

Women's Struggles in Afghanistan: Past and Present

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Abstract

This article begins with the current situation of women in Afghanistan and their resistance against the complete takeover of power by the Taliban in August 2021. It reviews the ways in which prior Afghan governments, various imperialist occupations, wars between religious fundamentalist forces, sexism and prejudices within the Afghan Left and progressives have made it impossible to develop a coherent and persistent women's movement.

I am Kobra Sultani, a physician from Afghanistan, a country which the international community has declared to be the worst place for women.

This pronouncement was made at the time when the US-backed government of Ashraf Ghani (r. 2014–2021) ruled the country. Today however, Afghanistan is speedily regressing even further. Women have been pushed out of all social activities and have been denied their most basic individual and social rights.

Under the new Taliban regime, girls are not allowed an education beyond the fifth grade. Women are not allowed to work in offices, in non-Governmental Organizations, or engage in sports or in cultural work. They are not even allowed to leave the house without a male relative as chaperon. Even beauty salons were closed. The compulsory hijab or *burqa* has been forced upon us. Even the color of the burqa is chosen by the Taliban. These oppressive rules are imposed on women at a time when the country remains in a state of shock and is suffering from unimaginable poverty. Families who have sold their property and basic

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means of living for the sake of a meal, now resort to selling their children, mostly little girls. Women who have lost their husbands to the Covid-19 pandemic, the war, or terrorist attacks by Islamic Jihadist groups, and have become the sole breadwinners for their families are facing multiple draconian problems. After selling their meager livelihood, they do hard and onerous labor, peddle on the streets, beg and work as domestic laborers for more well-to-do people. In addition to the stress of hard labor, when they leave the house, these destitute women often have to endure the lashes and rifle butts of the Taliban on their bodies, because the Taliban ideologically oppose women's work and social activity outside the home.

But women in Afghanistan continue to resist the repressive rule of the Taliban. They have gone out into the streets in protest, giving voice to the destitute of Afghanistan, and screaming that they want freedom. These protests are spontaneous and arise from the depth of poverty and deprivation that these women have faced. Protesters continue to endure violence and beatings from the Taliban, who blame women for the international community's refusal to give them diplomatic recognition. The Taliban dismiss women's protests and label them illegal. They have responded with intense violence against not only the protesters but also the reporters who have tried to cover the women's protests for various global media.

The Taliban have shot female protesters. In the state of Badakhshan and the cities of Bamiyan and Mazar-e Sharif, they have abducted female protesters. Afghan women's protests have also spread beyond the borders of Afghanistan into Pakistan and Iran. Refugee and migrant women have had gatherings and protests to tell the freedom-seeking people of the world about the realities that Afghan women are forced to endure in the twenty-first century, as a result of the shameful manner in which the US government, first under Donald Trump and later under Biden, made a deal with the Taliban and left the country in their hands.

The Taliban have also been organizing targeted assassinations to silence women. On November 5, 2022, four women campaigning on behalf of women's rights and civil society groups in Mazar-e Sharif were executed by firing squad. Among them was Forouzan Safi, a professor at Balkh University. The identities of the other three female victims have not been revealed. Their families have not spoken out for fear of the Taliban's reprisals, and have gone into hiding.

The One-Hundred-Year History of Women's Struggles in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's history has always been about political changes and upheavals. This country has rarely experienced any harmony or peace in the last century. This might be one of the reasons for the scant attention given to the creation and development of a women's movement. Thus, today women's protests do not appear as a coherent, organized, and persistent movement with specific demands and a program, making them less effective.

The history of women's struggles in Afghanistan is a hundred years old. These struggles began during the period of the reforms by King Amanullah (r. 1919–1929), which included compulsory elementary education for girls, banning of polygamy, banning of marriage for girls under the age of sixteen, and ending the use of female household slaves. During this period, and for the first time, women university students were sent to Europe and Turkey to continue their education.

In 1920, the first Association for the Defense of Women was established to promote women's rights within the family. The first elementary adult education classes for married women, including pregnant ones, was established. On March 17, 1921, the first issue of the women's journal *Ershād-e Nesvān* (ارشاد نسوان) *Enlightenment for Women* was published. This journal was dedicated to issues of women's rights and continued publication until 1925.

This was the beginning of women's participation in the social and political life of Afghanistan. Most of these reforms addressed the concerns of upper- and middle-class women and remained limited to the elite circle around Amanullah and his wife's court. Nevertheless, they created a basis for women's participation in the social and political life of Afghanistan. The reforms did not last long and faced many barriers, because there was great opposition to such measures among the ordinary people, and because reactionary religious and tribal leaders, with their highly conservative ideas, ruled society.

