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Disconnected and Discounted?

Religious Actors and Civil Society in Post-2001 Afghanistan

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Religion is an influential force in Afghanistan – both in people's daily lives and in politics. In the international debate on peacebuilding and development in post-Taliban Afghanistan, however, religion is hardly ever mentioned, and religious actors and institutions are rarely included in policies or programmes. Given that strengthening Afghan civil society is considered essential by both national and international development actors, why do they pay so little attention to religious actors and institutions? How is religious civil society viewed by the main development actors – the Afghan government, other international governments, and national and international civil society? How does religious civil society perceive current peace and development processes? And, more generally, what role and function does religious civil society play in Afghanistan?

With these questions as a starting point, researchers from the International

Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO), the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and the Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU) undertook a new research project, whose main findings are presented in this policy brief.¹ The project draws on case studies from Kunduz city (Kunduz) and Sayedabad (Wardak where 40 religious leaders and a range of key informants were interviewed, as well as a national-level study based on interviews with officials from the Afghan government, national and international development actors, and religious leaders, complemented by a review of relevant existing literature.

Afghan Civil Society

Formal, modern civil society organizations are a recent phenomenon. In Afghanistan, traditional forms of association – such as the local councils (*shuraljirga*) – and religious institutions – such as the mosque, the religious seminaries (*madradas*) and religious leaders (*mullahs* and *ulema*) – have historically played an important role

in society and politics. While many formal and informal institutions declined during the war, local religious civil society institutions remained significant.

The understanding of civil society in the international aid community that has defined peacebuilding and development policy in Afghanistan since 2001 is rather narrow. Donors have mainly supported formally established organizations associated with secular development programmes. Focusing on the service-delivery role of civil society, donors view such organizations as effective implementers of reconstruction and development projects. More traditional civil society actors and institutions, however – religious ones included – do not commonly perform these sorts of functions.

Although the Islamic faith is shared by virtually all Afghans, there are also religious differences within the country.

¹The present policy brief is an output of a research project that forms part of a larger research initiative on Afghanistan by the CMI and PRIO. The project is funded by the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and complementary funds have been granted by the Ford Foundation. The main research has been conducted by Kaja Borchgrevink (PRIO) and Kanishka Nawabi, Mirwais Wardak and Idrees Zaman (all CPAU). Advice, training and support have been provided by Kristian Berg Harpviken (PRIO) and Arne Strand and Astri Suhrke (both CMI).

Religious civil society is not homogenous, but comprises reform-friendly, pro-government moderates along with Islamists, conservative-minded traditionalists and radical fundamentalists that oppose the government. The public debate gives voice to many competing groups who all speak the language of religion. Furthermore, religious networks and institutions often span state boundaries including movement of people, finances and ideas.

Civil Society Functions

Religious civil society has a number of functions. Religious actors and institutions stand out from other types of civil society actors by providing moral authority and linking the believer to the sacred. In addition to these functions, which are fundamentally religious, religious actors in Afghanistan perform a number of other 'civil society functions':²

Socialization and Social Cohesion

As authoritative guardians of religious norms and practices, Afghanistan's religious leaders and institutions have considerable potential to strengthen internal bonds between members in a community, as well as to act as a bridge between different groups. Their position, however, can also be used to divide groups. Just as religious actors can potentially foster conflict, they can also be important promoters of peace, reconciliation and collaboration across conflict lines.

Public Communication and Advocacy

Religious leaders serve as local information brokers, and also voice their opinions on public matters. In Afghanistan, the mosque is used not only for religious services but also to share information of public relevance and to spread political messages. The Friday prayer, in particular, is an

important and influential institution for religious leaders as opinion-makers. More generally, religious leaders serve as the conveyors of civil society 'voices', and they often have considerable influence as critics of political processes.

Mediation and Conflict Resolution

Afghan religious leaders have played a role in conflict resolution not only because of their knowledge of religious law and their general religious authority, but also because, as religious leaders, they have a degree of autonomy in relation to community and tribal structures.

Intermediation

The relatively independent position of ulema and local mullahs enables them to act as interlocutors between their own communities and external agents, such as the Afghan state, international agencies and NGOs.

Resource Distribution and Social Security

Afghanistan's religious institution – the mosque and the religious school – perform social security functions through charity and redistribution of resources within the community.

