Rural Community Voices the Key to Peacebuilding in Afghanistan? – A case study based on interviews –

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Abstract

It is quite common to tackle the reconstruction of collapsed states through the re-establishing of the state system and rule of law. Although it is undeniable to consider the state system in the context of peacebuilding, it should be also crucial to examine the life of the vast majority of nation’s people who live in rural areas. In other words, re-establishing rural life directly affects peacebuilding in the rural area. This article examines the life and local community structure of rural Afghanistan. Through the analysis, this article suggests the importance to reinterpret “peacebuilding” based on the perspective of rural life, not on the state-centric perspectives.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, Afghanistan, Reconstruction, and Local Community

Introduction

Afghanistan, a conflict affected South Asian Islamic Republic, witnessed longstanding violent conflicts since the 1970s. In 1919, Afghanistan became a sovereign country as a kingdom. Once the kingdom of Afghanistan enjoyed a calm and peaceful time, but with slow economic development. King Zahir Shar introduced a democratic political system (1963-1973), the first constitution (1964) and the first general election (1965). The turmoil of the country began with the coup d’état in 1973 and the result was the establishment of the Republic of Afghanistan. The first president of Afghanistan, Daud Khan, however, was not able to maintain his power. On the 28th of April, 1978, the so-called Saur Revolution, the pro-communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took over the political power from Daud Khan and assassinated him in the presidential palace on that day. Accordingly, the name of the country changed from the Republic of Afghanistan to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The new government
brought radical changes to rural life by land reform and so on. Consequently, it caused rural aversion and then armed uprising. The political and security situation created a cause for the Russian invasion in December 1979, which was marked as the beginning of the Afghan conflict. Since then, the country was in conflict. At the same time, it is possible to say that this is the beginning of the process that undermined and decomposed the state system of Afghanistan. Because of the prolonged conflict, the decomposing process continued until 2001.

After the 9/11 attack and subsequent intervention by US/NATO and allied forces, the situation in Afghanistan changed its nature. Before 2001, the conflict in Afghanistan was a "forgotten war" waged by local and domestic players, but after the collapse of the Taliban regime, massive international assistance flooded into the newly established Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for reconstruction. Although there are insurgencies in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is an internationally recognized sovereign state and the sole recipient of international assistance inside the border. The national and international efforts are made to restore the state system and the life of the people after the decades of conflict. While there is an effort to reconstruct the state system, vast majority of the nation (72%) live in rural areas and 5% of people maintain nomadic life (CSO 2012). In that sense, it would be crucial to re-establish the rural life for the majority of the nation and it automatically means that the peacebuilding in rural areas is directly related to peacebuilding in the country.

The international effort to reconstruct Afghanistan also created a surge of research interest on the country, but since the 1960s and 70s, there were several studies on rural Afghanistan. Dupree studied pre-war rural Afghanistan during the 1970s and his writings provide basis of rural research (Dupree 1973). After the breakout of conflict in Afghanistan, Kakar suggested that the rise of religious leaders (Mullahs) in rural areas as providers of channels to obtain weapons and resources, and the emergence of commanders as users of physical power (Kakar 1995 pp. 141-144)(1), while Mullahs did not have much power during pre-war Afghanistan (Huldt, Jansson eds. 1988, p.79). At the same time, the rise of warlords and commanders from the sons of rural traditional leaders was also depicted after 1979(2).

After 2001 witnessed the increase of research on rural Afghanistan. Wily investigated rural society focusing on the land tenure system and pointed out that due to conflicts, land tenure became one of the major issues in rural Afghanistan (Wily 2003). Wily also suggested that resolving the land rights issue in agricultural areas can contribute to the stability in rural regions (Wily 2004).
The influence and control of central government in rural areas is limited and the rule of law in those areas is not fully implemented (Wily 2003, Deschamps and Roe 2009). Deschamps claimed that the inability of the formal justice system to handle cases concerning the land tenure/rights and judgments outside the formal judicial system would undermine the formal legal system (Deschamps and Roe, p.1). In fact, it is reported that villagers are not relying on the government but using Taliban courts to solve their cases concerning land, inheritance and family disputes (Giustozzi, Franco and Baczko 2012).

