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The Afghanistan Peace Talks: Where are the Women?

Introduction

In February 2019, a series of peace talks between the US, representatives of Afghan government and the Taliban took place in Moscow. The intense negotiations have been a result of Trump's emphasis on leaving Afghanistan and "ending" America's longest war in Afghanistan. The negotiations have raised both hopes and fear among Afghans. While the peace-talks with the Taliban could mean an end to the 17-years long conflict and be the beginning of a new era for Afghans, it could also curb the hard-fought rights and freedom that Afghan women gained over the past decades. With only two women representatives in an otherwise male dominated negotiation table, women's voices, perspectives and agenda remained totally absent during the peace process. In the aftermath of the peace talks, Afghan women have come to streets of Kabul with the slogans such as "we do not go back". While such women-led protests in one of the most hostile environments for women is inspiring, the silent response of the international community to this harsh reality is alarming.

The US and the Taliban representatives concluded the eighth round of these negotiations in Qatar on August 14 and both sides announced that "they are close to reaching a deal". These negotiations focus on four main elements of total withdrawal of foreign troops, counterterrorism assurances, initiating intra-Afghan dialogues, and comprehensive ceasefire. While the US government claims to have an implicit emphasis on women's rights, it is not a key issue in the negotiation table and seems to be sidelined by the "greater" security concerns. So, what does such a peace negotiation mean for Afghan women? What role do they play in the process and what are the potential consequences of this deal for Afghan women? This research paper focuses on these research questions. Highlighting this topic at the present time is more important than ever before since the peace-talks between different parties are ongoing. It is critical to point out the challenges within the process to ensure that Afghan women never again get sacrificed by male dominance, misogyny, and patriarchal practices.

Importance

This topic is of critical importance because the numerous rounds of peace talks between the US and the Taliban have proven over and over how women's rights can be easily sidelined by security issues. It is not only women's low representation around the peace negotiation table which is alerting but also how women's rights is not a key agenda among the four key elements of the deal. To ensure that Afghanistan and Afghan women do not go to the Taliban era and are never again get sacrificed by their brutality, it is important to raise this topic and discuss how women can play a key role in the process as well as remain a key element in the peace negotiations.

Research design

In answering the research questions, I will first conduct an indepth literature review and read the scholarly articles and existing arguments on the issue. The literature review will help me in designing my research questions and help deepen my knowledge in the area. I will then conduct qualitative interviews with 4-5 women rights activists who were directly involved in the peace

negotiations with the Taliban or observed the process closely. Doing qualitative interviews is the most reasonable for this study as it will give the respondents the opportunity to provide thorough and indepth answers to the research questions. I will then analyze the collected data and answer the research questions.

Challenges

I think one of the key challenges in conducting this research will be reaching out to the women's rights activists who were involved in the peace negotiation process, having that I am based in Sweden. In answering this challenge, I intend to contact Women and Peace Studies Organization in Afghanistan and the Afghan Women's Network, both of which have worked closely with the peace process and play a major role in women's rights issues in Afghanistan.

The second main challenge is that this is a very recent and ongoing topic and new evidence come to light with each meeting. Moreover, the US government and the Taliban seem to treat the process quite diplomatically and there is little transparency and so much confusion in the process. While I am hoping that talking to the women's rights activists can help in answering some of the questions, lack of access to the deals, agendas in the meetings and a summary of the talks is a real challenge for this research paper.

Conclusion

The first part of this paper hopes to show how an increasing role of women in the peace-talks can legitimize the process and lead to long-lasting peace in the country. Building up on this, in the second part, I hope to argue that although increasing women's quantity around the peace negotiation table is vital, their mere symbolic presence is not enough. To promote durable peace in Afghanistan, it is significant to integrate a gender perspective into the process and set women's rights as a key agenda.