, especially in Herat,

Kandahar and Nangahar. While still mostly positive, more respondents in Balkh and Bamyan expressed concerns and dissatisfaction with the government's role.

A significant group of the survey respondents did perceive an outstanding role for people in the peace process. And yet, the majority of the respondents were less optimistic, seeing their role (as the general public) as pale or even dispassionate. In the two provinces of Kandahar and Nangahar, respondents were the most optimistic about the

Figure 4: Will the peace negotiations bring change to Afghanistan? (in %)

Source: Afghanistan Policy Group, *The Public's Voice in the Peace Negotiations Survey 2018*.



role of the public in the peace negotiations. The most sceptical were people in Herat, where only one in five respondents expressed optimism about the role of the public.

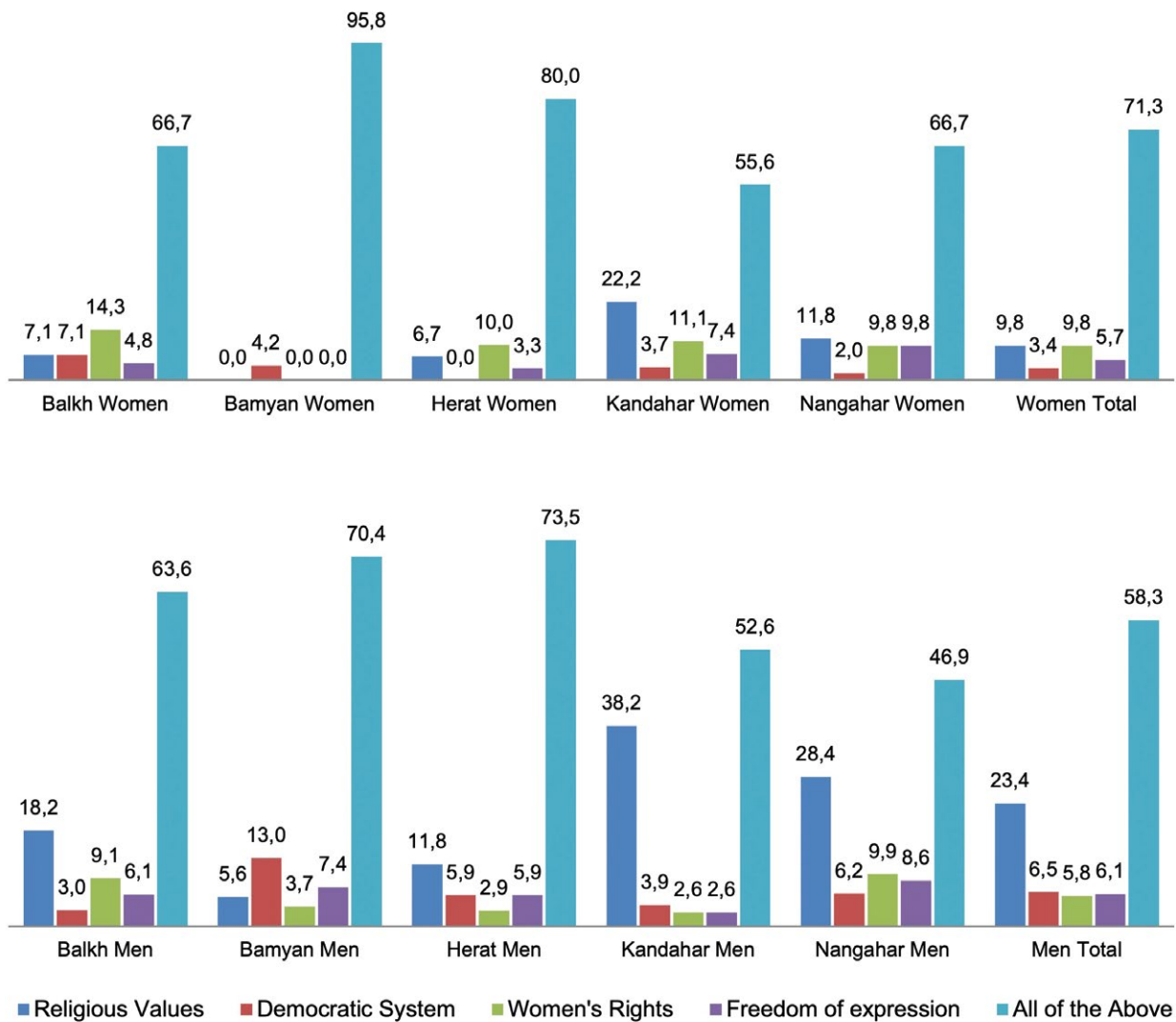
Asked how they assess the position of the Taliban in the peace negotiations, more men than women saw them in a superior position. About one fourth of respondents described the role of the Taliban as constructive. The women in Balkh, Kandahar and Nangahar overwhelmingly described the Taliban's position as weak. In Herat, most

