

# **Unveiling Potential: Afghan Youth as Architects of Peace and Reconciliation**

by Paris Wilkerson, APL Student Volunteer

On May 30th, 2024, the Afghanistan Policy Lab (APL) hosted a virtual panel discussion titled *Unveiling Potential: Afghan Youth as Architects of Peace and Reconciliation*. The event convened four expert panelists to explore the pivotal role that Afghan youth play in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan. The panel was moderated by Nazeela Elmi, a current APL fellow known for her expertise in political science, gender, human rights, and international relations. She was also one of the ten Rapporteurs who drafted the outcome document of the 12th UNESCO Youth Forum, which emphasized the importance of youth engagement in social and political spheres.

Despite being a crucial aspect of Afghanistan's state-building process, the history of peacebuilding and reconciliation has often been overlooked. With approximately 64% of the Afghan population being under 25 years old, young people make up two-thirds of the country's populace. However, they have been largely excluded from meaningful discussions about Afghanistan's future. Though the engagement of young people in the country's peacebuilding process has been significantly challenged by the current Taliban regime, the event's panelists underscored how the country's youth are a critical force that must be reckoned with.

Graeme Simpson, the Director of Interpeace USA and adjunct professor at Columbia Law School, began by contextualizing the movement to include young people in peace-building processes around the world. As the lead author of a Youth, Peace and Security Progress Study under UN Security Council Resolution 2250, Simpson explained how this resolution emerged through the mobilization of global youth. He emphasized the importance of applying the resolution's recommendations in a localized manner to prevent the further marginalization of young people. By tailoring these recommendations to specific contexts, the unique needs and contributions of youth can be effectively integrated into peace-building efforts worldwide.

Simpson also cautioned against applying gendered stereotypes to youth living in conflict zones, including viewing young men as dangerous, young women as passive, and treating young people as ‘problems to be solved.’ Rather, Mr. Simpson argued that we should all be considering, **“How can we translate this demographic dividend into a peace dividend?”**

Lastly, Simpson discussed how through his work on UN Resolution 2250, he heard young people consistently talk about the harm of the violence of exclusion. This includes political, economic, and educational exclusion, which is particularly salient regarding young women in Afghanistan who have been explicitly excluded from the country’s education system and human rights infrastructure. He ended by emphasizing that **“until we deal with the violence of exclusion, we will never prevent the violence of extremism.”**

Panelist Mr. Niamatullah Ibrahim, a Senior Lecturer at La Trobe University whose research focuses on political violence, peacebuilding, and human rights, contrasted the inclusion of young people in Afghanistan’s peacebuilding processes both before and after the fall of the Republic in 2021.

He discussed how from 2001 to 2021, there was an unprecedented expansion in social and political opportunities for young people in Afghanistan, particularly through educational mobility via access to schools. This period fostered an environment where the voices of young Afghans were valued and given importance, allowing Afghan youth to become more actively involved in shaping their country's future, particularly in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes.

By 2014, there was an upsurge of youth activism in the country, illustrated by the protest in Kabul against the killing of Farkhunda Malikzada and the Enlightenment Protest Movement. Mr. Ibrahim accredited the strength of the youth protest movement between 2014 and 2021 to both the expansion of educational opportunities for youth and the growing disparity between young people’s expectations of the government and the actual performance of the government. This disconnect fueled a powerful wave of youth activists demanding more accountability and better governance from their leaders.

Mr. Ibrahimi cautioned that since the fall of the Republic in 2021, the Taliban began a systematic campaign to “reform” young people in a top-down, ideological manner where dissident is suppressed. This is particularly evident in the silencing of activists who criticize the systemic gender apartheid and the exclusion of ethnic minority groups from Afghanistan’s social and political spheres.

The third panelist of the event, Summia Tora, founder of the Dosti Network and the first Afghan Rhodes Scholar, shared insights on how her research has shaped her perspective on the current state of Afghanistan’s peacebuilding efforts. From 2018 to 2020, Ms. Tora studied how Afghans from a diverse set of economic and ethnic backgrounds view the nation’s peacebuilding efforts. She discovered a significant disparity in the political discourse of the mainstream media and political establishment and the viewpoints of everyday Afghans. Her research revealed that a considerable number of everyday Afghans harbored deep mistrust towards the peace process, with over 70% of respondents in a survey conducted by the Asia Foundation expressing dissatisfaction with their representation in the country’s peace negotiations.

Ms. Tora emphasized how the disconnect between the political establishment’s peace-building negotiations and the life experienced by everyday Afghans has given rise to mistrust of everyday Afghans towards the country’s political elite. Ms. Tora also discussed how the trauma of the fall of Afghanistan engendered further levels of distrust between the Afghan people and the government, particularly among women, girls, and ethnic minorities, and many young people feel a sense of political and social disillusionment. **“Many feel that their voices were ignored, and their futures bargained away without their consent.”**

Ms. Tora ended by emphasizing that for there to be a conversation about peace and reconciliation under the current regime, the process must engage with a diverse range of voices, particularly the youth, to foster a more sustainable and just peace.

Closing remarks were made by Barakat Rahmati, a former diplomat and current nonresident fellow at APL. He ended by emphasizing APL’s commitment to this work, and he gave a brief preview of the work to come stating the ***“panel has vividly painted the complex tapestry of challenges and***

*opportunities in Afghanistan. It's clear that while the current absence of open conflict might give the illusion of peace, what Afghanistan needs is the establishment of positive peace—a state where justice, human dignity, and the voices of all citizens are not just heard but are integral to the governance.”*

[Click here for access to a full video of the event.](#)