Civil Society in Afghanistan: Issues and Prospects

Muntazir Ali

Accused of harbouring Osama bin Laden, the alleged mastermind behind the destruction of the Twin Towers, Afghanistan under the Taliban regime became the first target in President Bush's war against terrorism. The Taliban regime quickly succumbed to US military and political might. The process of political stabilization, reconstruction and development which followed the Bonn Agreement and the presidential elections in 2001 and 2004 respectively, have proceeded in close conjunction with the determined pursuit of the war against terrorism. The resolute hunt for Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda supporters and sympathizers still continues.

Today Afghanistan presents a peculiar picture of two, seemingly contradictory, US goals: the pursuit of war against terrorism on the one hand and the promotion of democracy and free markets on the other.[1] When the Bonn Conference was held in November and December 2001, the challenges with which Afghanistan was confronted were staggering.[2] Afghanistan was one of the poorest and most traumatized countries in the world. The state structure, which was sustained by Soviet support until 1991, had collapsed completely. This left many components of the Afghan resistance vying to get control of what were essentially symbols of state power, most notable being the capital Kabul. Though Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) ousted the Taliban as a central political force, the fissures between the different members of the Afghan political elite have deepened. Eight years on, the initial euphoria which followed the ouster of the Taliban has been replaced by cautious optimism. Though Afghanistan has met a number of the goals contained in the 'map' for transition which the Bonn Agreement set out, it is far from a stable, democratic polity. It is not too difficult to identify the factors which have messed up the situation in Afghanistan. They range from weakness of the incumbent regime beset by rampant corruption, booming drug trade and influence of drug barons on various stakeholders, involvement of foreign

Muntazir Ali is Research Officer at the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs.

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[1] Jude Howell and Jeremy Lind, 'Civil Society With Guns Is Not Civil Society': Aid, Security And Civil Society in Afghanistan' p. 5, www.lse.ac.uk.
[2] William Maley, 'The Reconstruction of Afghanistan', in Ken Booth and Tim Dunne (eds.), Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 184-193.

troops in the killing of innocent civilians, slow reconstruction process, inability of donors to live up to their commitments, to the resurgence of the Taliban.[3]

The Afghan context, as an arena of post-conflict reconstruction, presents an opportunity to analyze the role of civil society in humanitarian and development activities. Furthermore, in Afghanistan we see a more intensified convergence of aid, security and foreign policies, which, inevitably, has impinged upon donors' approaches towards civil society.[4] In the post-Cold War era, the literature on governance has assigned a key role to civil society. It perceives civil society not only as an alert watchdog in relation to government but also an alternative service provider, augmenting rather than inhibiting the market and the state. The Afghan context, as a theatre for the simultaneous pursuit of war against terror and processes of reconstruction, development and stabilization is of particular interest.

This paper examines the state of civil society in Afghanistan and its role in reconstruction and development of the country. Since civil society does not operate in a vacuum, this will also lead us to an examination of constraints and opportunities for civil society to function in relation to the present political power structure, including the international community and local and regional power-holders. The paper is divided into three parts:

•   the first part examines the concept of civil society, both as an analytical construct and a policy tool and also evaluates its utility in non-Western contexts such as Afghanistan,

•   the second part traces the emergence and evolution of civil society in Afghanistan,

•   the last part analyzes the changing landscape of civil society in post-9/11 Afghanistan, efforts at rebuilding state-civil society relations, its role in reconstruction and development and constraints and opportunities associated with its viability and effective functioning.

I

The present era is witness to an increasingly universal negotiation between citizens, states and markets. For a long time, among social scientists, the idea of a two-sector world prevailed. There was the market

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[3] For a more detailed and informative account see 'Afghanistan: New US Administration, New Directions', www.crisisgroup.org.
[4] Jude Howell and Jeremy Lind, op. cit., p. 5

or economy on the one hand, and the state or government on the other. Within academia, theoretical expositions and explanations were undertaken to explore the two institutional complexes of state and market. Such an approach hindered the understanding of how economy and society interact. One example is the inability of the social sciences to predict and understand the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. In retrospect, it can be said that the events in Central and Eastern Europe proved pivotal in reintroducing the topic of civil society in Western sociological discourse. Thus civil society or the realm of citizens is once again in vogue and is an essential part of the above-mentioned universal negotiation.