women responded that the Taliban have a superior position and in Bamyan more than a third of female respondents described the Taliban's position as constructive. Among the men, assessments of the Taliban were much stronger; in Balkh, Bamyan and Herat, men overwhelmingly described their role as superior. Only in Nangahar did a majority of the men describe the Taliban's role as weak.

While the majority of respondents in nearly all provinces expressed their satisfaction with the United States-led

Figure 5: Which values are non-negotiable to you? (in %)

Source: Afghanistan Policy Group, *The Public's Voice in the Peace Negotiations Survey 2018*.



negotiations, there was considerable dissatisfaction. The largest group of sceptics, both among men and women was in Bamyan.

When asked what they would expect from the peace negotiations, the overwhelming majority of respondents, particularly in Bamyan, Kandahar and Nangahar, hoped that the situation would get better. The respondents in Balkh and Herat said their greater concern was that the situation could stagnate or even change for the worse.

Asked which values they would not want to lose in the course of the peace talks, the overwhelming majority picked all four options: religious values, women's rights, freedom of expression and democracy. In Kandahar and Nangahar, religious values were cited first; more men in Balkh and Nangahar than in other regions emphasized the importance of women's rights. The participants in Bamyan thought that maintaining a democratic system was the most important value that should not be compromised.

A public agenda for the peace process

This project brief is based on the recommendations and comments from more than 600 Afghans who attended the Afghanistan Policy Group's Public's Voice in the Peace Process meetings in Balkh, Bamyan, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Herat in May and June 2019. Six themes related directly or in a broader sense to the peace process provided a framework for the discussions and helped the participants come up with recommendations as specific as possible.

While it surely does not come as a surprise that there were different opinions and ideas in such a huge and diverse group, the rapporteurs identified remarkable common ground and consensus in all areas: Most participants expressed concerns about political interference of neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also an understanding of their legitimate interests in the peace process and its potential outcome. Hence, addressing historical, economic and political problems with other regional states was deemed an important part of the peace strategy of the Afghan government and its international partners.

Figure 6: The Working Group Themes.

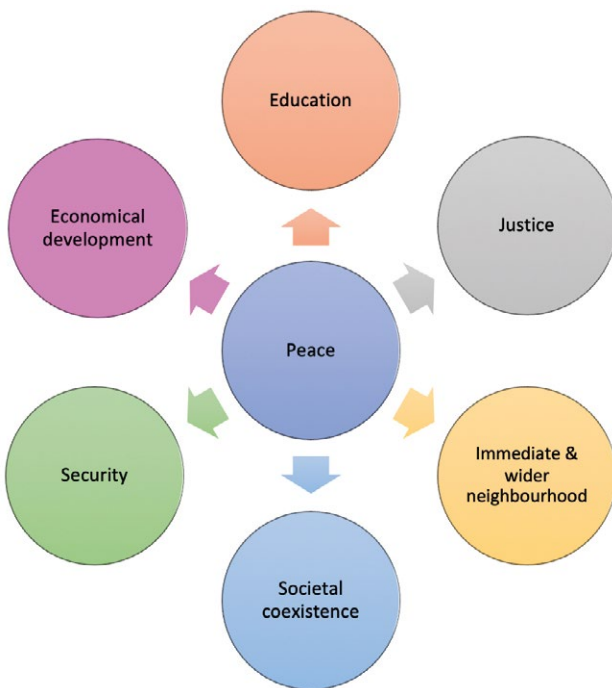


Figure 7: A host speaker launches the conversation by emphasizing the importance of peace for the future of Afghanistan during the Public's Voice in the Peace Process conference in Jalalabad city, April 2019.

