An Afghan elder shows his inked finger to show he voted during the heavily anticipated Afghanistan elections in Barge Matal, Afghanistan, Aug. 20, 2009. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

A Story of Failure: Ignoring the Local in Democratic Nation-Building in Afghanistan

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[This article is part of a roundtable on "Ignoring the Local in Afghanistan." Click here to read the introduction to the roundtable and the other articles in this collection.]

September 11 put Afghanistan at the center of world attention and reminded Afghans of the forgotten process of democratic nation-building. The process, initiated by the international community, was both ambitious and ambiguous and failed to achieve its aims. The result was not just a new failed state to study in the context of politics, investment funds, and leadership, but a disaster that has caused thousands to leave the country and Afghan women to lose their role in public life, education, and self-development.

What brought about this disaster? This contribution will explore a key missing element in

Afghanistan's developmental process over the last two decades: attention to the specifics of the local. Indeed, nurturing a healthy democracy requires not only financial investment, international support, technological innovation, and rational guidance, but also consideration of local culture and history and an orientation toward improving individual agency, enabling people to choose ways to increase their resources and protect their rights. In this way, the process puts people, rather than ideals, at its core and ensures that it is meaningful and effective. The lack of this attention in Afghanistan has cost both the international community and Afghans alike.

Mistakes were soon apparent in the democratic nation-building process but were not taken seriously. For example, while the world announced educating Afghan girls among its major goals for the country, a 2017 Human Rights Watch report noted that after 16 years of Western intervention rates of female education had not substantially improved and in fact were perhaps decreasing:

According to even the most optimistic statistics, the proportion of Afghan girls who are in school has never gone much above 50 percent…Sixteen years after the US-led military intervention that ousted the Taliban government, an estimated two-thirds of Afghan girls do not go to school…The progress that had been made toward the goal of getting all girls into school may be heading in reverse—a decline in girls' education in Afghanistan.

The HRW report did not refer to other educational problems, such as poor quality and accounts of ghost schools. Other critical infrastructure, physical and nonphysical, fared even worse; research fellows from the Clayton Christensen Institute, for instance, called the outcome in Afghanistan "too much infrastructure and too little value" and a 2021 report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction stated that "billions of reconstruction dollars were wasted as projects went unused or fell into disrepair."

Underlying methodological and conceptual shortcomings, such as overlooking domestic elements, helped bring about these failures. For example, Islam has dominated

Afghanistan for many centuries, but this long history and cultural potency was ignored; the international community and Afghan leaders did not offer an image of Afghan modernity, nor did they consider Islamic conceptualizations of democratic values or ensure a public appreciation of religious traditions, all of which would have eased the process.

The great majority of Afghans are Hanafi, the Sunni school considered the most liberal in terms of Islamic jurisprudence. For instance, it is the only classic school of law that recognizes female judges. Hanafi jurists are also known as *ahl al-ray*, or people of opinion, as they tend to rule according to the needs of people over the dictates of scripture. Yet Afghan policymakers and civil society leaders did not seize the opportunity to work with Hanafi jurists in the development of the nation.

Another lost opportunity was ignoring examples of Muslim women who have developed the Islamic faith; drawing attention to these figures could have effectively promoted contemporary women's rights. One such example is Umma Salma, who accompanied the Prophet in battle. According to the Quranic commentaries, she questioned the Prophet about the lack of revelation praising the female faithful (the Quran, 33:35); about female immigrants (3:195), and about the fact that men are privileged in the Quran (4:32). More modern examples include the fact that several heads of state in Muslim-majority countries have been female, including Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan); Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia); Tansu Ciller (Turkey); Khalida Zia and Shaykha Hasina (Bangladesh). The use of such stories to advocate for women in public life, such as via the more than 200 local and international television channels available in Afghanistan, would have wisely employed local culture and history. Instead, exclusively "modern" and non-Islamic examples, such as Laura Bush's activities aimed at "empowering" Afghan women, were highlighted, which gave extremist Muslims fuel for the argument that a democratic vision separates people from their local culture and values.

Further, though Afghans were suffering crises from the previous two decades due to political regime change, imported conflicting ideologies, and the Taliban 1's oppression

and brutality, the international community and Afghan leaders and elites neglected these urgent needs and basic requirements of Afghan subjectivity and were preoccupied with rapid change. As a result, imagined needs replaced true needs: Lengthy public debates over the ratio of women in parliament or ministries took place, while little attention was paid to nurturing values of equality, self-autonomy, responsibility, transparency, and inclusivism on a local level or to the democratization of community leaders. Women were not encouraged, for instance, to take leading positions in community mosques. Mosques are widespread and effective institutions in a conservative Islamic society, but they were left open for use by radicals.