Since the end of the Cold War, the concept of civil society has become very common, both in academic and policy circles. There is a widespread assumption in different parts of the world that civil society is relevant in strengthening development and democracy. It has become one of the most discussed concepts in global discussions. It is being touted by presidents and political scientists as the key to political, economic, and societal success.[5] The ending years of the last millennium saw the remarkable triumph of civil society. A plethora of groups ranging from those opposing globalization to those articulating concerns about global warming, started presenting themselves as champions of this historic idea. The revolution in information and communication technologies enabled the media to disseminate it as 'the idea'. This hype inevitably created confusion and questions were raised about its nature as John A. Hall and Frank Trentmann noted, 'what then, to make of civil society: rediscovered thinking tool, emancipatory panacea, or new imperialism?[6] Thus it is useful to evaluate arguments about the nature of civil society—past and present—in order to be able to fathom its place in the current political and developmental discourse.

Civil society: Changing meanings

Mary Kaldor has argued[7] that like all great political ideas, civil society can be traced back to Aristotle. However, it can also be traced through the works of the Romans, most notably Cicero. The term 'civil society' has

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[5] Thomas Carothers, 'Civil Society', *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1999-2000, www.foreignpolicy.com

[6] John A. Hall and Frank Trentmann, 'Contests over Civil Society: Introductory Perspectives' in John A. Hall and Frank Trentmann (eds.), *Civil Society: A Reader in History, Theory and Global Politics* (Basingstokes: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 1

[7] Mary Kaldor, 'The Idea of Global Civil Society', *International Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 3, May 2003, p. 584.

a direct equivalent in Latin (*societas civilis*), and a close equivalent in ancient Greek (*politike koinona*).[8]   The Romans and Greeks perceived it as a 'political society', wherein citizens took active part in shaping its institutions and policies. It was a society in which law governed social interactions and it was an expression of the Aristotelian 'good life'. Here it is interesting to note that this particular conception of civil society barred certain people, non-citizens and barbarians, from being a part of civil society.

As in the late 20th century, civil society moved to the centre of discourse in late 17th and 18th century Europe, coinciding with scholarly efforts to study the foundations of the emerging nation-state. During this time, civil society became associated with the idea of a rights-based society in which the interaction between the rulers and the ruled was regulated by a social contract. It was also contrasted with the varying notions of the state of nature. For Thomas Hobbes the state of nature was a condition of 'warre of every man against every man'[9] and according to him the main advantage of living in a civil society was physical security. For John Locke, on the other hand, the state of nature was characterized by the absence of a rule of law. The rights enjoyed in a civil society also included the right to liberty and to private property, because for Locke 'no political society can be, nor subsist, without having in itself the power to preserve the property.'[10] He is concerned about limits on arbitrary powers when he says, 'and thus, in the state of nature, one man comes by a power over another; but yet no absolute or arbitrary power'.[11] Thus, a political or civil society exists wherever any number of men are so united that every one of them quits 'his executive power of the law of nature and resign it to the public'.[12]

The political experience of modernity in18th century Europe, in which capitalism was taking the place of feudalism and the new emphasis on individualism and rights, gave fresh impetus to philosophical reflections on the idea of civil society. The Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, particularly Adam Ferguson, emphasized the importance of capitalism for

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[8] Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius, and Mary Kaldor, 'Introducing Global Civil Society' in Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius, et al., (eds.) *Global Civil Society 2001*, p. 12, The Centre for the Study of Global Governance, www.lse.ac.uk

[9] Thomas Hobbes, 'Relations among Sovereigns' in Phil Williams, Donald M. Goldstein, et al., (eds.), *Classical Readings of International Relations* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994), p. 29.

[10] John Locke, 'Two Treatises of Government' in William Ebenstein (ed.), *Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 403.

[11] Ibid., p. 395.

[12] Ibid., p. 404.

understanding the dynamics of the newly emerging rights-based society. Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, first published in 1767, is considered one of the most extensive treatments of civil society. In a society where capitalism was leading to moral degradation, Ferguson tried to resurrect the Roman ideal of civic virtue. He, perhaps for the first time, equated civil society with activism, both social and political. He argued that in order to have civil society, men need to take an active interest in the government of their polity.[13]

Civil society versus the state

In classical usage, there was no distinction between civil society and the institution of the state. Post-Enlightenment thinkers, especially Georg Hegel and Alexis de Tocqueville, explored and developed the notion of civil society as a realm parallel to, but separate from the state. This new thinking was prompted by emerging new realities such as the rise of private property, market competition and the emergence of the bourgeoisie. It also reflects the changing political landscape in the form of rising demand for liberty as manifested in the American and French revolutions.