Source: Photo © FES Afghanistan.



Another transnational aspect of Afghanistan's sustainability and the chance to end violence is the enormous dependence on foreign aid. As a solution, participants suggested larger efforts to fight corruption, to attract investments, to work towards a production-driven economy and to capitalize on Afghanistan's unique transit status in the region.

The participants recognized that, within the country, no peace could be achieved without justice, although they agreed that a comprehensive transitional justice system might not be practical for immediate implementation without the risk of re-escalating the violence.

Peace and security were seen as mutually dependent by the participants – one clearly cannot work and be sustainable without the other. Many participants emphasized the need for an immediate ceasefire and that Afghan society should pressure the government and the insurgency to agree.

Turning to a factor of the ongoing violence and weak economic development, the participants touched on the country's widespread illiteracy and the need for investments in primary and higher education because peace can only grow and survive in a literate society.

Other major obstacles to peace cited by the participants were ethnic and linguistic tensions. To protect the outcome of peace talks, many people emphasized that much serious effort was needed to avoid exacerbating such divisions.

Finally, addressing the process of the current talks as a whole, the participants noted that a marginalized role of the greater public in the peace process could create major flaws in any possible peace agreement and further ways of participation and inclusion should be explored.

Economic development

As with peace and security, sustainable peace and economic development have the potential to mutually reinforce each other. And, again, one cannot exist without the other.

Despite the inflow of billions of dollars in foreign aid, Afghanistan remains one of the least developed countries. Although government revenue increased at double-digit rates through 2017 and exports grew by 28 per cent in 2017, according to the World Bank, domestic revenue is currently only covering approximately half of on-budget expenditures and less than a quarter of total public expenditures. These high levels of reliance on foreign aid are unsustainable and present risks at a time when Afghanistan's international partners and donors are facing multiple competing commitments for available development assistance and security resources.

The recovery and development of Afghanistan's economy is severely threatened by insecurity and war, tying up major

human and financial resources of the government and preventing it from planning, developing, and implementing respective programmes. In some parts of the country, due to the presence of terrorist groups or ongoing clashes, providing even basic services to communities appears to be an insurmountable task. Even if peace is possible in Afghanistan, the risk that economic problems could disrupt it remains a grave concern. If economic programmes continue to fail to attract proper investment and increase domestic revenue, the sustaining poverty and lack of opportunities could exacerbate the problem of radicalization and make recruitment easier for armed groups.

For economic development that can help prevail peace, the participants recommended:

- Plan for development programmes that will gradually liberate the economy from the dependency of foreign aid and work towards a production-oriented economy.
- Attract domestic and foreign investments, inter alia, in extractive resources.
- Design a balanced economic development plan across the country, away from political, ethnic and regional discrimination.
- Design and implement programmes that can effectively fight the corruption that severely damages the economy.
- Use the country's transit position to convince neighbouring States that a peaceful and economically successful Afghanistan can help them secure their own interests.

Figure 8: Participants discuss opportunities for economic development during the Public's Voice in the Peace Process conference in Mazar-e-Sharif city, April 2019.

Source: Photo © FES Afghanistan.



Reciprocity and cooperation in Afghanistan's neighbourhood

Throughout history, Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours were turbulent and destabilizing. And yet, there survives good potential for cooperation and trust-building.

Tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan left a particular mark on each other's security in the past. Both countries accuse each other of supporting armed insurgencies against the other, and territorial disputes add up to it, preventing the mutual transit of goods. In recent years, water issues and the Pakistani government's shifting policy towards several millions of Afghans seeking refuge in

Pakistan, including an increasing number of deportations, have complicated relations between the two countries. According to many participants, Pakistan has exploited the presence of up to three million registered and unregistered Afghan refugees politically, whereas armed groups have sought to recruit from them. Although it has been a few decades since their peak (in the 1980s), the number of Afghan emigrants to Pakistan in the past years has outweighed the number of returnees, according to official sources.

Relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran are affected by a similar pattern of issues. The Iranian government is openly dissatisfied with the presence of United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces in Afghanistan and with the accusations from senior Afghan and Western politicians that Tehran is supporting the Taliban and other terrorist groups operating in the country. In addition to disputes over shared water resources, the presence of up to four million Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran poses a challenge to bilateral relations. While Afghan migration into the Islamic Republic of Iran has not ceased in the past years, there is a clear trend in the other direction – with nearly 1.2 million Afghans having returned since 2018. Many left reportedly due to mistreatment by government officials, especially Iranian security forces.

Due to substantially smaller refugee communities, historically less strained bilateral relations and involvement

Figure 9: Participants debate Afghanistan's neighbours and opportunities for regional cooperation during the Public's Voice in the Peace Process conference in Herat city, March 2019.

Source: Photo © FES Afghanistan.



in Afghanistan's domestic politics, the northern neighbours (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) share a different perspective and were also seen more positively by the participants. In contrast, however, the situation in Afghanistan poses a security concern to them, including the production and trafficking of narcotics. To the East, China traditionally did not give much attention to Afghanistan. In the past three to four years, however, there has been a gradually increasing role for China in Afghanistan, as an ally of Pakistan and through major regional and global economic programmes, like the Belt and Road Initiative. Finally, albeit to a lesser extent, other regional powers, like the Arab countries, India, Russia and Turkey are also involved in Afghanistan, along with many Western States, further complicating the situation.

For nurturing regional peace, the participants recommended:

- Any meaningful peace strategy for Afghanistan needs to proactively engage, in a constructive and cooperative way, the interests of regional and global powers deemed legitimate by the Afghan people.
- Bilateral disputes with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan need to be addressed and resolved swiftly, including encouraging Afghan refugees to return and providing opportunities for them, which will help ease bilateral tensions and reduce opportunities of interference in Afghan domestic affairs.
- Central Asian countries should utilize Afghanistan's favourable geographic position to export energy and import goods and should be encouraged to take on a more positive role in Afghan affairs, including facilitating peace.
- Both Afghanistan and its neighbours must take steps to prepare for multinational regional projects, such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia power project, because they will bring common interests among them, which can reinforce security for the region.

Mitigating conflict through education

A lack of education and low literacy rates are likely to cause social misfortune and lead to conflict, violence and war anywhere in the world. Hence, in Afghanistan, peace

is more likely to be promoted by people who are literate and educated.

Despite significant investments in education and literacy in recent years, ranging from elementary education to different degrees of higher education, the endemically low level of school enrolment remains one of the most pressing social challenges. According to the United States Agency for Development, more than nine million children and adolescents are currently enrolled in public and private schools, among them more than 3.5 million girls. But that leaves some two million children deprived of schooling, especially in rural areas and areas partially or fully controlled by insurgents. More than 370,000 undergraduates enrolled in university in 2019, 40 per cent of whom are young women, while two-thirds of the 200,000 graduates continued into post-graduate studies. While this generation is considered the best educated in Afghan history, the number of young people benefiting from the education system still needs to be expanded. Higher education opportunities, including scholarships, in other countries constitute a vehicle for a brain drain that the government can do little about and enhanced existing concerns among the participants about external influence on the country's elites. And young persons denied education and related opportunities

are more vulnerable to the recruitment tactics of armed groups and criminal organizations.

To achieve lasting peace, increasing education levels is considered imperative, the participants recommended:

- The government and its international partners should plan and implement short-term, medium-term and long-term programmes to combat illiteracy and provide access to education.
- To generate a “culture of peace” in Afghanistan, the curriculum of elementary education should include peace education.
- Through special programmes, the government should encourage and support families to send their children to schools.
- The government should seek and implement specific approaches and strategies to combat illiteracy among (young) adults who did not receive a formal education.
- Religious education should no longer be an exclusive task of private institutions funded by donations but made available to all children through the public school system.
- To secure the independence of religious education institutions, considerable public investment should be made so that these institutions do not have to collect donations from private and non-Afghan individuals and groups.

Figure 10: A representative from the Working Group on Education presents findings and recommendations during the Public's Voice in the Peace Process conference in Kandahar city, April 2019.