From the perspective of political history, Afghanistan has a strong tribal society and delayed centralization of power (Poullada 1973). Grace also indicates that, as a reality in rural Afghanistan, villages are operated apart from the state system and rule of law (Grace 2005). Those arguments mentioning state-society relations would lead us to the insight of Migdal (Migdal 1988). Using the title of Migdal's book, Saikal called the inability or malfunctioning of the state and functioning community in Afghanistan as weak state and strong society (Saikal 2005). In that sense, it would be possible to say that Saikal developed the previous state-society analysis in the context of Afghanistan.

While there are several researches on rural Afghanistan, the majority of peacebuilding studies focus on reconstruction of the state system in order to recover from the failed state situation in the post-conflict period (Fukuyama 2004, 2006, Ghani and Lockhart 2008, Ponzio 2011). Some emphasise state building (Fukuyama 2004; Hyek & Morton 2012), others highlight the importance of rule of law (Tondini 2010; Mason 2011).

In this regard, it should be noted that those discourses are ‘state-centric’ and disregard the detailed research on the village level. It is, therefore, meaningful to review the peacebuilding process based on the reality of the micro-level, namely, the village and community level. This is why this article examines a case study of rural Afghanistan to highlight a possible approach for peacebuilding in rural areas.

For the purpose, this article will examine the life in rural Afghanistan and based on that, highlights the decent and humble needs of villagers, farmers and ex-combatants for life that directly indicates a way to establish peace from rural areas. It would also imply the gap between the reconstructions of the state system and the needs of the people in rural areas. This article, therefore, (1) touches upon a brief background of the targeted rural districts, and (2) examines the needs of the people in the rural areas and finally (3) highlights the community structure in rural Afghanistan.
Historical Background of the Targeted Districts; Kalakan and Mir Bacha Kot

The case study is based on the interviews in the northern districts of Kabul Province where different military powers waged decades of violent conflicts. The targeted districts, Kalakan and Mir Backa Kot, were some of the fiercest battlegrounds in the region (Map 1 and 2). Map 1 shows that the area experienced fierce battles because of the main road connecting Afghanistan with the former USSR where Afghan Mujahideen conducted attacks against Russian troops alongside the main road. As a result, landmines were planted and UXOs (Unexploded Explosive Ordnances) were left in the region (Map 2).

Map 1: Targeted Districts:
Kalakan and Mir Bacha Kot, and two Main Roads

Source: AIMS modified by the Author
A large number of the farmers living there once took their weapons to fight. After the emergence of the Taliban in the region, villagers in the northern parts of Kabul, including both Kalakan and Mir Bacha Kot, mainly the minority Tajik, were forced to move by the Taliban\(^3\).

The Shomali plain, the northern part of Kabul Province including Parwan Province, was once a large source of wheat and was called the “Breadbasket of Kabul”. In addition, the Shomali plain was a well-known grape producing area and until the 1970s, Afghanistan accounted for around 60% of the dried fruits in the global market\(^4\).

Most of villages in Kalakan and Mir Bacha Kot districts took the side of Rabani and Massoud, and during the Taliban era, the majority of their grape trees and Karez\(^5\) (underground water tunnel) were destroyed by the Taliban. Mosques and houses in the area were also set afire and burned down as well.
The impact of such harsh conflicts resulted in the migration of the villagers in the two districts. Figure 1 shows the places where villagers of the two districts spent their life during the conflicts. Based on the interviews conducted by the author, 45% of villagers escaped to other countries (Pakistan 39%, Iran 6%). Those who stayed inside the country (53%) went to other provinces. Out of the 53%, 37% went to the Northern Alliance controlled area or Tajik-majority area (Charikar (Parwan Province)28%, Panj Shir Province 9%, and Kabul Province 10%)(6). 

![Figure 1: Impact of Conflicts: Places lived outside Kalakan and Mir Bacha Kot during conflicts](image)

Source: Interviews by the Author (December 2004)

Based on the interviews, the villagers responded that almost 90% of residents returned to their villages after 2001. It was, however, not easy for them to re-start their life in the villages because of the destruction of houses, Karez, grape gardens and farm lands. In addition, most of the villagers in their 30s and 40s lost the opportunity for education during the conflicts. The majority of the age group of 30s and 40s are illiterate and among the age group, a large number of males joined the battle and have now returned to the community without productive skills except farming. Thus, job opportunities for those ex-combatants are quite limited. For instance, those ex-combatants only can work as day labor.
This historical background of the two districts would make sense to focus on the area to consider a peacebuilding from the perspective of rural areas.

