

# Youth Political Activism in Afghanistan



HEINRICH BOELL FOUNDATION

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# Youth Political Activism in Afghanistan

## Summary:

- With 68% of its total population under the age of 25, Afghanistan is currently witnessing a serious youth bulge that has resulted in cultural, social and political consequences, including the growth of modern youth political activism.
- Rapid growth of technology, media and access to education and information since 2001 has meant that young people are much more politically aware and, more importantly, conscious about their expectations and ambitions, including the growth of modern youth political activism.
- Cultural constraints pose a big obstacle to youth political activism, as a person is not considered suitable to lead others unless he is an elder in her/his community.
- Lack of political awareness among the rural youth also makes them more susceptible to succumbing to the political status quo.
- Political youth groups do not have the necessary resources to challenge the established political actors.
- The main obstacles facing young parliamentary and provincial candidates are campaigning for finances and lack of transparency in the election.
- A holistic policy involving youth, national identity and national

development is necessary; moderate and progressive youth political groups seemed to understand the importance of nation-building processes and reflected their concerns through incorporating members from every ethnic group into their organizational structures.

- A comprehensive national-level project should be undertaken to access perspectives from provincial youth political activists and groups on the challenges and obstacles they face.

## Introduction

"The movement is revitalized by the youth who are free of responsibility for the past ... Only the fresh enthusiasm and aggressive spirit of the youth can guarantee the preliminary successes in the struggle; only these successes can return the best elements of the older generation to the road of revolution."

- Leon Trotsky.

Young people have traditionally been at the forefront of social and political movements in societies and, as witnessed during the recent Arab Spring, have also been instrumental in bringing about regime changes through revolutions. The government's inability to fulfil the aspirations and provide for the urgent needs of young people, alongside an expanding youth population, has the potential to affect a country's political landscape. A so-called youth bulge is often considered a negative phenomenon in developing countries, contributing to the increased likelihood of conflict due to a

growing number of unemployed young men and the inability of the government to provide public services.<sup>1</sup>

Although the country is unlikely to face any revolution in the immediate future, with 68% of its total population under the age of 25, Afghanistan is currently witnessing a serious growth in its youth population, and it has resulted in socio-cultural and political consequences that have been previously unheard of in Afghan political culture and conventions.<sup>2</sup> Though it should be mentioned that youth and student politics are not an entirely new concept in the country.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the radicalisation of the educated youth in the 1960-1970s, coupled with the unwillingness of the monarchical elite to share power with the new educated class, was one of the most important factors in the crisis of the Afghan state from 1973 onwards.<sup>4</sup> During the 1950s-1970s, young people often expressed their opinions through a particular ideological inclination, and the dominant trends were either to become an Islamist or a communist to challenge the monarchy. Youth activities focused on mobilizing large numbers of university students and recent graduates with the intention of overthrowing the political regime and establishing an Islamic state or a communist regime.<sup>5</sup>

But more than three decades of civil war followed by a democratic setup ensured that the current genre of youth political activism was more tangible and moderate than what has been seen in the past. This report sets out to explore the challenges faced by young political activists/groups in Afghanistan since 2001 as well as the gaps in the political system that are the key factors behind these challenges. Moreover, this paper presents policy recommendations that reflect interviews and meetings with political youth groups and desk review studies of youth political activism in Afghanistan.

## Research Methodology:

After the fall of Taliban, new moderate youth political groups have emerged in Afghanistan. This study attempts to assess the status and challenges facing youth political groups in contemporary Afghanistan's political system. Research for this study was undertaken using a qualitative approach through desk reviews, conducting meetings with representatives of political youth groups, and conducting key informant interviews with several members of the Youth Political Contact Group. In this particular study, the purpose is based on policy analytical components of the research and presents several recommendations for political youth groups to work together in order to function as an influential political and work force in Afghanistan.

## Youth political activism in today's Afghanistan

The expansion of higher education has created emerging youth political groups that have challenged traditional politics and created large numbers of new aspirants for elite positions. In fact, it has typically been the case that revolutionary youth movements have been preceded by a vast expansion in secondary or higher

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, 'Youth Mobilization and Political Constraints in Afghanistan', USIP Special Report, Jan 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Information and Culture, "Afghanistan National Youth Policy – July 2013".

<sup>3</sup> Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, 'Youth Mobilization and Political Constraints in Afghanistan', USIP Special Report, Jan 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, 'Between Patronage and Rebellion: Student Politics in Afghanistan', AREU, February 2010

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

education that exceeds the expansion in opportunities for further upward career mobility and to engage in politics and power.