When Queen Soraya traveled abroad without her burqa in 1927–28, the Mojadadis, an influential clerical family in Kabul, used photos of the queen without her burqa to accuse the king of blasphemy. Their edict was signed by 400 clerics throughout Afghanistan. The fall of Amanullah was followed by a period of regression in which all reforms, especially those concerning women, were ended.

During the rule of King Nader (r. 1929–1933) and the beginning of the rule of King Zaher (r. 1933–1973), there were no attempts to address women's issues. During the premiership of Mohammad Daoud Khan (r. 1973–1978), the state enacted some reforms related to women. In what is known as the 'Decade of Democracy,' beginning in 1964, gender reforms were once again implemented. These included the expansion of girls' elementary schools, women's employment, enrollment of women in universities, especially in the fields of medicine, though not in engineering or law.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, Afghan women became involved in leftist politics, both pro-USSR and Maoist parties. The leftist women's movement was very active in Kabul University. At the same time, some women were elected members of parliament. Once again, gender reforms were limited to the urban areas and were not extended to the masses of women in rural areas.

At the time of the pro-USSR government of the People's Democratic Party (1978–1992), some progressive reforms were carried out. These included land and other economic reforms, a literacy campaign, as well as reforms specifically aimed at women and children, such as a ban on bride price and forced marriage, as well as raising the minimum age of marriage for girls. However, the glaring errors of the leadership, their use of force in implementing these policies, the dictatorship they imposed, and the severe restrictions they placed on intellectuals and dissidents led to deep popular dissatisfaction with this party and the rise and growth of political Islam.

Afghan leftists had a rather moderate view of women's rights, and it would be more accurate to characterize them as bourgeois nationalist. They did not address the subject of compulsory hijab, and justified many sharia laws concerning marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance, as well as customary views regarding parental involvement in selection of partners in marriage.

In 1978, Hafezullah Amin, a communist politician, launched the Saur Revolution and co-founded the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, of which he was the secretary general. In December 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Amin was assassinated and replaced by Babrak Kamal (r. 1979–1986). The Russian imperialist military occupation lasted from 1979 to 1989, a period when Afghanistan became the scene of a bloody civil war and a proxy war between the United States and Pakistan on the one hand, and the Soviet Union on the other hand.

After the overthrow of Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai (r. 1986–1992), the last leader of the People's Democratic Party, the Islamic fundamentalist Mujahedeen took over the reins of power. Soon, there was greater retrogression in women's rights: The wearing of the hijab became compulsory, limitations were placed on women's attendance in universities and their employment in government offices. Laws were further Islamized, and clerics regained control over people's lives.

In September 1996 the Taliban took over. They established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and ruled the country from 1996 to 2001, soon becoming known for their infamous and diabolical treatment of women. The goal of the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban was to deprive women of their political, social, economic, cultural, and most basic human rights. Thus, we saw all women prohibited from attending schools or working outside the home. Women were flogged and stoned in public for minor violations of segregation rules. They were prevented from leaving their homes without a male relative, denied health care and educational services, and soon vanished from the cultural scene as well.

When the Taliban were overthrown in September 2001 by the United States and its allies, the U.S.-installed governments of Hamid Karzai (r. 2002-2014)) and Ashraf Ghani, despite their claims to establishing a new democratic order, saw the continuation of many patriarchal norms in the name of religion, culture, tradition, and law. While a new generation of young women benefited from the twenty-year US occupation and were able to go to school, receive college degrees, and find employment, violence against women continued.

New laws attempted to ameliorate women's lives. Stoning became illegal and the new constitution included clauses in support of women's rights. However, in parts of the country some women were still stoned by edicts from clerics. Extremist Islamist groups flogged women and continued to promote forced marriage and child marriage. Various NGOs created shelters for battered women, but domestic violence continued unabated. In addition, now that women were working outside the house, especially the ones who were the sole breadwinners for their family, began to face sexual harassment and sexual violence at work. Indeed, many had to comply with the sexual demands of their bosses to keep their jobs. In effect, the rulers of Afghanistan were ideologically in agreement with the religious extremists and misogynist clerics.

Women who belonged to elite families of the new state were placed in key posts, as tokens of equality, and on the basis of previously arranged ethnic quotas. Many were obedient and determined to protect their rank and status. At the same time, they were used as a means of giving the government an image of progress, suggesting that the new government was promoting women's emancipation and countering protests by human rights groups which pointed to institutional violence and prejudices against women.