**Life of Villagers and Needs of People in Rural Areas**

During wartime, a large number of male members of Kalakan and Mir Bacha Kot districts took their weapons and joined the conflicts. At the time of joining the conflicts, a consideration was paid to each family to have male members in each family take care of the household and farmland. At least one male member was left for each family and other males were attending the conflicts in the mountains or battlefields. After 2001, those ex-combatants returned to their villages and re-started their lives as farmers or day laborers in and around Kabul.

Most of the villagers own farmland or grape gardens and produce grapes, wheat, and vegetables. Figure 2 indicates the agricultural calendar in the northern part of Kabul Province.

The off-season in the winter period, namely, December, January and February, farmers call “short blanket (in the 12 months, they can work only 9 months)”. If the harvest cannot provide enough income for the household, then farmers usually go to day labor in Kabul or the nearest large cities in the next province (Parwan Province).
Interviews conducted by the author suggest that (1) the economic situation (unemployment during winter, owing land or not), (2) water (available water for farmland), and (3) electricity (for household) are the biggest difficulties in the rural areas.

As for (1) the economic situation, farming in Kalakan and Mir Bacha Kot district allows villagers only 9 months work and for the other 3 months, they have to wait the arrival of spring without doing anything. This is a huge economic loss for the villagers.

On (2) water, in Afghanistan, Iran and other central Asian countries, water means farmland. If there is no water, then there is no farmland, which means that the land can be farmland or dessert. It's solely depending on the water availability. It is, therefore, obvious that the water availability is crucially important for farmers in the region.

Finally, regarding (3) electricity, before 2001, the grid line of electricity was totally unavailable, but after 2001, a gradual expansion of the grid line can be seen as a visible peace dividend. Even in rural communities, people hope to have electricity for their life and for their children. The power supply can be used for lights, TV, mobile phones and so on.

Those three above indicate that the wishes of rural villages are focusing on their life, not something related to the government or security. In this connection, it should be noted that the first priority for the villagers is not security, governance or corruption, but normal life and its improvement. The results of interviews highlight a gap between the needs of local people and the focus of international assistance. Quite often, international communities, donor agencies or UN agencies try to re-establish the state system in the post conflict situation, but as the results above showed, people on the ground do not consider their government or the way of governance. A huge amount of foreign assistance is pouring into the governance, security and reconstruction of the state system as peacebuilding efforts, but the focus does not match the needs of the villagers.

It seems that this discrepancy is creating frustration among the majority of the nation, namely, farmers and rural villagers. It would understandable that farmers and villagers think they do not benefit from the massive inflow of money donated by foreign countries. This is because farmers and rural residents are still struggling with their daily life while the capital is developing and expanding with foreign assistance.

In that sense, the discrepancy indicates a gap between international peacebuilding efforts and local efforts for life. In other words, we need to re-think the approach for peacebuilding in the context of local perspective. It would be essential for foreign assistance or official development assistance to reflect and respond to the needs of the majority of the nation.
Local Community Structure and Its Relation with Governments

The villagers organize community structure to govern themselves. Afghanistan has 34 provinces and 364 districts. Under the central government, there are Provincial governments and District governments. The smallest official administration unit is the district, and one district consists of several villages and communities. Each village and community have its own governing body. In the case of the northern districts of Kabul Province, the governing body is called ‘Shura’. Shura is not an official administrative institution, but an indigenous community structure.

There are two levels of Shura, that is, Village level Syura (Shura-e Qariya: Council of Village) and District level Shura (Shura-e Mardomi Ursowali: Council of the people of District). Usually a village is formed in a walking distance from a mosque, and a village has a Shura-e Qaliya (Figure 3). Outside of formal and official administrative organizations, villagers operate their area through Shura-e Qariya. People select the members of the Shura (Kalan/Bozorgan: Elders) by discussion and the qualifications for a member are not based on financial status or family lines but on the character, wisdom, and literacy. Then, those members of the Shura select a Malik (Representative). A malik does not have any given years of term, but if villagers file complains to the Shura, then the Shura will have another discussion to evaluate the malik. The same procedures can be applied to the members of Shura. The Shura is held at a mosque having the attendance of a mullah and, contrary to the author’s expectation, the mullah functions only as an religious advisor for the Shura.

Figure 3: Village level governing body: Shura-e Qariya

Source: Interviews by the Author
The Shura handles decision making such as supporting very poor villagers/widows, dealing with issues of water allocation and farmland demarcation, requesting infrastructure for the village (bridge, road, school and hospital, electricity) from the national and provincial governments and so on.