German philosopher and historian Georg Hegel, in contrast to Locke, privileged the rational individual. Hegel had a great deal to say about civil society, but one of his most important contributions to the further development of this concept is that he saw civil society as something separate from, although symbiotic with, the state.[14] In a Hegelian sense, all the political space between the state and family was the realm of civil society. In this socio-political space, autonomous people negotiated and re-negotiated the social contract that had already bound them with the state and hence it provided an opportunity for individuals to exercise their power of liberty.

The other important 19th century thinker was Alexis de Tocqueville. The central theme of his *Democracy in America* and his major contribution to modern political thought is his attempt to reconcile individuality and liberty with democratic equality. He was greatly impressed by the extent of associations in civic life and argued that active associations were a condition for freedom and equality.

> The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found establishments for education, to

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[13] Adam Ferguson, 'An Essay on the History of Civil Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 199-235.
[14] Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius, et al., op. cit., p. 12.

> build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send
> missionaries to the antipodes; and in this manner they
> found hospitals, prisons, and schools.[15]

He viewed these associations as necessary to provide a check on state
power as its functions became more diverse and complex.

> As soon as several inhabitants of the United States
> have taken up an opinion or a feeling that they wish to
> promote in the world, they look out for mutual assistance;
> and as soon as they have found each other out, they
> combine. From that moment they are no longer isolated
> men, but a power seen from afar, whose actions serve for
> an example, and whose language is listened to.[16]

While de Tocqueville did not use the term 'civil society', his arguments
about 'associational life' as one of the guarantees of individual liberties,
continue to influence modern thinking about civil society.

Civil society: Between the state and the market

The modern conception of civil society as a realm located half way
between the state and the market had its seeds in the works of Italian
writer and theorist, Antonio Gramsci. Most scholars agree that it was
Gramsci who rescued the concept of civil society for modern use. In his
Prison Notebooks, he portrayed civil society as a crucial sphere of
revolutionary struggle against tyranny.[17] He articulated a concept of civil
society that differentiated it both from the economy and the state.
Gramsci intended this idea of civil society, as the non-state and non-
economic area of social interaction, to be only a temporary tool in the
revolutionary struggle.

Although Gramsci was concerned with dictatorships of the right, his
books were influential in the 1970s and 1980s with groups fighting
against dictatorships of all political stripes in Eastern Europe and Latin
America. [18] The Eastern European and Latin American thinkers and
practitioners of civil society both tried to reclaim the space which the
authoritarian state had infringed. They viewed this space between the
market and the state as a necessary complement to democracy and a

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[15] Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London: Oxford University
Press, 1946), p. 376.
[16] Ibid., p. 380.
[17] Joseph A. Buttigieg, 'Gramsci on Civil Society', *Boundary 2*, vol. 22, no. 3,
Autumn 1995, pp. 1-10.
[18] Thomas Carothers, op. cit., p. 19.

bulwark against future encroachment by the state. The events in Eastern Europe and Latin America proved pivotal in reintroducing the notion of civil society not only in Western sociological discourse but also in countries where the demise of socialism had left a vacuum. Its relevance was felt not only in countries where there was dictatorial rule, but also in established democracies such as in Western Europe and North America. The concept has also been found useful by Western and international institutions to implement programmes of economic and political reform.

This cursory sketch makes it amply clear that the fortunes of civil society have risen and fallen over time and the concept remains, essentially, a contested one. Some view it to be a specific product of nation-state and capitalism. Others see it as an expression of the collective life of individuals at different stages of development and viewed in different ways according to history and context. For some it is an entirely separate sector from the state and the market while for others it is inextricably linked or interpenetrated by states and markets. Some view it as the process which generates trust between people and they prefer to use the term 'social capital' instead of 'civil society'. Others insist, like Adam Ferguson, that it consists of active citizens who take an interest in public affairs. This ambiguity about the exact nature and role of civil society helps explain its present universal popularity.

II

Locating civil society in Afghanistan

Locating civil society in Afghanistan is fraught with challenges, given its diverse social landscape where tribal, kin and clan identities predominate. It becomes all the more challenging when we employ the modern concept of civil society which describes forms of voluntary self-organizing geared towards shared goals which transcend primordial ties such as family and tribe. Also it must be kept in mind that Afghanistan has a primarily rural, non-industrialized economy and the centralized, authoritative state has eluded Afghanistan for the most part of its history. Yet, over the past half century, elements of an elemental civil society have emerged at key moments in Afghanistan.

