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## Afghan Civil Society and a Comprehensive Peace Process

### Summary

- A successful, legitimate and sustainable approach to peace in Afghanistan requires the inclusion of Afghan civil society and their interests. For the most part, Afghan peace negotiations exclude representatives of civil society and center on a narrow agenda featuring concerns of armed groups. Attempts at a quick fix settlement could compromise the foundations of durable peace, resulting in more costs to the international community, and more death and destruction on the ground.
- Half of all peace agreements fail. One of the reasons why they fail is that too few people support them. Building a national consensus requires participation by and support from civil society.
- Afghanistan requires a peace process that is both *wide* and *deep*, with structured mechanisms for participatory deliberation and decision-making involving diverse stakeholders from the top, middle and community levels of society.
- Based on examination of successful peace processes, there are four broad models of public participation in peace processes relevant for Afghanistan. These include direct participation in local peace processes, a national civil society assembly, representation at the central negotiation table and a public referendum to vote on a final agreement.
- The international community, the Afghan government and Afghan civil society can each take steps to ensure a comprehensive, successful and sustainable peace process.

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### Introduction

The transition from war to peace in Afghanistan requires much more than high level official negotiations and low level reintegration efforts. A comprehensive Afghan peace process would also facilitate discussion amongst diverse civil society sectors about their relationship with the Afghan government and on the future relations between diverse groups in Afghanistan. A political settlement without significant progress on these two other dimensions is unlikely to produce a national consensus supporting sustainable peace.

Excluding or limiting civil society input into formal negotiations creates long-term problems. First, it rewards groups who use violence with political influence and positions of power, further entrenching illegitimate and ineffective governance. Second, a peace agreement that excludes public input and interests will lack public ownership of the agreement and the political will required to implement it.

Members of civil society fear that government and armed actors will use negotiations to achieve narrow political goals that will benefit particular ideological, ethnic, tribal or religious groups and undermine the Constitution, human rights and justice, further fragmenting the country.<sup>1</sup> Civil society leaders flag the continued exclusion of public interests in the National Peace Council and current peace talks, and before that in the 2010 National Peace Jirga and the 2001 Bonn Agreement.<sup>2</sup> Public discussions on how to tackle corruption, and how to enshrine Islamic values supporting human rights and women's rights, for example, are important elements of building a national consensus on the future of Afghanistan. The long and messy process of all stakeholders coming to understand each other's underlying interests through wide consultations and public dialogue is necessary for all to understand why certain provisions in an agreement may be the best possible outcome.

## Benefits of a Comprehensive Peace Process in Afghanistan

Research comparing successful with unsuccessful peace agreements illustrates that civil society engagement is often the critical ingredient.<sup>3</sup> According to the research, comprehensive peace processes have at least four interrelated benefits:<sup>4</sup>

- **Public Support:** Half of all peace agreements fail, in part, because too few people support them. Involving the public in a peace process helps to cement public support for an agreement.
- **Legitimacy:** Peace negotiations that include only armed actors inadvertently legitimate the use of arms to achieve political power. A comprehensive and inclusive peace process creates a more legitimate outcome and builds public consent for the national government.
- **Sustainability:** Public participation in peace processes more often address a range of driving factors fueling conflict, such as reforming state institutions. This can prevent the recurrence of violent conflict.
- **Democratic Governance:** Unlike elections that can heighten inter-group tensions, a peace process uses participatory deliberation and dialogue that can lay the ground for democratic governance.

## Understanding Afghan Civil Society

Stable governance and a durable peace require a citizen-oriented state working in partnership with an active civil society that has adequate space and resources to hold government to account.<sup>5</sup> An active local civil society at the national and community levels is an indicator of a functioning and democratic state. Yet the international communities' strategy in Afghanistan focuses almost exclusively on supporting state institutions rather than civil society.

While there are competing definitions of civil society, for the purposes of this brief, Afghanistan's civil society includes traditional or tribal structures such as jirgas and maliks (leaders), religious leaders and structures such as the Shura-e-Ulama, along with trade unions, universities, media, women's groups, youth groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Community Development Councils (CDCs) and other sectors.<sup>6</sup> Many Afghan civil society sectors are already playing significant roles in peacebuilding and could desire a more active role in an Afghan peace process.

## Structuring Public Participation in Peace Processes

A peace process is essentially about creating structured mechanisms for participatory deliberation and decision-making involving diverse stakeholders. There are four broad models<sup>7</sup> of public

participation in peace processes relevant to the design of a comprehensive peace process in Afghanistan.

### *Direct Local Peace Processes and Agreements*

When the authority to stop a war is not centrally located, high level negotiations cannot create a national ceasefire or political settlements. In Mali, civil society initiated direct traditional decision-making processes based on local rituals and traditions for dialogue. These local processes resulted in local level ceasefires and agreements that enabled previously stymied high level negotiations to advance. These local level peace processes can take place simultaneously across a country and involve thousands of people. Each locality may work through a similar agenda of issues to identify stakeholder's core grievances and develop local security guarantees, political power sharing deals and address economic and identity issues. Local communities then are responsible for implementing the agreements they make. These local peace processes can help create a national consensus able to eventually lead to an end to the war. Local peace councils already exist in many areas of Afghanistan to resolve local grievances, facilitate reintegration and to address local disputes over land, water, debts, domestic violence and other community related issues. If carried out across the country simultaneously, local level negotiations could help build ceasefires, political power sharing and security guarantees that would result in a more sustainable outcome and make a national peace accord possible.

