

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
DEMOCRACY

E-PAPER

The dynamic of youth activism in Afghanistan: A journey between hope and desperation



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Published by Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, June 2022

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Abstract

August 15, 2021, marked the start of a new chapter in Afghanistan after all international troops were withdrawn and the Taliban took over the country. The past 20 years have seen some gains in human rights and women's rights and the emergence of the Afghan youth as a socioeconomic and political force. The humanitarian situation worsened further in the second half of the year, due to both the ongoing conflict and the economic crisis that has hugely affected all Afghan citizens, in particular Afghanistan's youth. Many young Afghans were evacuated to other countries, and those who remain in Afghanistan face many challenges, including no access to education, financial hardship and unemployment. This e-paper is written based on interviews conducted with young activists*, journalists, human rights defenders and academics from Afghanistan (all under the age of 35), who have been actively involved in the process of democratisation and committed to liberal values over the past 20 years in Afghanistan; it highlights the twenty years of achievements by Afghan youth and explores their hurdles and challenges under the rule of the Taliban's *de facto* regime.

*Note: *some names of activists were changed as per their request to protect their identities.*

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1. Introduction

Since the transition politics of late 2001, Afghan youth has emerged as a significant social, political, economic and developmental force. Afghan youth, defined as aged 18-35 years old by the country's [National Youth Policy](#), is estimated to constitute more than 65 per cent of the population. Those under the age of 25 make up nearly two-thirds of the Afghan population, making Afghanistan one of the countries with the youngest population worldwide.^[1] The rule of the Taliban beginning in 1996 and the invasion of the Americans in 2001 are significant parts of Afghanistan's history for the younger generation.^[2] After 20 years, the Taliban are back in power, but today's Afghanistan is unlike the country that they ruled in the late 1990s. It is now a country with a young generation who has grown up and been raised with certain values like freedom of speech and human rights.^[3] A generation that despite patriarchal and discriminatory attitudes and practices, which largely undermined policies and strategies related to youth over the last two decades, actively took part in almost all spheres of Afghan society and politics. Young Afghans have represented their country in international arenas, festivals, contests and sport events, bringing pride to the country with their achievements.

In the eight months since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, an uncertain era of even more instability for youth participation has arrived. The Taliban have embarked on a swift reversal of the socio-political gains and democratic values that have been extensively practiced over the past 20 years. Youth participation in various social and political spheres has remained precarious and volatile. Conversely, intimidation, extrajudicial killings, house searches, discriminatory practices and the exclusion of young girls from education have resumed, which have resulted in extreme uncertainty and despair, as well as a strong desire for outmigration among young people.^[4]

This research paper is written based on interviews conducted with a selected group of young Afghan activists, journalists, human rights defenders and academics, who have been extremely engaged with the process of democratisation and affiliated with liberal values over the past two decades in Afghanistan.

The paper gives voice to the unheard Afghan youth by portraying their life experiences and opinions of the current situation under the rule of the Taliban's regime, and draws on the major achievements, progress and hurdles regarding youth participation in society and politics during the last two decades.

It should be noted that the current research was conducted under extreme circumstances, where the majority of the interviewees who were in Afghanistan were dealing with the day-to-day restrictions imposed by the Taliban and ongoing protests, while others had been forced to evacuate the country. The researchers believe that the current research presents a basis for further research activities and projects in the future on Afghanistan's youth living under an extremist and hard-line regime.

The paper proceeds in five sections. The first section, which presents the paper's methodology, precedes an analysis of youth participation, which leads into a brief section on the term 'youth', and then a discussion of the conceptualisations and driving factors of Myanmar youth participating in the anti-coup movement. This is followed by a description of the major components of the anti-coup resistance movement in Myanmar today, an assessment of the practical challenges they face, and finally, a concluding section.

2. Youth performance, support mechanisms and opportunities

The majority of youth have commenced their engagement with civic activities in the context of post-2001 transition politics. As well as the presence of international community support during this time, the Afghan constitution adopted in 2004 ensured a relatively democratic environment for civil and political activities in Afghanistan, one in which not only political parties but also civil society organisations, youth groups, networks and movements were founded to consolidate democracy. The young generation gained the most benefit from these opportunities, enabling them to enter various fields of education, culture, society, economics and politics. Their role was prominent in all areas of the economy, society and politics, where they not only obtained membership, but also endeavoured to push forward their agendas and programmes via participation in society.