The development of this 'proto-civil society' cannot be divorced from the historical processes of state formation in Afghanistan. A complex interplay of internal dynamics and external influences have been shaping

both state formation and civil society development in Afghanistan.[19] The tribal context in Afghanistan and a highly diverse regional, lingual and ethnic milieu has not only been inhibiting the emergence of a centralized nation-state but has also hindered the emergence of associational life which transcends clan or tribal affiliations. External forces, in pursuit of diverse geo-political interests, patronized certain sections of the Afghan political elite or their opponents, generating a fragmented and weak polity in the process.[20] The involvement and exposure of Afghan refugees to civil societies in other parts of the world have also been shaping the contours of civil society in Afghanistan. Thus it can be argued that the interaction of internal and external forces has not only been shaping the processes of state formation in Afghanistan but also, in the process, has been generating elements of a rudimentary civil society.

If we move beyond the 'Eurocentric' notion of civil society and try to define it with reference to tradition, along with reference to modernity and democrcay, it becomes clear that in Afghanistan there are historic democractic elements that have been shaping state-society interactions. Most common are village *shuras* and *jirgas*[21] where local issues are discussed. At the national level, democractic traditions support the convening of a *loya jirga* or grand assembly when issues of national importance are to be discussed. The loya jirga of 1747 in which Ahmed Shah Abdali was selected as leader of the Afghans is often cited to be the first of its kind. While elections ceased under the various communist, Mujahideen and Taliban rulers beginning in the 1970s and continuing through 2001, democractic traditions did not.

Growth of civil society in Afghanistan

The evolution of civil society in Afghanistan can be analyzed with reference to five key phases. In each of these, a particular blend of internal imperatives and external influences gave rise to different modes of associational life and values.

The periods from 1949-1952 and from 1963-1973, under Shah Mahmud and Zahir Shah respectively, were of relative political

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[19] For a highly informative account see Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[20] For example, Britain and Russia from the19th century onwards and indeed modern Afghanistan developed as a buffer between these two competing empires. From the 1950s onwards, the US, Pakistan, Iran and India have been pursuing their interests in Afghanistan.

[21] Both refer to 'council' or 'assembly'. Shura is used in Dari and jirga is used in Pashtu.

liberalization. It was during these periods that recognizable signs of civil society such as clubs, discussion groups, newspapers, and informal groupings in the consultative parliaments appeared. However, a political society could not be established.[22] The expansion of foreign aid for secondary and university education from the mid-1950s onwards, particularly from the US, played an important role in the development of a new class of urban, educated youth, who became exposed to new ideas. Also, frequent educational exchanges with the Soviet Union during Daud's reign gave rise to new, educated elite, thus providing not only the intellectual seeds for a modernizing state but also for an emerging civil society.

The third phase is the complex period of Soviet occupation from 1978 to 1986. During this period, the arena of civil society was contested by at least three programmes of state-society relations, namely socialist, liberal and Islamist.[23] The socialist programme introduced Soviet forms of state socialist associational life into Afghanistan. The Democratic Youth Organization of Afghanistan, modelled on the Soviet Komsomol was an attempt to construct Leninist-style mass organizations. The occupying Soviet forces also formed trade unions, artists' associations, craft unions and other professional bodies in an attempt to bridge the gap between the political elite in Kabul and Afghan society. However, their version of modern associational life remained confined to cities and they met with little success in the rural areas.

It was also during this period that international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), predominantly from Europe and the US, became involved in humanitarian work in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and in cross-border relief activities. In this way, educated Afghan refugees became familiar with liberal discourses, got involved in NGO work and equipped themselves with knowledge of international institutions and networks. The involvement of international NGOs must be viewed against the backdrop of the Cold War. For example, the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan was set up in 1980 to support the national independence of Afghanistan and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. It had pioneered the delivery of assistance to Afghans in resistance-controlled areas through a complex and flexible methodology based on direct relations with commanders. This method was effective in delivering the aid to those in need, but it failed to create a national political centre and

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[22] Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 81.
[23] Jude Howell and Jeremy Lind, op. cit., p. 10.

