

**RESEARCH PAPER****The Forgotten Peace Marches of Afghanistan: Local Sentiment and International Power-Game****<sup>1</sup>Bakht Noor Nasar, <sup>2</sup>Saira Bano and <sup>3</sup>Atique Gulbahar**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article brings to surface peace marches held in Afghanistan briefly before the Afghan government's collapse, to demonstrate that grass-root level political atmosphere cannot hold ground against the geo-strategic designs of global power. For this purpose, it traces the origin and spread of peace marches in Afghanistan, and the varied responses toward them. The approach taken is exploratory with peace marches as unit of analysis. The data sources are secondary, available on internet. The paper argues that public opinion alone cannot change the political landscape, particularly in a militarized terrain contested by great powers. Although there was a widespread quest for peace in Afghanistan, it lacked a robust and vocal civil society which could change the course of history for the Afghan people. In doing so, this article also documents Afghanistan's seemingly insignificant marches for peace.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Taliban, Peace, March, Pashtun, War, Society**Introduction**

Afghanistan witnessed rare occasions of political and social activism after the republic system had gained some ground post 9/11. The accumulative effect of democratic system, donor development interventions, new freedoms in political and economic sphere had encouraged people to adopt democratic means for their demands. This change in Afghan political landscape, in great part, also owed to the growing use of social media among the youth. As a result of these developments there were several social and civil movements across Afghanistan, though varying in level and scope. In areas where the contest between Afghan military forces and Taliban was intense, there were growing voices for peace. Limited in participation and impact, they nevertheless reflected the changing behavior among the masses who were tired with the never-ending-war. This article takes a stock of such movements, particularly the Helmand Peace March held in 2018. Helmand remains a stronghold of Taliban, thus has seen more violence than any other province in Afghanistan. In addition to Helmand Peace March, it maps the organic, small-scale civil movements in the years before the Taliban takeover in 2021.

The purpose of looking back at those years is to make point that contrary to what is believed in Western societies, public opinion is not determinant of policies and actual outcomes in developing societies. Through the brief narration of peace movements across Afghanistan, the article neatly establishes that people of Afghanistan did not want war or Taliban take over but a democratic society. But their wishes had little influence in the larger picture. Perhaps, one may argue, these movements were too nascent to exert influence on global powers and prepare a solid ground for more such movements in future. The argument does have some justice; but it would be naïve not to believe that if given due attention, these calls for peace could garner wider support hence more strength.

## Literature Review

The peace marches in Afghanistan have not been analysed and theorized in purely academic sense. Since the marches were held from 2018 onwards, one reason for the lack of academic work can be attributed to its relative 'newness'. Importantly, the period immediately following the peace marches was tumultuous to say the least. Academicians and research scholars had little to worry about the academe and more about their survival. Most of the research on Afghanistan in recent years came from the faculty and research scholars of American University of Afghanistan (AUAF). AUAF staff fled after the fall of Kabul.

The available secondary sources on these peace marches thus are newspaper reports. However, some institutions such as United States Institute for Peace (Stephan, 2018) and Afghanistan Analyst Network (Sabawoon, 2018) do have long-form papers/essays on these peace marches. In addition to that, Insan Foundation Afghanistan has also done extensive articles, but they are in Pashto. This paper has relied on these long articles (not academic per se) for insight on the peace marches. While the main source have been Afghanistan's leading English and Pashto dailies, namely, TOLO News (Moby Group), Pajhwok, BBC Pashto, VOA Deeva, Mashaal Radio, and others.

All the sources consulted for this paper share a journalistic theme. That is, these sources only provide information on who are the organizers and what are their motives. With the exception of AAN, none of them shed light on the socio-political context of the marchers or its implication for the wider political landscape of the country (Rutting & Sabawoon, 2018). Since, this study was conducted after the collapse of the Afghan Republic, on the account of its failure to avoid a state collapse, this article identifies limitations of a civil society movement in a country with a brief democratic experience.