In these cases, the increase in percentage of educated youth often far exceeds the increase in the youth bulge. Revolutions of the late twentieth century and the Arab revolts of the early twenty-first century have similarly been preceded by expansions in higher education. It was recent university graduates, often educated abroad and then returning home to find limited avenues for their ambitions, who led revolutionary movements in many Asian and African colonial states and dictatorships.<sup>6</sup>

As already mentioned, although Afghanistan is not close to seeing a youth revolt, rapid growth in technology, media and access to education and information since 2001 has meant that young people are much more politically aware and cautious about their political situation compared to those in the past. New generations are conscious of their expectations from the government and ambitions to engage in social and political activities.<sup>7</sup>

The recent presidential election testified to this altered political scenario when the two candidates in the presidential runoff vigorously tried to win the support of the younger demographic through different innovative approaches and voter drives. However, some moderate youth political groups are not satisfied with only casting their votes during the elections; they want to establish themselves as legitimate

channels to voice their grievances and expectations to the government and members of parliament. As a result, they try to influence politics through the best possible means available to them.<sup>8</sup>

In meetings and individual interviews with representatives of political youth groups, young activists demonstrated their refusal to be passive candidates and voters in the 2015 parliamentary election. However, they mentioned finance campaigning and fraud as two major challenges they face; the 2014 presidential and provincial elections have drawn a clear picture of the obstacles that stand in the way of political youth groups running in provincial council elections and competing with traditional power brokers.

Primary and secondary research in this study revealed the following prominent patterns of youth political activism:

- Formal setup: Registered political parties, non-governmental organizations and youth councils have tried to cater to the needs of young people. Such institutions mostly focus on several development initiatives, targeting young people for mobilization, election campaigning, trainings and political activities. However, their activities were project-based and focused more on building leadership and other skills. By contrast, Jihadi factions were more successful in mobilizing youth, because of their long experience mobilizing and recruiting young people during the war with the Soviet Union and the civil war. Jihadi groups have youth committees to set up an informal network of young people that expands across regions, usually cutting across tribal and ethnic lines. This strategy

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<sup>6</sup> Jack A Goldstone, 'Causes of Revolution: The Role of Youth and Other Social Factors', *World Politics Review*, Nov 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Sameull Hall, Research commissioned by DMOYA, UNDO, UNFPA, and UNICEF, "Afghanistan's Future in Transition: A Participatory Assessment Of the Afghan Youth," 2013.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with the member of Youth Political Contact Group, 05 January, 2015.

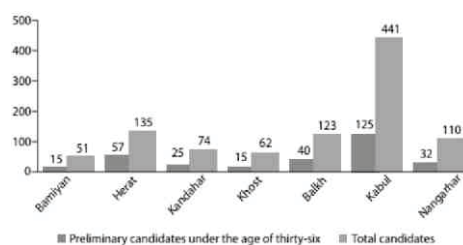
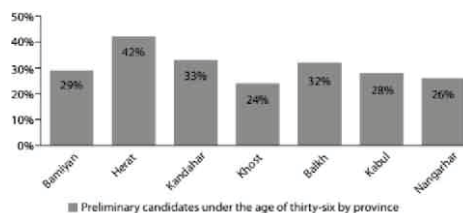


helps them recruit youth for their political agenda.

- Informal setup: Educated young expats and university graduates who formed political youth groups aim to participate in political and civil life. Their main goals are increasing involvement in politics and to enact policymaking that will bring changes and reforms. Some of these political youth groups aim to foster national identity, rather than ethnic identity. The political youth groups advocate for young people's interests and have taken political positions on political and social issues. Moreover, their agendas and organizational structures reflect their plan to attract members from all ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to develop a truly national approach. Activities are primarily concentrated on peaceful demonstrations, releasing statements, press conferences, meeting with the national government and international community and publishing articles on political issues.<sup>9</sup>
- During elections, young people are perceived as voting blocks and are courted by local leaders and power brokers for influence in return for political favours.
- Joining politics directly: A large number of Afghan young people participated in the recent provincial council elections. While no accurate data are available for the entire country, research has revealed the following statistics on preliminary candidates under the age of 36 for the council elections from the provinces of

Bamiyan, Herat, Kandahar, Khost, Balkh, Kabul and Nangarhar<sup>10</sup>:

According to these two charts, Afghan young people participated actively in the 2014 provincial council election, and young candidates—particularly young female candidates—proved their



ability to win elections. Studies on the provincial councils in Herat and Kabul showed that more than 70% of their members are young. Young members of provincial councils have also been actively taking part in different committees to get experience representing the people and engaging with political and social issues. Young provincial council members also gained confidence and the ability to compete with the elders and power brokers in the council. For instance, Tabiba Khawari, a former civil society activist and young member of the provincial council in Bamiyan, was the first woman elected as the head of a provincial council in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> TLO Policy Brief, "The Age of Youth: The Peaceful Shaping of Afghanistan's Transition Decade," 02 May, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Gran Hewad and Casey G Johnson, 'A Rough Guide to Afghan Youth Politics', USIP Special Report, April 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Pajhwok News, "Women elected as Bamiyan council head," 16 November, 2014.