contributed to political fragmentation by strengthening the autonomy of commanders.[24] As a result, military assistance overshadowed humanitarian projects. From 1980 to 1984, the US supplied 400 million dollars worth of arms to Afghan resistance groups through covert CIA channels.[25]

The third related strand which was to have important effects on state-society relations is the exposure of Afghan refugees to humanitarian and development NGOs from the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states actively participated in the humanitarian assistance efforts. Apart from direct involvement of Arab governments, Arab influence was felt in two other ways. First, a large number of religiously minded Arabs found Afghanistan an appropriate arena for their pan-Islamist ideals. Osama bin Laden is a case in point. Second, private organizations became involved in humanitarian assistance both inside Afghanistan and to refugees in Pakistan, often blurring the distance between humanitarian assistance and more overt political and military support.[26] The US, in pursuit of its policy to 'bleed' the Soviets in Afghanistan, channelled huge amounts of 'aid' through its intelligence establishment and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and thus cannot be absolved from the mess into which Afghanistan descended after the Soviet withdrawal.

The period from 1992 to 1996, when the Taliban captured Kabul, was one of chaos in which power struggles among the various warlords heightened insecurity and impeded the access of humanitarian workers to many of the rural areas. The immediate aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal was the crumbling of the state-socialist civil society structures. The ensuing scramble for Kabul among the various factions further eroded whatever semblance of a centralized state remained.

The rise of the Taliban marked the fifth phase in the course of a proto-civil society in Afghanistan. As the Taliban extended their control and restored some measure of security, many international NGOs were able to widen their humanitarian activities. The Taliban regime, within a year of gaining control of Kabul, had begun to tighten up NGO activities. It ran into serious disagreement with international humanitarian agencies over issues like female employment and girls' schooling. Several Western

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[24] Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 66-67.

[25] As cited in John D. Montgomery and Dennis A. Rondinelli, *Beyond Reconstruction in Afghanistan: Lessons from Development Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 87.

[26] William Malley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 82-83.

NGOs halted their operations in Kabul because of the Taliban's refusal to let them continue helping women. In the north, the fighting forced many NGOs out and they never returned. The Western enthusiasm for funding aid to Afghanistan was dealt another severe blow when Emma Bonino, the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs and 19 Western journalists and aid workers were arrested and held for three hours by the Taliban religious police in Kabul on 28 September 1997.[27] In May 1997, the Taliban regime made it mandatory that all aid projects receive clearance from not just the relevant ministry, but also from the Ministries of Interior, Public Health, Police and the Department of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Following the Taliban move to relocate all 35 UN and NGO agencies to the Kabul Polytechnic building, the European Union suspended further humanitarian aid and the UN and other NGOs left Kabul.[28]

The Taliban also left their mark on traditional forms of associational life like the shura In some instances, the Taliban used 'local councils' for tax collection and tried to Islamize them by appointing village religious leaders as heads.

To summarize, this brief sketch of the development of a rudimentary civil society in Afghanistan makes it clear that civil society institutions have emerged at key moments owing to contests between different ideas, interests and values. More than any indigenous movement towards civil society activism, it was the influence and interests of external forces which had shaped the core elements of civil society and the state. In all its phases, it was the urban and educated who formed the bedrock of both state and civil society. The collapse of the Taliban regime and the subsequent influx of international aid have ushered in a new phase in the trajectory of civil society in Afghanistan. It is also reshaping the dynamics of relations between traditional forms of associational life and more modern ones. The changing landscape of civil society in Afghanistan and emerging new issues and prospects forms the subject of the next section.

III

[27] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), p. 65.
[28] Ibid., p. 114.

Three sets of conceptualizations of civil society can be invoked and applied with respect to Afghanistan, each drawing upon wider global definitions as well as the Afghans' historical experience. First, there is the notion of networks of free citizens—professional associations, unions, political parties, public interest groups—that create political space as a prerequisite for building democracy and the rule of law. This view is dominant among humanitarian groups and international organizations working in Afghanistan. It also includes NGOs that are internationally-funded.

The problem with this approach is that it is often perceived by local people as an abstract and idealized paradigm that grew out of modern Western experiences spanning centuries. It is often presented as a mandatory and sometimes the only blueprint for reforms, reinforcing its perception as an alien force among the local populace.