Among others, Fatima Roshanian (28), the editor-in-chief of a women's magazine, believes that:

Over the course of the past 20 years, hopes for a better future, and enthusiasm to study, work and contribute to society, were high among young people. At least in main cities their engagement with various cultural, social, political and entertainment events/issues were visible, which have created high motivation to bring positive changes. (Interview with Fatima Roshanian, 2021)

Faisal Zaheb (28), an artist and journalist, points out that the performance and activities of the youth in the last 20 years – given the war and the obstacles – are highly commendable:

Young people strived for a prosperous Afghanistan by learning from the dark days and bitter experiences of the past. Now this generation has changed and has experience in various fields; they have expertise, they have views and plans, and they play a major role in the development of the country. In addition, Afghan women and girls, who had previously been isolated, were given the right to education, work, social and political participation, and are no longer silent or unnoticed. (Interview with Faisal Zaheb, 2021)

The large participation of youth – both female and male – with different demands and agenda points required some sort of institutional arrangements to coordinate them, provide funding and resources, and respond to their needs. The only national institution that served and represented the young generation was the Deputy Ministry of Youth in the framework

of the Ministry of Information and Culture. Despite the largely symbolic role and function of the Deputy Ministry of Youth, it initiated and coordinated the development of the first ever-national youth policy, which has indeed strengthened the chance of youth participation in various fields, allowing young people to raise their voices and influence policies at the local and national level. Furthermore, the High Council of Youth was another achievement that provided the space for young people to work for peace, development, democracy promotion, community mobilisation and volunteerism, as it aimed to make decisions and submit specific plans to relevant ministries for improving the situation of young people and solving the problems of youth all over the country.^[5]

It is impossible to ignore the achievements of young candidates in the provincial councils and parliamentary elections in 2018. Interview with Ehsanullah Hikmat (34)

While youth participation was constructive over the last two decades for many young people,^[6] just being part of the transition in itself was a great opportunity, as it provided bonds and opportunities for their capacity building and personal growth. The support of international stakeholders and partners in terms of providing funding and learning opportunities, especially providing scholarships, fellowship programmes and exchange programmes, were key pillars in youth improvements, which enabled young people to gain modern education, improve their skills and bring positive change to society. Although the exact statistics are not available, a large number of Afghan youths had the opportunity to be part of the scholarship programmes of neighbouring, regional and western countries over the course of the last two decades. Furthermore, transition politics provided a relatively open atmosphere in which young leaders were able to criticise the state and politicians, possessing a strong voice through media, movements and networks.

Freedom of expression, opportunities for the youth to be part of the transition, and the chance of setting up and leading own associations and media platforms, all enabled youth to contribute to a variety of fields. (Interview with Abdul Naser Folad, Muska, and Fatima Roshanian, 2021)

Having said that, it is important to consider the complexity of the Afghan culture, state and society when we talk about social and political participation of the young generation, particularly young women. Muska (35), an advocate for women's rights, explains:

I belong to a culturally sensitive family where they do not allow girls/women to even have access to their basic rights such as education. A young leader/activist in this country must start fighting with their family. This fight was also not an easy fight for me as my parents were not supporting me, because the family were all against my political engagement. (Interview with Muska, 2021)

Abdul Naser (30) draws an overall view of the political culture in the country, which acted as a huge barrier to effective participation of the young generation over the last two decades. He believes that:

The general and political culture that governs our society is based on traditional, tribal, ethnic and local characteristics, and all opportunities are limited and defined according to these characteristics. In such a space, there is no room for effective participation based on merit and efforts. (Interview with Abdul Naser Folad, 2021)

3. Challenges and hurdles of youth participation

In a patriarchal and traditional society like Afghanistan, there are many challenges and obstacles to youth participation and activities: corruption; nepotism in employment and scholarships and exchange programs; patriarchal behaviour and discrimination towards youth; ethnic and identity politics; mismanagement; and a project-based approach to youth empowerment and participation. All of these factors have been highlighted by the interview participants, as well as conflict, insecurity, explosions and suicides. However, these may emerge in different forms affecting them either collectively or individually, or may be based on social and ethnic class. For example, for young women activists:

Being a woman and a young leader in Afghanistan itself is a challenge; in this country, which is male- and elder-dominated, it is very challenging to be part of decision-making and share your ideas. (Interview with Muska, 2021)

Fatima encountered an almost similar issue when she talked with a Malik, an elder of a village, who refused to talk to her just because she was a woman:

The first obstacle I faced was a gender-based view towards me. This was a negative experience which constructed kind of a perception in me that our society is deeply divided. (Interview with Fatima Roshanian, 2021).