- Student politics: Young men and women in academic institutes, particularly universities, actively participate in political discourse, get in touch with influential political leaders, develop their own political visions and are known to mobilize for their selected political parties or representatives. While political activities and unions are discouraged on university campuses, students are connected to political networks, parties and individuals outside. These connections range from informal student groups that meet off campus to study and host social events (but also to liaise with party leaders) to lodgings provided for students. Students have been able to use these connections to help them mobilize politically for different issues.

What becomes evident is that while the circumstances or process of political activism might be different, the youth in contemporary Afghanistan have a keen interest in participating in politics. Even the political discourse among young people is different from what it has been in the past. Most young people have few memories of Jihad against the Soviets and are more interested in having a stable government that is able to organize and provide for a productive society.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, new opportunities and resources for political and civil activism have become available to young people, and these openings have encouraged the emergence of new kinds of youth groups and associations. One of the reasons young people need to develop political groups and unions is so they can respond to the multiple challenges mentioned above. They must try to find autonomy

and enter into the political realm without depending on traditional power brokers.<sup>13</sup>

The emergence of new, privately owned newspapers and television channels has provided the marginalized young people with a medium to voice their concerns and grievances. Similarly, the significant growth in internet usage, especially among young people, has allowed young people to interact easily with other like-minded young people, build networks, organize events and create new public spaces that are less subject to state control and repression. In addition, the emergence of educated young professionals has paved the way for them to exercise power and participate in politics. Thus, in recent years, young people have tried to create political groups and publicly express their positions on different political issues.

## Challenges to youth political activism:

Cultural constraints and conservatism pose the biggest challenges towards political youth activism. In such an orthodox society, political authority is not earned based on merit; rather, it is inherited. Every tribe has its own leaders in each village/community. These leaders make political decisions on behalf of the entire community, and they are usually followed by the members of the communities in question.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, young people's political opinions do not carry as much importance as those of a village elder or tribal leader. Moreover, subscribing to tribal politics based on

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the member of Youth Activists Network for Reform and Change, 28 December, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with the member of National Coalition for Green Youth of Afghanistan, 13 December, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Jorrit Kaminga, "From security transition to civilian power: Supporting Afghan youth after 2014," the Clingendael Institute, No 8, June 2014.

family connections is considered an easy way to attain political power. What's more, the older generation of leaders currently maintains a strong grip over power politics and hinders youth political mobilization and the creation of a new generation of leaders. Tribal elders rarely select a young man or woman as a political leader for their communities and as a result hinder any development of youth political activism. Afghanistan's national politics are still dominated by an old guard of aging traditionalists, warlords and their patronage networks; an unconnected outsider has very few opportunities to make progress in this scheme.<sup>15</sup>

Another major challenge to youth political activism is the gap in education and awareness between rural and urban populations. The media coverage of the recent presidential elections made lots of reference to the booming, increasingly tech-savvy and connected young population in Afghanistan. But the truth is that life outside major cities is very different. Of an estimated population of over 31 million, only 8% of Afghans have access to the Internet—less than half the population of Kabul. Even fewer Afghans have access to electricity. Lack of access to education, technology and information of the youth in rural Afghanistan means that they are less politically aware than their urban counterparts and thus face increased challenges when it comes to political activism.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the lack of education also means that young people lack the knowledge to challenge the traditional

political setup in their communities and are more prone to supporting the status quo. Such disenchanted youth in rural areas are vulnerable to radicalization, and it may well be that the primary mode of political expression in these areas is to join insurgent groups like the Taliban.

In September 2013 local imams and religious scholars in a village in the Faizabad, Badakhshan province were discussing ways to encourage people to participate in the upcoming elections. After three people had delivered their speeches, one young man rose and started arguing against the general notion of the seminar they were holding. Five more young people backed him as the argument intensified, and all of a sudden, the clerics found themselves in a tough theological debate over the legitimacy of elections in Islam. The young men called the clerics "deviants" and "government puppets." Finally, the policemen in charge of protecting the event intervened and arrested three of the men for sabotaging the seminar.<sup>17</sup> It is entirely possible that this may be an isolated incident, or it may be representative of a small aberration among the Afghan youth population. However, it also proves that not necessarily all Afghan young people are progressive or believe in democracy.