A second conceptualization involves traditional networks of solidarity, based on primordial ties of kinship and patronage. In the Afghan context, shura and jirga are examples of such networks. A problem with this approach is that the modern practice of state-building views such traditional organs as part of the problem rather than the solution.[29]

Yet a third paradigm postulates a 'religious civil society' in which a community of believers undertakes to live according to the values and ethics of their faith (Islam in the Afghan context). In Afghanistan, religious civil society is not homogenous. It comprises reform-friendly, pro-government moderates along with Islamists, conservative minded traditionalists and radical fundamentalists who oppose the government.[30]

The Bonn process: Political transition and civil society

The war in Afghanistan was initiated without any clear strategies for long-term stabilization, state-building or development. In the context of previous policy declarations from the Bush administration, Afghanistan was a target and concern within the context of counterterrorism, not humanitarianism.[31] As the OEF continued, the UN initiated discussions

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[29] Olivier Roy, 'Soviet Legacies and Western Aid Imperatives in the New Central Asia' in Amyn B. Sajoo (ed.), *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 124.

[30] Kaja Borchgrevink, Kristian Berg Harpviken, et al, 'Disconnected and Discounted? Religious Actors and Civil Society in Post-2001 Afghanistan', p. 2, www.cmi.no.

[31] Fatima Ayub and Sari Kouvo, 'Righting the course? Humanitarian intervention, the war on terror and the future of Afghanistan', *International Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 4, July 2008, p. 641.

about the future political profile of Afghanistan once the military operations ceased. These discussions culminated in the Bonn Conference of November and December 2001, which involved discussions for power-sharing arrangements in a transitional administration. It is debatable that the factions convened at Bonn constituted legitimate representatives of the Afghans because most of them were given prominent roles at the Bonn Conference in return for their services to the US in ousting the Taliban. Also, the exclusion of the Taliban from the talks put a question mark on its representative character. At Bonn, Afghan and international stakeholders had prioritized security and stability in the short term over accountability, peace and justice in the longer term.[32] The push for the development of formal institutions shifted the focus away from community-driven processes and informal governing mechanisms.

In the period since the Bonn Agreement, Afghanistan has met a number of the goals for transition which the accord set out. In June 2002 the Emergency Loya Jirga elected the current President, Hamid Karzai, as the head of the transitional authority. In December 2003 and January 2004, a Constitutional Loya Jirga endorsed a new constitution, establishing a presidential system. The national consultations for the drafting of the new constitution have been viewed by many Afghans and international observers as flawed and compromised by backdoor deals. [33] The Bonn process officially ended with the holding of presidential elections in 2004, and the subsequent parliamentary and provincial council elections in 2005. The measures constituted under the Bonn process have tended to reinforce the view that short-term stability and political gains pushed aside long-term peace and a system based on the rule of law. This state of affairs has, inevitably, adversely affected the functioning of civil society mechanisms. Given that civil society organizations (CSOs) have a vital role to play in building peace and upholding the rule of law, the marginalization of civil society set a bad precedent for effective activism on the part of civil society institutions. Although the 76 Afghan civil society actors represented at the Bad Honnef Conference in November and December 2001, held parallel to the Bonn Conference, insisted upon and got the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) established, they failed to make their voices heard in the transitional process in any effective manner.

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[32] Barnett R. Rubin, 'Transitional Justice in Afghanistan', The Anthony Hyman Memorial Lecture, 3 February 2003, www.soas.ac.uk.

[33] See for example 'Afghanistan: The Constitutional Loya Jirga', International Crisis Group Briefing, 12 December 2003, www.crisisgroup.org.

Afghan Civil Society Organizations

The Afghan Civil Society Conference at Bad Honnef, for the first time, brought together a broad range of Afghan advocacy actors. For the first time, the label 'civil society' was used to describe a gathering of Afghans who represented a range of issues, though participants were invited by the organizers, not selected by ordinary Afghans.[34]

Following the conference, two organizations calling themselves 'civil society' organizations were formed. The first was the Afghan Civil Society Forum (ASCF), developed as a partnership between the Afghan civil society actors and SwissPeace. Based as a coordinating body in Kabul, it provides a venue where broader civil society issues can be discussed at a national level. In January 2005, it got registered with the Ministry of Justice as an Afghan social organization. The second such organization was the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society (FCCS). Founded with a grant from the World Bank's special presidential fund, the FCCS, for the first several months of its operation concentrated on reviving Afghan culture through music programmes and other regular public gatherings. It now addresses various civil society issues through roundtable discussions and seminars.