## Methodology

This article approaches the peace marches as events, which were an effect of the decades long violence and conflict. Its unit of analysis is peace marches, which it explores as manifestation of a growing civil society in the decades after 9/11. The methodology adopted is causal inference. The paper builds on the premise that Afghan society indeed transformed in the brief period after 9/11. However, it did not fundamentally change the Afghan society to the level where it could give rise to organized political parties, which eventually could channel the political objectives of the masses. As the peace marches' fate determined that the local people's sentiment, notwithstanding matter their genuineness, couldn't yield significant results.

## Peace Marches

On June 18, 2018, a peace convoy of around 100 Afghan citizens reached Kabul after 700 miles long march on foot from Southern Helmand province. The participants included students, farmers, and athletes. The march had a humble start when seven individuals had set off towards Kabul in the second week of May. On reaching Kabul, the activists staged a sit-in in front of UN camp office (Ghubar, 2018). They were asking UN mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to take decisive actions for peace in Afghanistan (Amiri, 2018). and attempting to form a Jirga to mediate for peace between Taliban and the Afghan Government (Pajhwok Afghan News, 2018). They vowed to hold such sit-ins in front of embassies of US, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, the countries they think have hand in the conflict of Afghanistan. The peace march and the sit-in had the reasons to be seen as a peoples' movement despite the modest numbers of participants cited above. At least, a depiction of common sentiment among the people for peace. The march had been the next phase of a public outrage that started as a protest camp from the site of bomb explosion in Helmand. The deadly car bombing near a stadium hosting traditional Afghan wrestling game in March 2018 had killed

at least 14 and wounded dozens (Aljazeera, 2018). This proved to be the saturation point for the people of Helmand.

Helmand is one of the deadliest affected areas of Afghanistan, more particularly during the fight ensuing from toppling over of Taliban regime in 2001. According to UNAMA report, Helmand had the highest casualties in 2017 (UNAMA Report, 2017). Once famous for its green fields, it's now notorious for bad law and order situation. There has been continuous retake and loss of control over different districts of the province. There were parts of Helmand which had continuously been in Taliban control despite intense operations by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Afghan troops. After the fall of Taliban regime, Helmand was handed over to British troops for controlling the law and order. British forces faced heavy casualties and hard battles against Taliban (Beale, 2016). The demonstrators who erected protest camps called themselves the "People's Peace Movement" (Da Soly Olasi Harakat) and included tribal elders, civil society activists and relatives of victims killed in violence and had the support of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC), Afghan Ulema Council and political leaders. They demanded peace and ceasefire from both warring sides — Taliban and the Government. The youth had tied white banners around their heads on which "Enough of War, We Want Peace" was written in Pashto (*Jang bas dy, solah ghwaro*). In a rare move for the Taliban stronghold province, women joined the sit-in on March 27. Women participation (largely belonging to victim families, majority being widows) was seen as unprecedented and surprising in the context of traditional Pashtun culture where women are rarely allowed outside homes. The women pitched a separate tent beside the already erected protest tent and with the passage of time more women joined the gathering (Gul, 2018). The significance of this move can better be understood in the context of honor and respect that women enjoy in Afghan society. In this tribal setting, when women beg for ceasefire in conflicts, it is rarely turned down.

The initial antiwar sit-in turned into a hunger strike when Taliban turned down the plea for peace maintaining that the protesters needed to pursue the Government and not them for peace. Even still, Taliban warned them from approaching Taliban-controlled territory of Musa Qala. They advised protesters to conduct their protest at a nearby Afghan and NATO military base (Afghan Herald, 2018). The phenomenon of protest camp erection started being replicated in other parts of the country. Among those who came forward to show support for Helmand sit-in were the locals from Bamyan province, which is essentially a non-Pashtoon region (The Frontier Post, 2018). The grass-roots movement that had begun with a single tent in Lashkargah soon spread to Gereshk and Nawa districts of Helmand Province. Residents of Kandahar, Zabul, Uruzgan, Farah, Khost, Bamiyan, Balkh and Nangarhar provinces too set up tents in support of the population of Helmand and its call for peace (TOLO News, 2018). The people of Herat province proclaimed their support for the cause by erecting of great tent in front of Herat governorate. The public demand for peace thus gathered support from different corners of the country, blurring strong ethnic lines.