In my view, many of these elite women damaged and derailed the actual struggles of women. They participated in peace negotiations with the Taliban, and when the Americans left the country, they also left Afghanistan at the first opportunity, on US planes, and abandoned over fifteen million women and girls. Today Afghan women are at the mercy of the criminal Taliban, a group that sees women as an evil force and limits women's role to staying at home, procreating, and providing services for their husband.

Why Was the United States Willing to Make a Deal with the Taliban?

Many analysts have asked why the U.S. was willing to make a deal with the Taliban. Some have pointed to the corruption and weak administration of the Afghan national government and the reluctance of Afghan soldiers and their lack of morale. We can say that the victory of the Taliban was to some extent due to the lack of resistance from hungry soldiers. However, to a larger extent, it was due to the continuing undercover negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban which began during the presidency of Barak Obama in 2013 and was accelerated during the presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020). The Trump administration took these negotiations to a new level in 2020 when Trump met directly with Taliban representatives and promised the release of 5000 imprisoned Taliban fighters and a May 2021 US

withdrawal date. The Biden administration continued Trump's policy and simply delayed the withdrawal date by a few months (Tankel 2018; Whitlock 2021).

The US peace negotiations with the Taliban completely ignored the Afghan people. . President Joseph Biden continued this policy of extricating the United States from its entanglement in Afghanistan as soon as possible. Biden said that the United States had not occupied Afghanistan for a nation-building mission. He emphasized that the United States had spent over two trillion dollars on a totally corrupt and inefficient government in Kabul and that he believed it was up to the Afghan people themselves, and not the US soldiers, to fight for Afghan rights, including the rights of women and children. After twenty years of US imperialist occupation, which led to the bombing that killed over 65,000 innocent civilians, US peace with the Taliban became the continuation of death and misery for the people of Afghanistan.

The US withdrawal agreement with the Taliban involved two issues: first, that the Taliban would not harm US interests and US soldiers. Second, that the Taliban would not allow al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups to use Afghan territory to threaten the United States. Pressured by the Taliban during President Trump's presidency, the United States also forced the Afghan government of Ghani to release the 5000 imprisoned Taliban fighters, which Trump had agreed to.

What shocked the Afghan people more than anything else was that their fate had been decided in these secret negotiations. Once people realized what had happened, they were overtaken by fear. Hence, we saw tragic scenes such as people hanging from airplanes as they took off from the Kabul airport runway, and falling to their deaths. Many who abhor living under the Taliban have since fled the country, while others have gone into hiding.

Despite all these hardships, Afghan women have refused to stand by and witness the destruction of their future. They have appeared on the streets and have faced repression. Afghan women need to gain a deep understanding of the roots of their oppression. With a better understanding of the tyrannical religious rule of the Taliban, they can stand up for their rights. These rights include education, work, choice of clothing, travel, and choice in marriage, among others. With these rights, women will not be forcibly bought and sold like commodities in a business transaction. These rights are the prerequisite for women's achievement of greater social freedoms.

However, attaining these rights in a theocratic Afghanistan will not be possible. Afghan working-class and middle-class women are unemployed. They cannot afford to pay for their basic needs, including food and clothing for themselves and their children. Sharia law is used as a tool to force women to stay home and be obedient to their husbands. Women are coming into the streets with slogans such as, 'Bread, Work, Freedom.' It is the responsibility of leftists and socialist forces to bring this movement out of its divided and confused state and help it gain coherence.

What Do Afghan Women Demand from Freedom-Seeking Women around the World?

Support for Afghan women has to be for the purpose of changing their lives. However, the help they are receiving today from the international community cannot even reduce the violence and repression they are enduring under the Taliban. Rule by political Islam and the coming to power of Jihadist groups, are serious threats to all progressive forces, especially to women and children around the world. Since misogyny is deeply ingrained in many religions, confronting religion should be a priority for women. In my view, focusing on modernizing or reforming

religious laws will be a waste of our energy. All women around the world suffer from gender oppression. Women who live in war zones are crushed by the armies of ignorance, religion, semi-feudal regimes, as well as capitalism. Women's emancipation is only possible if we get to the roots of the oppression of women and if there is complete separation of religion and the state, so that the sharia is not the basis of the law of the land.

Female workers who try to stand up and express their identity as human beings in a class society cannot separate their participation in the class struggle from the struggle against compulsory hijab or, for that matter, from the right to choose whom they marry, the right to custody of their children, and the right to the most basic personal freedoms. These struggles are not easy but will become easier with solidarity from freedom-seeking women around the globe.

Kobra Sultani is an Afghan socialist, a writer, and an activist for the rights of women and children. She was a physician in Afghanistan and is currently a researcher in neurophysiology in Europe.

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