The clergy's role in defining, maintaining and preserving what are considered appropriate moral values, however, gives religious leaders considerable influence. The roles and functions of religious leaders and institutions can be utilized for different agendas; they may support the government, for example, or they may oppose it; they may promote peace and cooperation, or they may advocate hostility and conflict. It is partly this ambiguity that makes religious civil society critical in peace and reconciliation processes.

Giving Voice or Using Voice?

To the extent that religious civil society is acknowledged by other national

and international development actors, the relationship is presented as being solely one-way.

Lack of Genuine Dialogue

While their involvement is limited, the government and other development actors – such as the United Nations – have tried to use the voice of the clergy to legitimize their own policies and programmes, and to gain access to project beneficiaries. Little effort, however, has been made to create space for an autonomous role on the part of religious actors or to establish a genuine dialogue. Religious leaders express frustration about a situation in which their advice is only sought when the government needs it to support its own policies.

Tension and Collaboration

The values and agendas of modern civil society and traditional religious civil society in Afghanistan are often in conflict. Despite these differences, actors within modern Afghan civil society are somewhat more active than the Afghan government and Western donors when it comes to involving religious leaders in dialogue and project activities.

Interest in Collaboration

Among the religious leaders interviewed in Seyedabad and Kunduz, the overall majority expressed positive views about the government's development agenda. Although cautiously sceptical of the government, many believe that, as religious leaders, they could positively contribute to this agenda by generating support among the people, as well as through more direct participation in development projects.

- Most religious leaders, however, have not been invited to take part in such activities.
- Many religious leaders – even among the traditionalists – are

² The analysis presented here draws on the framework developed in Thania Paffenholz & Christoph Spurk's 'Civil Society, Civic Engagement and Peacebuilding', Social Development Paper No. 36 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006).

positive to foreign development assistance, as long as this does not conflict with Afghan traditions and Islam.

- The majority of the religious leaders (and virtually all those interviewed in Wardak) were highly critical of the foreign military presence. There was a clear tendency among religious leaders to distinguish between foreign support for development and foreign military assistance. Notably, even those who were critical to foreign military assistance welcomed development projects and signalled their willingness to cooperate with them.

Conflicting Agendas

Today, religion is highly politicized, and the relationship between religion and the state is contested, as is the role of religion in the public sphere.

Splits among the Clergy

A semi-governmental council of religious leaders, the *shura e ulama*, mandated with advising the government on religious matters, has a long tradition in Afghanistan. The clergy is split in their views of this council. Among the respondents in this study, moderate, pro-government religious leaders saw it as the role of the clergy to support the government and its policies; others – more traditionalist religious leaders – believed the clergy should be independent of the government and viewed government support to the clergy as a strategy of co-optation to gain legitimacy. In this perspective, religious leaders that associate with the government are seen as illegitimate, as political opportunists.

Afghan Religious Education

In Afghanistan, two entirely separate education sectors exist – one secular and one religious. Radicalization of

youth in foreign madrasas has alarmed the government, leading to new initiatives to counter this development. The Ministry of Education has recently initiated a madrasa programme in which regular subjects are grafted on to the traditional curricula. Religious education is a contested issue, where some (particularly in the government) would like a standardized broader curriculum, including secular subjects, while others (especially among the clergy) favour the right of madrasas to define their own terms. Growing dissatisfaction with the government and its foreign supporters increases the likelihood that religious educational reform will be met with suspicion among religious actors, suggesting that there is a need for a great deal of tact and sensitivity when dealing with these issues.

Religious Education Abroad

Recruitment of Afghan religious students to the Taliban and other militant groups has brought renewed attention to the radicalization of youth through religious education abroad. It is a common assumption within both government circles and civil society in Afghanistan that lack of access to quality religious education within their own country leads young Afghans to seek education abroad. Our research finds that the relevant motivations are multiple and that our knowledge of what actually ties Afghan students to madrasas abroad is fairly limited. The majority of religious leaders interviewed in Sayedabad and Kunduz had received part or all of their training from local madrasas. While there are undoubtedly madrasas that radicalize Afghan youth – an issue that needs to be addressed – there is great diversity in the madrasas that Afghans attend abroad, and the tendency to equate all madrasa education abroad with radicalization is questionable.