As cited above, the peace march began from Lashkargah during second week of March. It was warmly welcomed by locals along their way. The marchers stayed at different population centers, addressed the public and conveyed the message of peace (Achakzai, 2018). Meanwhile, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in his series of calls to Taliban for talks, took a bold step of announcing ceasefire with Taliban, it startled his Western counterparts as well as countrymen (Shalizai, 2018). It was the first time in the 40 years long war of Afghanistan. Prior to the ceasefire, Afghan government had undertaken an ambitious process to strengthen the peace prospects and building environment for talks with Taliban, it was termed as "Kabul Process" (Sen, 2017). Its first meeting was held in June 2017, attended by large number of regional and global players of international politics as well as international organizations. The first meeting called for an inter-Afghan dialogue, owned and led by Afghans. It followed by second Kabul Process meeting in which Afghan President made a generous offer of, accepting Taliban as legitimate political movement, political office,

exemption from trial among others, to make Taliban agreed upon on the Constitution and pursuing political objectives through election (Shalizai, 2017). The offer was welcomed across the board in the country as well as at regional and global (EEAS, 2018). However, Taliban rejected the offer and pledged to talk only to those “who are the real players”, the US.

Taliban’s repeated rejection however didn’t deter Ashraf Ghani to keep up with optimism and encouraging people for mounting pressure upon Taliban. On reaching Kabul, President Ashraf Ghani went to greet the marchers. He addressed and congratulated them for “initiating a noble cause” (Outlook Afghanistan, 2018). The President extended ceasefire and said that he was ready to talk to Taliban and requested them to extend ceasefire as well. Taliban turned down the request (Barker & Yousafzai, 2018).

### **Public Response to the Marchers**

General public and the well-wishers of Afghanistan started looking at this phenomenon as a ray of hope in war-torn country where bloody standoff between the government and Taliban continued the devastation in the presence of foreign troops, which were practically adding more complexities to the conflict (Ashraf, 2017). Men and women sitting in protest camps, going on hunger strike, and marching on long distances manifest that people were losing hope in those who controlled the affairs as parts of the government, the insurgents and the foreign players in Afghanistan. Sustaining war for over four decades seemed to have finally united the people and had brought them to a stage where they had resolved to take their fate in their own hands.

A mass movement of this volume was sure to make waves and gather responses. Taliban construed such protests to have been sponsored by the government (Khama Press, 2018). There were, however, indications that segments within Taliban sought to use these developments in their favor and against their adversary groups within the Taliban movement (Zahidi, 2018). One meeting of the public’s representatives with a group of Taliban had apparently happened and local Taliban groups in Helmand reportedly supported the call for peace (VOA Extremist Watch, 2018). Official Taliban response, however, did not seem to share the sentiment. Taliban spokesman Qari Muhammad Yousuf Ahmadi maintained in a statement on a Taliban website that protesters against the Taliban were being exploited by U.S. forces (Ullah, 2014). Adding that anyone participating in these activities is helping “the enemy”. Right after that statement, peace activists were targeted in Logar (Express Tribune, 2018).<sup>j</sup> For Taliban, the public pressure seemed to have been of serious nature. However, the Kunduz bombing that killed over a hundred civilians including children (Nordland, 2018), had turned the public opinion in favor of Taliban stance as it bolstered their argument that external forces, not Taliban, were the cause of violence and perpetual conflict in the country. The attack was condemned across the board and Afghan people outrageously denounced the Kabul government on failing to secure civilian lives (TOLo News, 2016).

The original sentiment in the movement, however, seemed to resurge and prevail. Southern Afghanistan that has generally remained a stronghold for Taliban for the first time saw a public voice against them. A protest in a province where Taliban controlled more than half of the territory was indeed remarkable. In fact, the never-ending war had inflicted too much pain to the masses that they are out for peace at any cost. This protest raised questions about the legitimacy and reality of war being fought in the name of the people of Afghanistan.

The peace offer made by Afghan President to Taliban was also another factor that was making an opinion among the masses against Taliban. On several occasions President Ashraf Ghani called upon the public to put pressure on Taliban to join the peace process. For this purpose, he has used the influence of ‘ulema and Masjid’ likewise. It appears that the President has figured out that the only way to vanish Afghans’ support of Taliban is to

delegitimize them among masses. Sensing the initial vibes where Taliban response to the demonstrators had created a negative feeling about them and in the backdrop of President Ashraf Ghani's unconditional offer for talks to Taliban, the government started supporting the movement. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani tweeted, "I welcome the campaign in Helmand and other provinces where women, elders and youth have gathered to seek peace and raise their voices in unison against war and violence. And I hope this peaceful national movement will be strengthened and supported by the people in large numbers," he said (Ghani, 2018).