Source: Photo © FES Afghanistan.



Insecurity and violence

Combat operations, raids and terrorist attacks and their high level of casualties among combatants and civilians, the destruction of infrastructure and housing and the limitations on individual movement are all indicators for the current absence of peace in Afghanistan. Although a wider understanding of peace is needed to make it sustainable and enduring, everyone recognizes that peace and security are synonymous in the most basic sense. Four decades of war and crises have left deep wounds in the Afghan society. The ensuing breakdown of social cohesion and the ongoing conflicts fuel the war engine. With some citing the proverb “Power of the people is the power of God”, the participants emphasized that Afghan society has a responsibility to foster peace within their country.

Figure 11: A representative of the Working Group on Security presents recommendations to the audience during the Public's Voice in the Peace Process conference in Herat city, March 2019.

Source: Photo © FES Afghanistan.



For ending war and achieving lasting social peace, the participants recommended:

- The Afghan people should pressure, wherever possible, the government, armed opposition groups and global actors to bring peace.
- Before any peace agreement, a ceasefire must be announced between the government and the Taliban.
- The issue of disarming Taliban militants should be addressed in the peace talks.
- The root causes of conflict in Afghanistan should be addressed in the peace talks and respective strategies developed.
- Only the government, and no other government, should establish direct relations with any political group within Afghanistan, especially armed opposition groups.
- Peace talks and their achieved results should have regional and global guarantee powers.
- Beyond the peace talks, a comprehensive and targeted promotion for social and economic peace in Afghanistan should be at the forefront of the government's and international community's efforts.
- An understanding among all Afghans should be created that the quest for peace should begin with the family environment and each person should and can contribute to the promotion of peace.
- Because the absence of a clear and widely accepted definition of Afghan national interests allows different

groups to interpret their own particular interests as the common good, a common definition of Afghan interests should be agreed during the peace talks and institutionalized afterwards.

Social coexistence

The participants emphasized that Afghan society is a combination of ethnicities. Years of autocratic government, war and crises as well as ethno-centred politics and historical tensions between ethnic groups have been exacerbated to such an extent that they now constitute one of the major factors of crisis and violence in Afghanistan.

While there is acknowledgement that ethnocentric power-seeking by political decision-makers and representatives of both legitimate and armed opposition cannot be a solution to the problems that exist in Afghanistan, it is also seen as making an already difficult situation worse in the aftermath of the 2001 fall of the Taliban. Instead, Afghanistan needs social justice based on an inclusive and general understanding of citizenship and rights. Another contributing factor to social and communal tensions is the omnipresent and often protracted issues of migration and displacement, as well as the emergence of alternative power centres in areas of limited statehood. Internal displacement and

Figure 12: A participant asks a question during the Q & A session of the Public's Voice in the Peace Process conference in Bamyan city, April 2019.

Source: Photo © FES Afghanistan.



the return of former refugees and emigrants has created dangerous new tensions over property and resources between the newcomers and the previous inhabitants of those areas.

Although resolving these issues requires significant time and effort, it constitutes an indispensable supplement to any peace agreement between the conflict parties. Therefore, the participants recommended:

- People of all societal backgrounds must participate and be present and visible in the peace process.
- Once the peace talks come to a result, local disputes over the division of water and land should be redressed immediately, also with regard to migrant and host communities.
- Decades of war and crisis have left a mark on the psychological security of the Afghan people, creating a permanent trauma for many. Acknowledging the negative impact of this on societal resilience, the government and its partners should develop and implement short-term, medium-term and long-term programmes addressing these issues.
- To win the trust of people in the peace process and provide the ground for restoration of unity among all Afghans, stakeholders must show in practice that their policies are not based on ethnic interests.
- Existing resources should be equally available to all ethnic groups so that their distribution does not further exacerbate ethnic and regional tensions.
- Government recruitment of civil servants should be particularly freed from any forms of ethnic, regional and linguistic discrimination.