Another major obstacle for preventing political youth groups from gaining power and momentum is the lack of sufficient financial support to either form such political youth groups or expand their activities to the national level. There are numerous examples of members of youth groups working as volunteers and relying on out-of-pocket funding to organize their programs. Financial deficit is preventing these youth groups from implementing

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, "Telecom's Sector Recent Achievements," <http://mcit.gov.af/en/page/4876/6005>.

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<sup>17</sup> Borhan Osman, 'Afghan Youth for Democracy? Not all of them', Afghanistan Analyst Network, Apr 2014.

their programs at the national level and competing with traditional political elites.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, there is also the problem of mind-set. The new generations of young people have been vocal when it comes to democratically expressing their grievances about social issues through civil society institutions, student unions and peaceful demonstrations. However, the civil wars of more than three decades and the resultant ethnic divisions in Afghan society have also affected young people's perspectives on politics.<sup>19</sup>

A lack of cooperation has been another major challenge among political youth groups. It is clear that close coordination on certain political issues among political youth groups influences a wide range of people, including the government. However, the limited capacity and partisan nature of these political youth groups has limited these groups in cooperating with each other on some related political activities.

Growing extremism in South Asia and the Middle East is also affecting Afghan political youth groups. Anti-western sentiments have been on the rise among Afghanistan's youth population. The international community's role in dealing with the country's fragile and corrupt central government, civilian casualties during NATO operations, and disrespect to religion and culture by international entities have all made this anti-western sentiment even more prominent.<sup>20</sup> The new strain of extremism in the established Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is

particularly alarming, and this will certainly affect the young people of Afghanistan as well.<sup>21</sup>

## Young People and Nation Building:

Because young people are human capital in the nation-building process in Afghanistan, they may see a new way forward. Historically, decentralized rulers with different ethnicities and languages ruled different parts of Afghanistan; conflict also had its impact by creating divisions within the population in terms of ethnicity, languages and tribes. Fragmented society and ethnic favoritism affected young people dramatically, and the concept of national identity became obsolete, requiring consistent efforts to solve the problem of displacement and disillusionment among young Afghans.<sup>22</sup>

After the fall of Taliban, nation building resumed its process through democracy and nationalism, which are dependent on each other. Democracy came to be known as the national form of the government. Therefore, time and opportunity created a national political culture—a pre-requisite of nation building.

Moderate and progressive political youth groups seemed to understand the importance of the nation-building process and reflected their concerns through their organizational structures: They included members of every national ethnic group, and their agendas projected a national consensus about different political and social issues.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with the member of Youth Political Contact Group, 13 December, 2014,

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the member of Youth Political Contact Group, 10 December, 2014,

<sup>20</sup> Jorrit Kamminga, "From security transition to civilian power: Supporting Afghan youth after 2014," the Clingendael Institute, No 8, June 2014,

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<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center, "Concerns about Islamic Extremism on the Rise in Middle East," 01 July, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Seth Kaplan, "Identity in Fragile States: Social cohesion and state building," Society International Development, 2009

<sup>23</sup> Interview with the member of Youth Political Contact Group, 05 January, 2015

It is clear that the new generation of educated young Afghans understands that the country's current political and social dilemmas are largely the result of ethnic and tribal divisions; during my observation of and interviews with political youth groups, their policies and plans were not targeted towards any specific tribes or ethnic groups.

## Conclusion:

Afghanistan is a nation of young people. After the fall of Taliban, young, educated Afghans started to become more representative in politics. The Afghan constitution provided an opportunity for Afghan citizens—including young people—to express their political views freely and participate in political activities. Education also increased the level of political knowledge among young people. After 2001, moderate political youth groups formed to engage in political activities and act as influential institutions.

While cultural constraints and resistance from traditional power brokers challenge young people's abilities to emerge as independent figures in their communities, the new political environment and emerging democratic values offer opportunities for young people to participate as candidates in parliamentary and provincial council elections. Marginalization and any discriminatory policy would create distance and discourage young people from supporting local governments and will not only foster social problems but also potentially become a new foot soldier for insurgents and create additional security problems. Emerging political youth groups have been shaping a political discourse among young people in universities and gradually grown in influence in wider circles as well.

However, young politicians experience challenges and obstacles to political legitimacy when they want to exercise their power.

