Adversity for Afghan Women: But Can Pakistanis Complain?

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On Tuesday the 7th of September, less than a month after assuming power of Afghanistan, the Taliban announced the structure of their government – along with the various individuals that would occupy ministerial roles in the days and months (years? decades?) ahead. Despite the nature of the buildup to this momentous event, which was colored by rhetoric of 'inclusion, equality, and dignity', not a single woman was granted a seat at the table for political office – which constituted 33 males. Notions of Taliban 2.0, therefore, slowly seem to be disintegrating. This was preceded by the announcement of mandatory abaya robes and niqabs (full coverings of the face, leaving only the eyes visible) for women at universities. A general culture of segregation also seems to be prevailing, with classes for women not just separate from those of men but also scheduled to end 5 minutes earlier so as to prevent any possibility of interaction. A ban on sports for women may also be imminent. In response to all this, several women have taken to the streets in Kabul to protest – triggering a violent response from security forces, beating them with heavy objects and fostering an environment of fear around ideas of change, resistance, dialogue, and dissent. (HRW) All this, of course, is regrettable. The question, however, is whether Pakistan – which is ranked 153rd out of 156 countries assessed in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap of 2021 – is in any position to play the 'holier than thou' role in response. (WEF).

In a report cited by Geo News in 2020, it was estimated that a minimum of 11 rape cases are reported in Pakistan on a daily basis – with over 22,000 cases filed during the 2014-2020 period. Furthermore, as many as 22,037 cases of sexual abuse were registered across the nation during the period 2015-2020 as per the same publication. (The Diplomat) It is also true that a miniscule figure of 77 (0.3% of total accused) of these have actually been convicted, with only 12% of total reported cases being filed in courts. This demonstrates the dire straits the judicial system is in, which has led to an estimated 59% of cases not being reported in the first place. (The News International) Also, 53 cases of gang rape were reported by the Punjab Police in just the first four months of 2021. Beyond this, a total of 430 cases of honor killing were recorded in 2020 by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, and 2,297 cases of 'violence against women' were identified during 2020 in a report by the Aurat Foundation – the latter of which includes "murder, abduction/kidnapping, rape/gang rape, honor killing, and domestic abuse." (The Diplomat) Linked to this is the prevalence of acid attacks – estimated at 9,340 cases during the period 1994-2018. (Dawn) Then there is the issue of early/forced marriages and child sexual abuse. This was documented in UNICEF's State of the World's Children report in 2017 – which estimated "that 18% of girls in Pakistan are married before their 18th birthday and 4% before the age of 15 while 5% of boys are married before the age of 18." (Tribune) This is also linked to the issue of forced conversions, whereby young girls from minority communities (particularly Hindu, concentrated in Sindh) are compelled to abandon their faiths in favor of Islam due to pressure from their would-be spouses. It is estimated that up to 1,000 cases of this occur in Pakistan on an annual basis. (Gandhara) Finally, the education system – which is one of the primary determinants of life outcomes – also contains strong biases against females, with an estimated 32% of primary school aged girls lacking access: compared to 21% of boys. (EduFinance) Keeping all this in mind, why has the media narrative in Pakistan slowly tilted towards 'saving the women' in Afghanistan – at a time when its own mothers, sisters, and daughters aren't guaranteed basic rights and safety? What are the origins of this line of thought?

In the aftermath of 9/11, when a plethora of justifications were peddled by the United States for maintaining a military presence in Afghanistan in order to curb 'global terrorism' and instill democratic norms, one facet of Afghan society that was identified as in need of rapid reform was culture/religion. The implication here was that there was something inherent to the Islamic faith which was producing violent tendencies in its adherents – particularly men. This not only led them to gravitate towards extremist groupings, but also resulted in the subjugation of 'women and children' – who were denied their individuality and forced to abide by strict codes of conduct including remaining confined to household duties, wearing clothing that covered their entire bodies, and not engaging with any men

besides their spouses. This narrative was carefully crafted to justify going on the offensive against a grouping that the USA itself helped build in the first place. In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, narrative building of another sort was taking place - but at precisely the same scale. At that time, notions of 'jihad' and 'resistance to a godless Communism' were advanced – thus artificially promoting a reactionary form of Islam that was based around discipline, warfare, and hyper-conservatism. This worked well for the United States, allowing it to recruit a massive army of 'mujahideen' (freedom fighters) to preserve its interests during the Cold War, in which the containment of Communist ideology was top priority. Pakistan was involved as a key actor during this period, in which the military dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq was assigned the task of recruitment, training, and organization of freedom fighters – which involved not only logistics and arms distribution but also a domestic ideology that promoted the cause to the masses through media and madressa networks. Following the fall of the Soviet Union and growing frustration on the part of the mujahideen, who quickly realized that the United States was not actually interested in preserving their faith/culture but was rather leveraging it in order to suit its needs at the time, frictions between the two parties grew and a different narrative building project was initiated by the USA – this time critical of the 'backwardness' that was prevailing and threatening vulnerable groups. The objective, however, was the same – which was to justify military presence and intervention in a valuable geopolitical region of the world located between the Middle East and Central Asia. It is unfortunate that groups like the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and ISIS were never able to (or were perhaps unwilling to) pinpoint that the USA was not only leveraging the Islamic faith during the Soviet resistance but also redefining it in the process, magnifying and distorting it to inculcate certain values and traditions. Instead, that same concocted ideology was embraced and romanticized – serving as a political tool for the Taliban to exert control over the Afghan people, which we see to this day. (Ahmad, 2011).

There is a grave need today, within Pakistan, for political analysts, pundits, and journalists – as well as academics, politicians, and even civil society – to learn from the mistakes of the past and adopt a skeptical attitude towards US-led narratives about 'saving' other communities. Instead, Pakistan would do well to pay attention to the problems plaguing women domestically – and focus on addressing their concerns through informed, nuanced, and long-term policy interventions through a multisectoral approach. This is only achievable if/when relevant stakeholders realize that the idea of an external force acting in altruism to benefit the people (also applies to foreign aid) has never worked – and it is only through large-scale, participatory democracy can an organic, bottom-up, and effective push towards betterment take place. This applies not only to Pakistan, but to the entirety of the developing world. Our fate is in our own hands – not anyone else's.

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