Regardless of gender-based discrimination, the generation gap and deficit of pro-youth politics was one of the main obstacles for youth political participation in the country. During the last two decades, the power was largely monopolised by tribal leaders and political parties. The political leadership and governance were absolutely in the hands of specific groups, which made youth participation either less effective, marginalised them or even made them fail, despite the fact that they constitute most of the population. However, as youth received modern education inside Afghanistan, and abroad, they wanted to represent their own beliefs, which were strongly affiliated with democratic values and principles, namely human rights, pluralism, social justice, equality, participation and rule of law. On the other hand, traditional elites, power brokers, elders and religious leaders, who possess huge influence in society, believe in traditional practices and oppose rapid modernisation.

Therefore, the government was not able to promote a neutral and effective youth agenda and strategy.

The general and political culture that governs our society is based on traditional, tribal, ethnic, and local characteristics, and all opportunities are limited and defined according to these characteristics. In such a space, there is no room for effective participation based on merit and efforts. (Interview with Abdul Naser Folad, 2021)

Lack of clear and credible policy from the government, strong religious beliefs, low levels of literacy, cultural and economic poverty, and, most importantly, security were some of the challenges and obstacles to youth engagement, but the greatest obstacle, among all others, was the war. (Interview with Faisal Zaheb, 2021)

Ehsanullah pointed out that the spontaneous movements, activities and programmes of the educated youth and young leaders, namely the 'Tabsum Movement', 'Enlightenment Movement', and 'Rastakhiz Movement' in the post-2014 era, largely came to the street, demanding social justice, equal distribution of resources, recognition of identity and the elimination of discrimination and distinction; however, they encountered huge obstacles, set up by traditional political elites and government leaders.

Peaceful movements led by educated youth encountered huge explosions, gunfire or a shutdown of roads to stop the rallies. The big movements were not formed again due to these hindrances." (Interview with Ehsanullah Hikmat, 2021)

Corruption was also a devastating challenge for the majority of youth, particularly for those who had obtained higher education. Due to a lack of transparency in government departments and ministries, corruption blurred the employment process, which particularly excluded the young generation from political inclusion and higher positions at all three branches of the state. Corruption essentially prevented the government from providing them with jobs and they were unable to use their talents, skills and expertise positively. This meant that youth had to maintain relationships with either the leaders who were in power, or with traditional political elites, power brokers and jihadi leaders, to secure a position in government. Such status led to the instrumentalisation of youth by either specific groups in the government, or by other traditional politicians and political parties. This has been particularly visible during elections and electoral campaigns.

Without nepotism and relationships, youth could not be assigned to government positions. So, everyone was trying to ensure relationships instead of focusing on building their capacities. (Interview with Fatima Roshanian, 2021)

I think the economy and mismanagement were the major failures, because due to the poor economy, most of the youth has been misled in politics." (Interview with Muska, 2021)

In the past 20 years, many people misused the Afghan youth. They implemented their projects and after that, they didn't even communicate with them any longer". (Interview with Ehsanullah Hikmat, 2021)

Last but not least, ethnic and identity politics was one of the overwhelming hindrances.^[7] Just before the fall of the previous government, the ethnic and identity politicisation had hindered the effective political participation and success of young people, as well as raising obstacles to the strengthening of democratic institutions.^[8] Consequently, not only the political space became restricted for them, but they were also highly politicised, fragmented and divided along ethnic and linguistic lines that overwhelmingly undermined their neutral participation, representation, unity and solidarity. Although the political and social context in Afghanistan is fluid and changing, and traditional and ethnic leaders have benefited from that to maintain their power and sovereignty,^[8] youth political participation has become tangible and undeniable.

4. The Taliban regime and its impact on youth engagement

The Taliban's rapid progress in taking control of districts and eventual takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 was a complete shock for most Afghan citizens and young people, especially as peace negotiations were continuing in Doha, the capital of Qatar. Basically, everyone expected peace, but it turned out in a way that has undermined every aspect of Afghan life, completely opposed to people's expectations. Currently, approximately 97 per cent of the population is at risk of sinking below the poverty line.^[9] Infrastructure such as the education system, healthcare and banking are on the verge of collapse, and, most importantly, the rise of extremism is extremely alarming amid the younger generation. Besides women and children, the youths are among the highly vulnerable groups whose challenges and hindrances have doubled.

The evacuation of foreign citizens and some Afghan citizens started soon after the withdrawal of the US military forces and the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021.^[10] Thousands of young academics, journalists, activists and local employees were able to leave the country through the evacuation process. However, there is still a huge number of Afghan citizens who do not have a work history with any international organisation and served in the previous Afghan government, especially in the media and military forces, who are at a great risk of being targeted by the Taliban. Many of them are still searching for ways to get out of the country, struggling to get access to their basic rights or hiding themselves to be safe and secure.