## Policy Recommendations:

Gaining political power in the current political climate has not been easy for young people in Afghanistan. In order to develop legitimacy and compete with traditional and conservative political powers, political youth groups have learned to understand the importance of cooperation among each other. Ethnic fragmentation and the existence of patronage networks have disrupted the nation-building processes in Afghanistan. Political power is often based on ethnicity, and this has led young people to take political positions based on their ethnic affiliations. This paper identified various policy recommendations for political youth groups. These recommendations are based on studies and group discussions and can address the groups' political agendas for working closely with each other.

These policy recommendations are as follows:

- Political youth groups should design their structures and strategies to reflect a unified national and represent all the ethnicities and languages of Afghanistan.
- Political youth groups should consider the role of women in decision-making processes and engage young women in their political and social activities.
- Political youth groups have expressed interest in participating in the 2015 parliamentary elections, but they feel a lack of transparency within the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Independent Election Complaints Commission (IECC)—as

well as finance campaigning—would create challenges facing young candidates. Nevertheless, they are optimistic that the number of young candidates will increase in the 2015 parliamentary elections. It would be useful for young candidates to learn about the mobilization of resources and fundraising plans. Therefore, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and other international and national organizations should develop workshops and supportive projects related to the 2015 parliamentary elections for young candidates.

- Afghanistan has made significant progress since the fall of Taliban. Political youth groups have stressed their concern that these gains not be undermined, and they have also expressed the hope that they go on protected by the Afghan people after the international community shifts its focus from Afghanistan.
- Political youth groups need to build their capacity for political power and familiarize themselves with the ethno-political situation in Afghanistan. The Afghan government and international stakeholders can support political youth groups by developing capacity-building programs.
- The establishment of a political youth contact group is an opportunity for political youth groups to work closely with one other on the same agenda, which will have the added benefit of strengthening their ties and increase coordination amongst themselves.
- In order to reduce the level of cultural constraints in local communities, civil society organizations and media should design and implement public awareness programs to encourage community elders and tribes to support youth participation in decision making and political activities.
- Comprehensive national programs should be undertaken to understand the perspectives of provincial political youth activists and groups and the particular challenges and obstacles they are facing.
- Special focus should be on young people from rural areas and provinces under higher threat of insurgency. The government should introduce incentive schemes for university and job placement for youth from such places.
- The government should organize dialogues at both the provincial and national levels to raise awareness among young people and mobilize them to participate in political and civil activities. These dialogues also help young people gain a better understanding of each other.
- The government should institute campaigns and advocacy to review laws about political parties and give quota benefits for bringing youth to the parliament. Youth political groups can form a workforce and lobby in the government and the parliament.
- The government should develop an alliance of political youth groups with other political parties so that they might work closely with each other and act as an influential force in the political sphere.



## Contributing Organizations:

**Afghanistan Analysis and Awareness (A3)** was formed in 2009 by a group of young educated Afghans with the aim of providing recommendations and strategic direction to help policy makers, both Afghans and internationals, better formulate their strategy and intervention to ensure a stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

**Afghanistan 1400** declares itself as the national movement of Afghanistan's new generation. Established in 2012, it is a civic-political movement that tries to mobilize the younger generation of Afghanistan for the future political, social and economic leadership of Afghanistan.

**The New Line Organization (NLO)** is a social, non-political, non-profitable organization created in 2010 to respond current need for Afghan people in order to sustain, strengthen and promote civic engagement, drug prevention, advocacy, and public awareness, across Afghanistan. NLO maintains offices in Kabul, and almost 14 other provinces of Afghanistan, which will serve to support management and logistics efforts in those areas, as well as a supplementary support network through its partners from the Civil Society Organizations.

**Solidarity Network for Change (SNC)** was formed by a group of civil society activists, literary figures and young politicians in 2012. SNC envisions a stable and developed Afghanistan equipped with active domestic and foreign policies based on popular will and national interests of Afghanistan.

**Wadan Afghanistan Gond (WAG)** is rapidly growing moving toward becoming a political party. WAG concentrates on rural youth, mobilizing them for political

activism and influencing policies affecting their lives. WAG was established in 2012.

**Youth Activists Network for Reform and Change** is an umbrella of 45 civil society and youth organizations established in 2012. This Network encompasses 14 thousand youth membership from all over Afghanistan and has initiated over 164 programs including demonstration, press conferences, consultative meetings and national meetings and seminars.

**Afghanistan Green Youth National Collation**, mainly consisting of the youth activists, formed in 2014 as a centre for exchange of ideas, interaction and join advocacy. This centre strives to strengthen democratic values and lobby for significant role of youth in socio-political affairs.

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