### *Participation through Consultation in Civil Society Assemblies*

Other peace processes design mechanisms for civil society participation through consultation bodies such as a National Civil Society Assembly and regional assemblies that run in parallel to official negotiations and/or are sequenced and coordinated with an official process. In this "accordion model" peace process, a sequence of small, private and large public meetings move back and forth like an accordion opening and closing. A small select group of key stakeholders negotiates over key issues while large, open processes seek input from the public. In the Philippines and Guatemala, national peace processes included civil society assemblies that brought together representatives of diverse sectors such as labor, agriculture, human rights and indigenous communities. A national level Afghan Civil Society Assembly, like that held in Guatemala, could play a key role in assuring that a wider set of issues makes it onto the formal negotiation agenda, such as women's rights or past and present human rights violations. It could also play a key role in a peace process to build structures for public consultations on these and other issues such as corruption, ethnic tensions and how to address the Taliban.

### *Participation by Representation at Central Negotiation Table*

A third type of structure for peace processes includes electing a representative group to work out the details of a peace agreement and/or a new constitution. Each group at the official negotiation table represents a group of constituents from a certain sector of society. In this type of a process, civil society sectors such as women's groups, religious leaders, human rights groups and labor unions have a representative participating in national level negotiations. This form of public participation can incentivize the creation of new political parties or organizations that organize themselves to represent others' interests. In South Africa, for example, a national level, elected constituent assembly including civil society leaders negotiated a new constitution. The benefit of this model is that the key issues of unarmed groups can be directly communicated to other key decision makers. An Afghan Civil Society Assembly could elect representatives to sit on the

National Peace Council and represent diverse civil society interests at formal, high level negotiations.

### *Participation by Post-Agreement Referendum*

At the most minimal level of public participation in a peace process, media advertisements attempt to garner public support for the peace agreement after it is already signed. In some cases, the public takes part in a referendum on a peace agreement developed through negotiation. Referendums allow the public to either say “yes” or “no” to a negotiated agreement. In Northern Ireland and Macedonia, for example, media outreach programs and national referendums accompanied other structures for public input. One of the benefits of public referendums is that it requires the authors of a peace agreement to have a stake in fully explaining it to the public and urging their support. The public, on the other hand, has the opportunity to oppose the agreement and at the same time the responsibility for supporting it should the referendum pass. The Afghan government’s legitimacy gap requires a variety of strategies. Ensuring that the public have a referendum vote in any peace deal is one way the Afghan government could increase public trust.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

A comprehensive peace process in Afghanistan requires a much more deliberate design than currently exists.

- Afghan civil society could develop a diverse and representative Civil Society Assembly to create an ongoing mechanism and forum for identifying key issues and work with the High Peace Council to represent a broader array of civil society voices.
- The Afghan government could consult with Afghan civil society in the design of a comprehensive peace process, including a Civil Society Assembly.
- The Afghan government and civil society could invest time in training from technical support teams on principled negotiation and mediation processes.
- The international community could initiate robust consultations with a broad range of diverse local civil society leaders to identify the ideal model of public participation in a peace process.
- The international community could support calls for a comprehensive Afghan public peace process and provide financial support, coaching, negotiation training and capacity building measures to all groups in an Afghan peace process.

## Endnotes

1. The Statement of the One-Day Conference on Justice and Reconciliation. November 10, 2010, Kabul, Afghanistan.
2. Peace Watch Committee. “Afghan Civil Society Statement on Peace and Reconciliation.” April 25, 2011.
3. Anthony Wanis-St. John and Darren Kew. “Civil Society and Peace Negotiations: Confronting Exclusion.” *International Negotiation*. 13. 2008. Pp. 11-36.
4. See “Public Participation in Peace Processes.” London: Conciliation Resources, 2009.
5. *Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Fragility and Conflict*, (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), January 2011).

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is based on research undertaken during five trips to Kabul, Afghanistan and one trip to Pakistan between 2009 and 2011. The peace brief summarizes key findings of the field research that will be discussed in detail in a forthcoming USIP special report. The author's conclusions and recommendations are her own.

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6. See Mary Kaldor and Marika Theros. "Building Afghan Peace from the Ground Up." Century Foundation Report, 2011. And Elizabeth Winter, "Civil Society Development in Afghanistan." UK: London School of Economics' Center for Civil Society. June 2010.
7. This section draws on "Public Participation in Peace Processes." London: Conciliation Resources, 2009. and Catherine Barnes. "Owning the process: public participation in peacemaking: South Africa, Guatemala and Mali" London: Conciliation Resources, 2002.



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