The Taliban announced that they will not seek revenge against former Afghan government employees, but according to an investigation by Human Rights Watch,^{[11], [12]} more than 100 former members of the military and police have been killed, brutally oppressed or forcibly disappeared by the Taliban since the group came into power.

The situation on the ground is seriously worse; poverty is very high among the people because there are no jobs and no money. In contrast, intimidation, frustration, disappoint-

ment, fear and uncertainty can best explain the state of people and the young generation on the ground. It is as if there has been a death of inner motivation. Faisal stated that:

Many people, especially the youth, left the country. Those who are still in the country face challenges such as lack of access to education, being jobless and not having the basic life needs for themselves and their family members. (Interview with Faisal Zaheb, 2021)

Being inside Afghanistan is like being in a grave, not even jail. I am just breathing, not living. (Interview with Muska, 2021)

The Taliban's current policies shrink the civic space even further. The tribal culture and religious policies and practices that dominate the Taliban's mentality leave no ground for participation, representation and democratic values.^[4] In their view, people are not citizens but servants who are obliged to only obey their rules and regulations. Thus, such narratives largely affect social and political participation:

The Taliban regime is like a dictatorship, which leaves no space for democratic activities and values. (Interview with Fatima Roshanian, 2021)

The concept of civic participation has no more meaning. It has lost its meaning, because in this regime, we are not citizens anymore, we are only servants for the Taliban's vision." (Interview with Abdul Naser Folad, 2021)

On the other hand, the Taliban are also comprised of different members, and therefore they may have different stances regarding the political system, governance, inclusivity, participation and rights; however, their voices are not forceful enough to influence the overall policies and practices of the Taliban. Ehsanullah stated:

The high-level authority of the Taliban [part of the negotiations team in Qatar] is accepting public opinion and believing in civic activities, but the low-level Taliban [Taliban fighters] do not have the same opinion. They do not accept Afghanistan's diverse community, civil society, and democracy. (Interview with Ehsanullah Hikmat, 2021)

Among other vulnerable groups, women and girls have been directly targeted by the Taliban.^[4]^[12] Women have lost not only their basic rights, such as education, employment, free movement, liberty, presence in the media and public office positions, but also their hope, values, identity, and achievements made over the last two decades.

There is no more freedom of movement, no freedom of dressing the way you want and no freedom to express your opinion. If you breach the framework, you face a bullet. I think women are the main victims of the peace process and the current collapse. (Interview with Fatima Roshanian, 2021)

Since coming to power, the Taliban have inflicted right-violating policies on women and girls in Afghanistan, for instance, restrictions on education and social engagement activities, curtailing freedom of movement without any male (family member) companion, and most

women who held prominent positions in society have lost their jobs. A large number of young women demonstrated on the streets, advocating for their basic rights.^[13] The Taliban have not responded to their positively demands; on the contrary, young women activists have been shot dead, disappeared, detained or jailed.

Now, Afghan women and girls are confronting both the collapse of their rights and their identity.

I cannot express my feeling and experience; I feel like I am useless material. Even for going to the shop close to my home I need to take my father or brother with me. I lost my identity; I was in the media and round tables, but today I even request to please not use my name in any paper. Being a woman in Afghanistan, especially after losing my identity, I feel scared, frustrated, disappointed and depressed; these would be the words I can use for my feelings. (Interview with Muska, 2021)

The state of civic engagement has become tough and challenging for the young generation. However, reality demonstrates that there are still many Afghan citizens, especially young people, who don't accept such conditions. Those standing against it, may bear high costs; others have left or are trying to leave the country.

A nationwide movement is required to set up, stand and struggle against the threats which destroy the whole society, its values and institutions, and its stakeholders. (Interview with Abdul Naser Folad, 2021)

The younger generation has two options: leave the country or be ready for another revolution – which will have high costs, not only for Taliban, but also for youth and the common people of Afghanistan. (Interview with Ehsanullah Hikmat, 2021)

Young people today are more concerned with preserving themselves and their families and, at best, migrating and displacing themselves, rather than worrying about civic engagement or participation. (Interview with Abdul Naser Folad, 2021)

A proverb that may define the current and future prospect of youth participation would probably be the following: 'The sun has set, but the story is not over'. The young generation in Afghanistan seeks alternatives and non-violent ways of civic engagement, to avoid a widening of restrictions, to revive the institutions and to ensure a moderate governance system, where basic rights and freedoms are granted.