Justice for all Afghans

Any outcome of the peace talks cannot be sustainable and lasting if it does not provide justice as well. For most participants, this not only includes human rights and universal values but also questions of religious guidance. Although Afghans experienced injustice on collective and individual levels in the past decades, subsequent efforts to bring and maintain justice to all of them have not appeared sufficiently serious or meaningful. Too few perpetrators have been held accountable for extrajudicial killings and assassinations, mass murders,

Figure 13: Participants discuss security challenges and develop recommendations during the Public's Voice in the Peace Process conference in Mazar-e-Sharif city, April 2019.

Source: Photo © FES Afghanistan.



attacks on public and civilian institutions and the shelling of residential areas committed by all conflict parties against each other and Afghan civilians. Even the fall of the Taliban in 2001 did not bring an end to the suffering of civilians due to ongoing clashes in almost all areas of the country.

The generalization and provision of justice for all must be chief among the efforts to achieve and maintain peace, for which the participants recommended:

- The rights and values of citizenship should not be sacrificed for the sake of dialogue and short-term security gains and should be promoted by the negotiating parties.
- Afghan women should enjoy equal and inalienable rights, which should not be the price of the peace talks.
- The current Transitional Justice Programme needs to be reviewed in a national discourse to prevent any individual or group from misusing the justice system for partisan interest.
- Any delay in implementing a reviewed Transitional Justice Programme is only acceptable if it will help facilitate peace immediately.
- Justice must be applied to all and equally to create and maintain a legal system accepted by everyone.
- A plan should be developed to address injustices and, in particular, war crimes in the past few decades.

Conclusion

There is much at stake for the Afghan people. Whether eventual peace talks fail or succeed will have tremendous impact on their future. If the talks only succeed by compartmentalizing interdependent issues and framing objectives too narrowly, it will be the people of Afghanistan who will suffer from protracted conflict and the high likelihood of a re-escalation of violence.

It is understandable that, despite all differences and heated debates when trying to find recommendations, the one common denominator and the loudest and clearest demands among all survey respondents and in the group discussions was to address their perception of being left out and of having their voice marginalized and to mitigate their frustrations.

Discretion is needed to generate trust and a mutual understanding of players at the negotiation table, and the spread of false information or the premature spread of news should be prevented. And yet, especially without a ceasefire, enhanced efforts by the conveners and conflicting parties to inform the public about the issues discussed and their agendas can help establish the transparency needed to maintain or even generate public trust in the process. In turn, if more and new voices and ideas have a chance to be heard in the process, the chance of arriving at the best agreement possible would increase.

Without public buy-in, a peace agreement is not worth much more than the paper it is written on. Hence, including the concerns, ideas and recommendations of the

greater public and creating space for public deliberation and participation will be key for the question of how to maintain societal and comprehensive peace and stability. Only if the Afghan people see themselves – and act – as real stakeholders and not just as recipients of decisions made by others will peace become attainable and beneficial for all.

In cooperation with its partners, domestic and international stakeholders, the Afghanistan Policy Group will remain committed to this aim and continue to work towards inclusion and participation at every stage of the peace talks and beyond.

Figure 14: Participants of the Working Group on Education exchange ideas with each other during the Public's Voice in the Peace Process conference in Bamyán city, April 2019.

Source: Photo © FES Afghanistan.



About the author

Mohammad Faheem Dashty is a journalist and author who began his career in 1993 with *Kabul Weekly* magazine, which was banned by the Mujahedeen government in 1996. He then became the press officer of the National Resistance Against the Taliban until 2001. In 2002, Dashty re-launched *Kabul Weekly*, as owner and Chief Editor until 2011. Since 2012 he has served as Executive Director of the National Journalists Union and took on the position as convener of the Afghanistan Policy Group in 2017. He is author of four books, including the latest, *End of the Game: Afghanistan in the Next Two Decades*.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a German non-profit organization committed to the ideals of social democracy. It was founded in 1925 as a political legacy of Germany's first democratically elected president Friedrich Ebert. To this day, FES follows his mission to promote freedom, solidarity and social justice through the political process in Germany and abroad.

FES has been working in Afghanistan, in cooperation with local organizations, since 2002. Its programmes aim at strengthening democratic institutions, from the local to the national levels, increasing the political participation of youths, enhancing women's empowerment and gender equality and promoting free and professional media, social justice in the formal and informal economy and regional cooperation for peace and development.