On local levels there were developments that brought optimism for peace-lovers. In the second week of April, Kandahar's provincial Police Chief told claimed that over 30 first and second tier Taliban leaders have abandoned militancy. This had been possible because of the interventions of tribal elders and 'ulema, who still enjoy considerable influence in society. There were signs of a people uprising against Taliban. The argument could be bolstered by the tribal meetings held in Paktia, Khost and Nuristan, wherein the tribal elders called upon Taliban to abandon militancy and embrace peaceful ways to settle political scores (Ikram, 2018). Peoples' movement, however, remained firm on its front and started protesting in front of US embassy. Being a novel phenomenon in Afghanistan, there were many speculations on the nature and aims of these camps. Many suspected, at least during initial days of this movement, that it was just another form of civil society campaign that would die down when the media attention is lost. Taliban and their sympathizers would see it a move solicited by their adversaries. Undeterred, the peace activists called upon Taliban to extend ceasefire, which was slammed by Taliban in a letter, calling them part of US conspiracy to belittle Mujahedeen struggle and delegitimize it in the eyes of public (Khama Press, 2018).

Though the protest and the march generally retained the impression of being apolitical and neutral but the young man Iqbal Khyber who portrays himself as a leader—though sometimes against the wishes of the people, was the provincial leader of Wadaan Afghanistan Party. The party's head, Abdul Ghafoor Liwal, then part of National Unity Government, is a communist ideologue and writer cum politician. Liwal and his comrades are considered heretic liberals by the Taliban, who want to change the Afghan society on Western models. Nevertheless, US, NATO and UNAMA welcomed and praised the march (Emmott, 2018). Gen. John Nicholson had mentioned the march on more than one occasions, putting much hope for the success of the campaign (Japan Times, 2018). There are doubts that the whole campaign might have been an attempt to generate an alternate political leadership.

Another manifestation of the people's longing for peace was visible in the form of grooming network of civil society activists in major population centers working for a more peaceful society (Matthew, 2016). Such initiatives however were still to gain confidence of common Afghan and remain limited in their scope and appeal. New political parties, headed by people who recently came to prominence and have not been known for militancy, were emerging. The Helmand Peace March was seen as a naïve political activity of the people uprooted by war. After the ceasefire in during the Eid days, hope for peace groomed even more. Taliban and public shared selfies hugged each other, and people could see strange sights of Afghan military personnel and Taliban fighters together (Constable, 2018). Soon after the peace March reached Kabul, another peace march of Afghan refugees from Peshawar started its journey towards Kabul in support of Helmand peace activists. A peace March from northern Kunar province also started. Their journey started on June 26, 2018. The Kunar convoy was accompanied by dozens of youths and civil society activists (TOLo News, 2018). The truth in Afghan conflict remains that both sides, the government and Taliban share the blame for the perpetual conflict. Afghan society on the other hand was hands up to the violence and chanting "war is enough". The phenomenon may have served the purposes of certain sides or factions, but it manifests indigenous and self-driven public sentiment for peace. The success of these peace-seekers depended upon their ability to

mobilize more people, gather support from different classes of the society and keep their initiative non-political.

### **Conclusion**

The peace march originating from southern Helmand province was resonated by civil society groups from areas farther east, Kunar and Jalalabad provinces. It ascertains that the longing for peace in Afghanistan was uniform across different sections of Afghan society. More so, in a country where every political development is seen through ethnic lens; these marches originated mainly in Pashtun areas, were able to acquire support from other Afghan ethnic groups. The fact that these marches are forgotten today, speaks more of a society that does not have strong voice that can have global epoch. Moreover, it establishes that the normative credentials of public opinion carry substantial influence only in 'Western societies' or in countries with relatively long history of democracy. In societies like Afghanistan, strategic games of the great powers, more than the public sentiments, decide what has to happen in the days to come.

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