Above the Shura-e Qariya, there is a Shura-e Mardomi Ursowali, which is comprised of maliks representing each village (Figure 4). Maliks select a Raise (Leader of District). Although the Constitution of Afghanistan prescribes the establishment of a District Council, currently there is no district council in reality. Instead, Shura-e Mardomi Ursowali substitutes for the function.

In addition, the Governor of a district is dispatched from the central government, which means that the Governor does not know the detailed matters in his/her assigned district. Therefore, the Governor usually follows and approves the suggestions and decisions made by Shura-e Mardomi Ursowali. In that sense, the Governor is depending on the knowledge and leadership of the Raise and Shura (Figure 5).

As described above, the Shura has enough knowledge of the area and plays an important role in rural Afghanistan. The Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) acknowledged rural farmers and ex-combatants as the ‘backbone of Afghanistan’ and mentioned that ‘it is important to include the Shura which functioned during and after the conflict in the process of implementing government policy in the rural areas’.

Figure 4: District level governing body:

Shura-e Mardomi Ursowali

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What is indicated here is the importance of the Shura for peacebuilding and reconstruction in rural areas. It is widely reported concerning the high prevalence of corruption of Afghanistan (Transparency International 2012), but the Shura is functioning better than the central government in rural areas. The Shura both in the village as well as in the district level can gather the voices of the villagers and reflect their wishes into the policy in the district. The Shura is also supported by the residents because of the fairness and transparent process of selection of its members.

Although the Shura cannot directly solve the economic difficulties of the villagers, it can facilitate a better environment for their village and district through the interaction with the District Governor. In this regard, it would be possible to say that the Shura can be seen as a funnel to convey the wishes of the village/district to the state system. On top of that, it is observed that the Shura members have the mobile phone numbers of the Member of Parliament selected from the region (8). If the Shura wants to get something, they directly call the politicians and solicit their support.

Figure 5: Shura-e Mardomi Ursowali and Government

Source: Interviews by the Author
Conclusion

Peacebuilding in rural Afghanistan was a reconstruction of life for the villagers. Daily decisions and issues were handled by Shura. After seeing decades of war, they are now trying to make a peaceful life through the Shura and it is mainly done outside the central, provincial and district governments. The communities are using government organizations through the Shura.

The interviews were conducted between 2003 and 2013. The results showed that all what people want are to make a better living, and it suggested that there is a gap between those needs at the local level and international peacebuilding efforts at the national level.

Peacebuilding at the national level can be translated into state system reconstruction and re-establishment of state governance but peacebuilding at the local level can be broken down into the reconstruction of daily life. In ordinary life in rural areas, the central issues are related to their life, such as the economic situation, water and electricity, not the state system.

International assistance tends to focus on the reconstruction of the state system as an approach for peacebuilding for the post-conflict countries or collapsed states, but what is suggested here is that we need to change our mindset for the notion of peacebuilding. The abstract word, peacebuilding, should be decomposed and translated based on the real aspects of farmers and villagers in Afghanistan.

Giustozzi stated that there is a gap of perception between the people of Afghanistan and outsiders. For the nation, government with corruption or malfunction is better than that with killers (Giustozzi 2012). This remark and the case study in rural Afghanistan urge us to look into the perceptions of people on the ground in detail, not to rely on our textbook knowledge of peacebuilding or post-conflict reconstruction. The voices of the rural community, which is not well heard by the international actors, tell us a key toward enduring peace in the conflict affected country.

Endnotes

(1) Most of Taliban leadership use the title of Mullah, which indicate the rise of value of Mullah.

(2) Koofi (2011) described the fall of her own family after 1979 and described how her brother became a commander during the conflict period.
(3) Since 1990s, forced migration was reported by Human Rights Watch or UN. UNOCHA 1999.


(5) The numbers of Karez in Kalakan district, for instance, were 108 before the conflicts, but in 2003, only 3 Karez were remained (interviews by the author).

(6) During the conflicts (against Russia and internal conflicts), those who went to Pakistan or Iran can be seen as somehow economically better because the transportation cost from their village to other counties was essential. In other words, the villagers who stayed in the countries can be seen as relatively poor (interviews by the author).

(7) Interview with the Minister by the author (July, 2012).

(8) Interviews by the author. Many former commanders became politicians after 2001. The members of Parliament from Kalakan and Mir Bacha Kot districts are also former commanders in the region.

References

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