Voluntary associations and interests groups

The overthrow of the Taliban regime and the prospects for an elected government ushered in a period of relative political liberalization. Various voluntary associations and interests groups, including professional groups such as the Afghan Lawyers' Association, youth groups, student associations and womens forums emerged. Islamic study circles and associations such as the Afghan Society for Social Reform and Development have also flourished in the more liberalized environment.

In Herat, a professional shura, a gathering of doctors, lawyers, artists, journalists and professors was established in 2001. It conducts meetings, publishes a newspaper and makes policy recommendations to the authorities of Herat. During the first few months of its existence, however, it was subjected to severe suppression including the arrest of its members and the prevention of its planned meetings by the security forces.[35]

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[34] Anne Carun, 'Engaging the IFIs in Afghanistan: The emergence of Afghan civil society', p. 5, www.bicusa.org.

[35] Kristian Berg Harpviken, Arne Strand, et al, 'Afghanistan and Civil Society', p. 10, www.cmi.no.

Religious civil society

Islam plays an important role, both in people's daily lives and in politics in Afghanistan. However, the international debate on peace-building and development in post-Taliban Afghanistan has not been very forthcoming in including religious leaders and institutions in policies and programmes. This is due to the fact that in modern parlance, building civil society involves the replacement of primordial communities and traditional networks by associations based on individual, direct affiliation through civic or ideological commitment. [36] But it must be kept in mind that in Afghanistan, traditional forms of association and religious institutions—such as the mosque, religious seminaries (madrassas) and religious leaders (mullahs and ulema)—have played a very important role in society and politics. While more modern forms of civic life declined over time, local religious civil society institutions remained significant.

In post-Taliban Afghanistan, donors have mainly supported formally established organizations associated with secular development programmes.[37] In addition to their religious roles, religious leaders in Afghanistan perform a number of civil society functions. Given their authoritative standing in the predominantly traditional Afghan society, they can potentially play a vital role in strengthening societal bonds and act as a bridge between different groups. Given their relative autonomy in relation to community and tribal structures, they can mediate between conflicting interests facilitating conflict resolution. They may act as interlocutors between their own communities and external agents such as the Afghan state and international agencies. In view of their potential, there is a need to create a space for an autonomous role on the part of religious leaders, streamlining and institutionalizing their historical role and making them effective partners in the peace and development agenda.

The gender dimension of civil society

Traditionally, the social setup in Afghanistan has remained strictly sex-segregated. The traditional view of sex roles in Afghanistan has developed within the structure of marriage and family. The most important duty of a man is to support and protect his family. The social customs through which male control of women is sometimes expressed are *purdah* (segregation and seclusion of women) and *chadri* (veiling). The extent of each varies according to ethnic group, social class, and

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[36] Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 97-108.
[37] Kaja Borchgrevink, Kristian Berg Harpviken, et al, op. cit. p. 2

location.[38] Women's role, however, was not limited to solitary hard work. Historically, Afghan women have developed innovative ways of participating in both religion and politics. For example, among Pashtuns, women would encourage and, if necessary, shame men into defending honour.

The Soviet invasion and conflict in subsequent years had stimulated the formation of organized advocacy groups. Among these the most vocal were those supporting women's rights. The Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association (RAWA) opposed the Mujahideen groups which threatened the Afghan women who worked and went to school. Despite the Taliban strictures on girls' schooling and women's employment, some women managed to organize home study groups, sewing centres and community development councils underground, which after the Taliban demise were then able to formally register.[39]

The collapse of the Taliban opened wide doors of opportunities for women's participation in the state-building process. The Bonn Conference witnessed the participation of three women as full delegates while two others joined in an advice-giving capacity. The Brussels Summit of 4-5 December 2001 had provided a common platform to explore ways of strengthening women's participation in reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. Women NGOs are active in services delivery, information campaign, and implementing projects in various sectors such as education and health. There are some 175 women's NGOs registered under the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The biggest women's NGO coalition is the Afghan Women's Network which has 65 NGO members and more than 2500 individual members.[40]

Post-Taliban Afghanistan: State-civil society relations

When Karzai was installed as president in 2004 and the parliament was elected, the focus of the donors' attention in channelling aid shifted away from NGOs towards the state. The donor community undertook measures to enhance the state's capacity in dealing with reconstruction and development issues. As part of these measures, a National Solidarity Programme (NSP) was designed. The Programme created new structures of civil society in the rural areas called Community Development

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[38] Barnett R. Rubin, op. cit., p. 24.
[39] As cited in Jude Howell and Jeremy Lind, op. cit., p. 13.
[40] Sameera Ayyubi, 'The Role of Women in Rebuilding Afghanistan' in Moonis Ahmar (ed.), *The Challenge of Rebuilding Afghanistan* (Karachi: BCC&T University of Karachi, 2005), p. 109.