Moreover, urban cultures were aggressively promoted though urbanization did not significantly increase. According to the World Bank, Afghanistan's population was 79% rural in 2001 and 74% in 2020. In addition, the number of internally displaced persons had become 3,547,000 by 2020 while it was only 297,000 in 2009. This trend provided a great mass of young and displaced people from which extremist groups like the Taliban could recruit, while politicized leaders in the capital and big cities busied themselves with a corrupt and ersatz democratic system. One can add to these overlooked people the disabled and other vulnerable populations whose difficult lives clearly showed the limits of "democracy." In short, notions replaced people.

A third and related problem was the reduction of the transformation process to market projects to benefit global capitalism. Although the political scientist Francis Fukuyama endorsed Ashraf Ghani's 2009 book on fixing failed states, lauding it for "develop[ing] a comprehensive framework for understanding the problem of state-building," after Ghani became president his approach, despite enjoying the support of international forces, failed due to the relegation of state-building to a solely economic project. To be sure, democratization requires stages with ongoing strategies, long-term vision, patience, trust-building, and cultural support, rather than a project, sets of tasks, or one-time event with a determined start and end time that privileges the market. Afghanistan's dependence on

foreign funds and policies put the country on a path in which a national process was reduced to a commodity. As Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, an expert on Afghanistan and gender equality, wrote, "In 20 years we funded fashion shows, skateboarding, mountaineering, orchestras, guitar playing, football for women – we didn't help them get the political and professional clout to be immovable from the public sphere."

These methodological flaws were accompanied by two conceptual difficulties. First, since the target of democratizing projects were international funders and reviewers rather than the people of Afghanistan, little was done to

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communicate meaningfully with the populace. Elites and policymakers did not use language that would create a vision beyond that of global market requirements, and as such, domestic terminology for new directions was not introduced. For example, after 20 years of investment in empowering women, a Dari or Pashtu translation of the term "gender" was not put forth. How can gender equality be promoted without conveying what is meant by gender in people's mother tongues? Language is the way the "self" or "agency" is expressed. But Afghan "self," "agency," and "subjectivity" were overlooked. Further, Afghan officials sometimes complained that their elections, projects, or plans were not Afghan-owned. Even within the international community, understandings of space, time, and Afghan "agency" were in conflict, creating a confusing and at times conflicting array of projects and policies.

Top-down international forces and liberal democracy descended on Afghanistan as "saviors," constituting a new orientalist-imperialist approach exercised in the name of nation-building. Though some called for caution, their voices were not heard. In 2006, for example, Antonio Donini, Director of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

Assistance to Afghanistan (1999-2002), <u>warned</u> about significant levels of Afghan alienation vis-à-vis development processes, including international humanitarian aid, noting that Afghans were "disillusioned, disempowered, and disengaged." This begs the question: When those offering humanitarianism do so in a way that alienates the people receiving the aid, what does that augur for the project of nation-building – arguably a much more complex endeavor?

A second and relevant problem was the creation of dichotomies: democratic leaders versus warlords, civilized versus uncivilized forces, tribal versus civic communities, and women versus men. These tensions divided people into many groups with isolated interests, rather than uniting them for the common cause of a nation. For instance, the prevailing discourse blamed men, rather than ignorance and dogma, as barriers to women's rights. As a result, instead of empowering both genders to fight prejudice, they were put in separate camps that encouraged suspicion and skepticism. Accusations replaced a unifying desire to improve human agency and self-autonomy, and ideas like democracy, human rights, gender equality, inclusiveness, and diversity became abstract notions distinct from common people and disassociated from daily dreams, desires, and obstacles. This created a society of oppressors and oppressed fighting for ideological interests rather than a community using its energy to work together to improve the quality of life – for everyone.

Though Afghanistan's latest democratic nation-building process failed, hope persists. Democratic values are not fixed, external entitles to be imported from foreign countries. Rather, they are human and universal values that manifest in different forms within varied cultures – and Afghanistan may still yet develop them. Global activists and policymakers must also learn from their failures and in the future work toward institutionalizing democratic values by combining them with local culture, values, and visions.