5. Demands of Afghan youth

Afghan youths are aware of the growing concerns on every level and may pose serious challenges to the Taliban regime if the international community, Afghan diaspora and other political stakeholders do not act seriously to ensure a stable and sustainable peace. Afghan youth realise the necessity of being alert and vigilant to the development and growth of their country. They make certain demands, which, it should be noted, have arisen amid circumstances that are highly poisoned, with continued restrictions on women, the killing of civilians, poverty, a ruined economy and a lack of responsibility taken for causing such unfavourable conditions for the majority of the citizens, especially for open-minded young people. The research participants, therefore, have put forward the following demands: They ask the international community to refrain from recognition of the Taliban's *de facto* regime. Among them, young women have explicitly expressed their concerns in this regard. What's more, they ask the international community to exert more pressure on the Taliban to recognise their basic rights. Furthermore, Afghan youth urge the international community to provide humanitarian aid and increase support mechanisms for citizens in Afghanistan.

The first and foremost priority for Afghan women is that the Taliban regime should not be recognised. Secondly, the people need humanitarian aid. (Interview with Fatima Roshanian, 2021)

I think the international community should differentiate between the Taliban regime and the people of Afghanistan. The international community shouldn't stop their support for the people of Afghanistan. (Interview with Ehsanullah Hikmat, 2021)

Along with international support, Afghan youth also expect the support of the Afghan diaspora, and educated youth around the globe. Young people inside and outside Afghanistan need to stay connected with each other, to exchange knowledge and means, to advocate, and to support Afghan citizens under any circumstances.

A global movement comprised of the educated elites of Afghanistan should be constituted, though it sounds difficult. They can actively intervene in Afghanistan's politics, power and society, but also influence the politics and politicians in their country of residence. (Interview with Abdul Naser Folad, 2021)

I believe that we will work together for a better Afghanistan. We will definitely continue our advocacy, and social and political programmes, and set up a huge coalition of youths to change the national decisions towards a developed Afghanistan. (Interview with Ehsanullah Hikmat, 2021)

If the situation alters, becoming more moderate and thus providing at least some space for small activities supported by the international community, Afghanistan's young generation can remain hopeful of bringing Afghanistan forward and preserving the achievements accomplished over the past two decades.

As it is now vague what scenario the Taliban will implement, it is difficult to be clear about my position in Afghanistan as a young activist. But as part of the new generation that has studied and worked, I am not too pessimistic. We can stay and raise our voices. We have access to the Internet and technology and the media; we can use them to achieve our goals. To provide the ground for thoughts and exchange of ideas, which is very important so that we can play a major role in the building and better future of Afghanistan, be it in the politics, economics, culture, art, sports or any other arena. We will see more positive changes. (Interview with Faisal Zaheb)

The new generation of Afghan youth is strong, bright and active. If the international community supports them, they will ensure the safeguarding of some achievements of the past decades, but if they are left alone, none of the achievements will remain. (Interview with Muska, 2021)

6. Conclusion

The young generation of Afghanistan made inroads into various aspects of the social, political and economic spheres over the past 20 years. Today, Afghanistan is not the same country that it was 20 years ago. Apart from some traditional and patriarchal societies in the rural areas of Afghanistan, one cannot deny the progress of the younger generation, particularly in the urban areas and big cities.

The Taliban's takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 marks a critical juncture for large segments of youth regarding their social and political engagement. If the Taliban want to control the people as they did in the 1990s, they will create a lot of oppression and violence, and it will not be easy for the Taliban either.^[3] The media has not been turned off. Likewise, the protesting youth and women will not be silent any time soon. The younger generation has a strong desire to bring about change for Afghan society, wants to discuss national issues affecting them and will not easily go back to the pre-2001 *status quo*.^[2] In particular, Afghanistan's youth wants to engage in political processes at the national level, demonstrate a collective commitment to encourage marginalised groups in rural areas and contribute to sustainable peace, development and policy changes. Also, many young Afghans who have been evacuated want to stay connected to the socio-political affairs of their homeland.

Afghan youth now feels extensively frustrated, disappointed and betrayed by their leaders, politicians and, to some extent, by the international community. Meanwhile, they are even more uncertain about their future, looking for the support of the Afghan diaspora and for international stakeholders to be able to moderate the space, monitor the situation and bring change to maintain at least some of their rights and freedoms to participate that they enjoyed prior to the Taliban *de facto* regime. The major question remains: will Afghanistan's young generation be able to safeguard at least some of their accomplishments and basic rights under the rule of the Taliban?

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Imprint

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Place of publication: <https://eu.boell.org/>

Release date: June 2022

Editor: Chris Meikle, Brussels

Illustration: Pia Danner, p*zwe, Hannover

Layout: Micheline Gutman, Brussels

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