Councils (CDCs).[41] These were different from existing traditional structures in three ways. First, their leaders were elected; second, they did not deal with issues of conflict among tribes; and third, and the most important was that they were required to involve women in decision-making process. While the involvement of women in key capacities would go a long way in empowering women and in gender mainstreaming, the idea of wholly bypassing traditional structures can be questioned. In a predominantly rural Afghan set-up, introducing new forms of association without preparing the ground would lead to new complexities. It would entrench the perception of development agencies as being alien forces, thereby limiting their reach and capacity to garner wholehearted participation from the locals. As an attempt to re-build state-civil society, the efficacy of this arrangement is yet to be seen. The NSP also defined the roles of international and local NGOs as facilitators for and capacity-builders of the Community Development Councils.

The implementation of the NSP has not been without problems. Issues like opposition to the participation of women in decision-making processes, relating CDCs with existing traditional structures and inter-community conflicts had impeded its implementation. Furthermore, delay in timely provision of development funds to the CDCs undermined one of the key aims of the NSP, which was to enhance the legitimacy of the Afghan government. The reconstruction and development process in Afghanistan has assigned a very limited role to civil society, that of service-delivery agents. There is no mention of the role of civil society as bulwark against the excesses of the state or as participants in the making of policies. Its capacity to hold bureaucrats and politicians to account and to demand transparency is nonexistent or at best very limited.

Conclusion

The landscape of civil society in Afghanistan underwent rapid change after the collapse of the Taliban. While international NGOs and a small number of Afghan NGOs have been operating since the 1980s, the fall of the Taliban in 2001 saw a sudden influx of new non-governmental agencies and the rapid mushrooming of local NGOs. The development and state-building paradigm approved for Afghanistan by the international community assigned a service-delivery role to civil society. Its political, and arguably more important role as a sphere of citizen engagement and deliberation in public affairs, has been overlooked.

Though international development agencies recognize the existence of traditional civil society structures like jirga, shura and religious actors,

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[41] www.nspafghanistan.org.

there have not been any meaningful efforts to incorporate them into the development process and to assign them a proper place in the emerging new civil society milieu. External forces have been extensively involved in shaping civil society in the post-Taliban period. Most of the local NGOs are dependent on foreign assistance, leading to what has been called a 'rentier civil society'. The deteriorating security situation has made large parts of Afghanistan virtually inaccessible to humanitarian and development agencies. As a result, the majority of NGOs and their operations are concentrated in large urban centres. The involvement of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in development projects as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) has created further complexities for development agencies because they are also being viewed, increasingly, as part of an occupying force. One very important aspect of civil society's role which is nowhere to be seen in Afghanistan is the lack of initiatives for promoting peace and harmony among different communities.

Though a renewed quest for civic culture has already found expression in the emergence of independent news media, with appropriate legislative guarantees, and in the revival of artistic life in both traditional and modern formats[42], civil society has to move out of its service-delivery role and take on the more important role of a watchdog on the state. The theory and practice of civil society in Afghanistan must incorporate existing, traditional associational forms into the newly emerging debate. Civil society institutions must not only mediate between the government and the society but also between different sections of the society such as majorities and minorities. This becomes all the more important given Afghanistan's pluralistic social set-up and its history of warfare and tension between different ethnic groups. Civil society groups must endeavour to indigenize themselves in order to dispel their alien image among the masses and must develop an independent domain for themselves.

The transition from war and violence to peace and justice is a daunting task. Its success can only be measured by improvement in the provision of justice, democratic participation of the people and emergence of a vibrant, robust civil society. The initial emphasis on short-term security and stability continues to influence governance in Afghanistan. This state of affairs, coupled with a precarious security situation has impeded civil society's role as an intermediary between the people and the state.

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[42] Amyn B. Sajoo, 'Introduction: Civic Quests and Bequests' in Amyn B. Sajoo (ed.) *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives*, op. cit., p. 25.