Abdullah Ahmadi: "They seek their human rights, as humans and citizens"
Abdullah Ahmadi is a human rights activist. He is the Program Director of the Cooperation Centre for Afghanistan, a human rights and conflict resolution organization where he has worked for the past 10 years. He is also a member of the leadership board of the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium, the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR), and the Civil Society and Human Rights Network, as well as a member of the Afghanistan Transitional Justice Coordination Group.

Photo : Rooholamin Amini / Matthieu Hackière
What are some important achievements in Afghanistan since the time of the Taliban?

Women are participating in political and social activities, as well as in national decision-making process. This is a great achievement. If we compare this to the time of the Taliban era, women were not allowed to go to school and university, and were banned from working outside the home. Schools and universities are open to them now. Women hold important positions in government. They are members of parliament and have equal rights to men under the law.

Other achievements include the vast expansion of the media. There was only one radio station operating under the Taliban. Now, there are more than 180 radio stations, 75 TV channels, and around 800 print and other publications. A free media is essential for the promotion of human rights, and the values of democracy and the rule of law. Another achievement is the ratification of the Constitution and other laws, such as the Law for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, as well as Afghanistan's accession to international human rights conventions, such as the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

What gives you hope for the future?

One promising factor is the emergence of civil institutions, which have played a major role in institutionalizing democracy and human rights. Civil society has never remained silent in the face of injustice and oppression, and has independently defended the rights of citizens vis-à-vis the government. The existence of a committed and dynamic civil society gives us reason to be optimistic about the future of human rights in our country.

What do you fear most today?

I, and others like me, am extremely worried about the lack of certainty in our future. I am worried that our politicians might trade in all of our achievements of the past decade for the sake of their own personal interests. A return to the dark past, where human rights have no place, is horrifying.

What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?

The major structural challenge in the field of human rights is the lack of an official mechanism to investigate the vast majority of cases of human rights violations. There are a large number of cases of violations arising every day, but only a few of them can be investigated. For example, the Law for the Elimination of Violence against Women was passed, but there is no competent court with the power to investigate domestic violence offences.

Human rights have a direct relationship with all the rights of individuals. If human rights are ensured, social rights will automatically ensue. However, if we specifically discuss the social challenge facing the human rights agenda in Afghanistan, domestic violence stands out. Many social problems and disorders in Afghanistan have roots in domestic violence.

Another major social challenge is the poverty that prevails in this country. Too many people are deprived of their basic rights, including food, clothing and housing. Poverty is one of our greatest social challenges, yet it has received little attention. There are also many cultural challenges to human rights. The persistent rule of tradition and customs poses a challenge to the fulfilment of human rights. Unfortunately, some of the customs and traditions which endure are inappropriate, outdated, and incompatible with human rights.
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Would today’s Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and exclusion of women from society?

The people of Afghanistan will never forget the bitter experiences of the dark era of the Taliban. They do not wish to return to and repeat them. The scars of those dark days weigh on the psyche of this nation. No informed citizen could be interested to return to those medieval times. The people will never allow their statesmen to make deals on their destiny and push the country back to the past.

Which factors deter women's participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?

The deterrent factors originate, in most cases, in the cultural and traditional restrictions, which prevent women from working outside the home, holding governmental positions, and playing an adequate role in political matters. Another major issue is the low level of literacy, in particular among women, which reduces their chances of competing with men. Furthermore, the continued prevalence of patriarchal beliefs results in preference going to men over women in respect of most jobs. The marginalisation of women in the national leadership, management, and decision-making is another serious obstacle.

What are the major demands of women in Afghanistan?

Women are not asking for much. Their demands are legitimate and humane. As a first step, they seek their human rights, as humans and citizens, that is, equal rights and privileges just like other humans. Women are interested in and seek to take part in political, social, economic, and cultural issues. They wish to participate as productive citizens, alongside their fellow male citizens, in the development of their country. That is in the public interest.

"Unveiling Afghanistan, the Unheard Voices of Progress" is a campaign by Armanshahr/OPEN ASIA and FIDH, which explores views held by Afghan civil society actors. Over 50 days, 50 influential social, political, and cultural actors hope to spark conversation and debate about building a society that is inclusive of women's and human rights in Afghanistan.

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