Why the Lack of Engagement?

Even though many national and international aid actors acknowledge the central role – even the potential for constructive involvement – of religious civil society, there is considerable reluctance to engage. Why?

- Lack of familiarity, not knowing how to engage and political sensitivities in donor home countries can partly explain the lack of engagement from the side of the international community.
- Stereotyping of religious leaders and institutions as militant extremists makes it politically difficult to include religious actors and institutions as partners in civil society.
- Within the Afghan government and the international community, there is a perception that religious actors are fundamentally opposed to modernization, and some seem to have concerns about making religious actors more powerful by granting them recognition or formal authority.

Shrinking Space for Religious Actors

The escalating violence in Afghanistan is reducing the space for religious leaders that seek to hold the middle ground. Religious leaders who support neither the current Afghan government nor the Taliban are attacked by both militant Islamic groups and the government. Precisely because many of these 'middle grounders' are seen as influential in their communities by both secular and religious actors, they are in a precarious position. They are seen as a threat to many, and are protected by none. Marginalization of and attacks on religious leaders – along with the government's inability to offer protection – contribute to widening the gap between religious actors and the government.

Radicalization: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

A policy of excluding religious actors for fear that their influence may be predominantly negative carries a risk of pushing these actors into such negative roles. Since religious actors who cooperate with the government and Western organizations are at risk of being attacked, it is all the more important to create productive openings to this group – exercising due tact and sensitivity.

Recommendations

Religion as an Internal Concern

Many Afghans, even those who favour international assistance, uphold religion and tradition as 'protected' domestic concerns where foreign – particularly non-Muslim – interference is not wanted. This has particular relevance for assistance in the areas of law and education. The sharing of experiences from Muslim states and civil society is here seen as appropriate. However, it is the state and civil society – religious actors included – that need to take the lead in defining the relationship between the state and religion in Afghanistan. If there is a role for international actors, particularly those from the international Muslim community, it is to help increase awareness and knowledge through research and information.

Inclusion through Dialogue

Dialogue rests on an understanding of 'the other'. Religious actors need to familiarize themselves with central concepts in the development agenda, particularly with regard to human rights and democratization, where differences and misconceptions are

most evident and have potentially very damaging consequences. Development and peacebuilding agents, both governmental and nongovernmental, need to strengthen their understanding of religion and how it works in an Afghan context.

Create Productive Openings

Some agencies have successfully used concrete issues – development projects and civic education – as points of entry for collaboration with religious leaders. A different approach is to build on Islamic practices of charity to help religious institutions make their engagement more productive and longer term. There may be a need for the government of Afghanistan to develop regulatory frameworks to support this, drawing on experiences from other Islamic countries. Similarly, local religious institutions have traditionally played an important role in providing education, and it is worth building on current government initiatives to further explore the interface between religious and modern forms of education.

Strengthen the Knowledge Base

Knowledge and understanding of the role of religion in Afghanistan today is critical, both for understanding the challenges that exist and for making use of the resources inherent in these institutions. There is also a need to know more about how religious actors are influenced, co-opted or coerced by other power-holders. On account of the authority and influence they possess within their communities, religious leaders themselves risk being put under pressure to advance agendas in the interest of others.

Conclusion

There is no blueprint for how to engage with religious civil society in Afghanistan. Actors and institutions vary greatly from region to region, from village to village, and between denominations and sects. Exactly how to engage with religious actors in a given case needs to be based on analysis of each individual context. This study, however, has established some commonalities, and it argues that everyone involved with supporting and strengthening civil society in Afghanistan, both national and international actors, ought to recognize religious actors and institutions as an integral part of civil society. Religious actors find themselves in a difficult squeeze. Taliban-led insurgents expect their loyalty, while the main agencies in the country's modernization are hesitant to listen to and unable to protect them. Religious actors carry considerable potential either to undermine or to buttress the building of peace. Which of these roles that they adopt is largely contingent on whether others are willing to prepare the ground for their involvement.

Further Reading

Mirwais Wardak, Idrees Zaman & Kanishka Nawabi, 2007. 'The Role and Functions of Religious Civil Society in Afghanistan: Case Studies from Kunduz and Sayedabad'. Kabul: CPAU; available at <http://www.cpaug.org.af>.

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