

# Afghanistan's struggling civil society

Thursday 19 August 2010, by [SABA Bella](#) (Date first published: 2 May 2010).

**There are 108 parties registered with Ministry of Justice but none of these parties has any impact on political process**

First things first. Democracy did not reach Afghanistan on board B52s dispatched by George Bush in October 2001. Current amnesia notwithstanding, Afghanistan held 13 nationwide elections before 1973, when Zahir Shah, the last monarch, was overthrown. The parliamentary contests of 1948, 1965 and 1969 have been relatively free and fair. Communists, liberals as well as Islamists -three traditional camps in Afghan politics- contested these elections and went to parliament.

Following Saur "revolution" (Maoists insist it was a coup d'état) in 1978, a civil war broke out and has continued since. In 1987, when Dr Najib became president, he encouraged multi-party system. In April 1988, general elections were held. The ruling PDPA (bagging 27 % of votes) lost the election to National Front (28 % votes). The Peasants Justice Party, Islamic Party, Workers Revolutionary Party got the rest. Though these elections were not taken seriously and failed to bring legitimacy to the government.

Like left parties, the trade unions registered their presence in late 1960s but other elements of civil society: professional bodies, literary and art circles, student unions, sports clubs and women associations, had surfaced in 1950s (though limited to major cities of Kabul, Herat and Jalalabad and Lashkargah). Democratic spaces were limited but definitely available. Civil society was weak but gaining strength.

The Saur revolution spearheaded by Afghan communists organised in PDPA in 1978, paradoxically, proved both a setback and blessing for the civil society. The PDPA introduced radical reforms and granted an unheard of, before and since, freedom to women. But a reign of terror was also unleashed thus curbing their political opposition including Maoists organised in Afghanistan Liberation Organization (ALO).

However, it was the US intervention in Afghanistan that played havoc with Afghan civil society. To give Soviet Russia its Vietnam, Washington patronised Mujahideen who brutalised Afghan civil society. When in 1992, Mujahideen came to power, civil society nosedived. Taliban rule (1997-2001) almost stifled it.

## Thriving Media

In the post-Taliban era, the civil society has registry a half-hearted comeback. Number of political parties, publications, radio and TV channels, women groups, associations and professional bodies made an appearance. Eight years down the line, Afghan civil society nonetheless remains anemic. The political set up weaved around warlords and put in place to serve US interests, has stunted the growth of civil society.

Electronic media have emerged as the most dynamic element of civil society. There are almost 20 TV channels including state-run RTA, 60 radio stations and 400 publications. Taliban had banned TV

while the state-run Radio Shariat was only a mockery of broadcasting. There are also two journalist associations. National Journalist Union of Afghanistan, claiming 7,200 members, is the main body.

The freedom of expression, however, despite a flourishing media remains limited. That warlords like Rashid Dostam himself has launched a TV channel (Aina/Mirror) shows both the growing influence and its shortcoming in Afghanistan. The blogosphere has also provided a great opportunity. It also is a safe mode to express oneself. While hundreds of Afghan youth and activists are running blogs, websites like [kabulpress.org](http://kabulpress.org) and [rawa.org](http://rawa.org) get thousands of monthly hits.

## **Political Parties**

There are 108 parties registered with Ministry of Justice but none of these parties have any impact on political process. According to UN statistics, only 12 per cent of the Wolesi Jirga candidates (381 out of 2381) who contested elections back in 2005, were registered under the name of a political party. In reality, the figure was much higher since for security reasons, many ran as 'independents'.

Around 200 of the 249 MPs that were elected are believed to be members or sympathisers of political parties. They represent 33 political parties, 19 Islamic, 7 "new democratic", 4 leftist and 3 ethno-nationalist parties.

## **The New Democrats and ex-Left**

In the post-Taliban period, a new current emerged from underground and exile: 'new democrats'. This is a new generation of political activists, that evolved mainly from the leftist camp, both Stalinist and Maoist, but also from amongst former Mujahedin who wanted to transcend old political dividing lines.

The four most interesting of the new parties, that involve almost only young activists that had no part in the bloodshed of the past, are 'Afghanistan Labour and Development Party (ALDP), National Solidarity Party of Afghanistan's Youth, the Republican Party and AFDM.

The ex-PDPA left today is more divided than ever. There are at least 15 registered parties led by former PDPA officials that try to appeal to this clientèle. But at the same time, these PDPA-off shoots claim that they have left the past behind. Some claim that they never really were communists but patriots and support a market economy. The first such party was established in August 2003 by former general Nur-ul-Haq Ulumi, National United Party of Afghanistan. Soon after, three groups led by former Khalqis, emerged: National Party of Afghanistan, Afghanistan Peace Movement and National Unity Party.

Maoists, who opposed Saur revolution and joined Mujahideen back in 1980s, have split into quite a few groups. However, Maoists remain the only force organised in what can be called a party.

## **Trade Unions and Professional Bodies**

In 1978, Central Council of Trade Unions was formed in the fashion all Soviet satellites back then would showcase workers. It was renamed National Workers Union of Afghanistan in 1990. But trade unions like professional bodies, already suppressed under PDPA, did not survive the puritan terror unleashed by Mujahideen and Taliban.

Encouraged by post-September 11 change, some professionals have formed associations. Like doctors in Herat formed Professional Shura of Herat. Journalists, lawyers and teachers have organised themselves. At least on paper, there is also an Afghan Federation of Trade Unions as well claiming 200,000 membership. Similarly, Central National Union of Afghan Employees represents

71, 597 members. But most of the unions and professional associations are either paper organisations or in their infancy.

Afghanistan has just started a steel factory in Herat and one in Kabul. One olive processing factory in Jalalabad was recently launched. Mining, carpet industry and state-run service sectors employ bulk of Afghan workers.

### **NGOisation of Women Cause**

There has been a mushroom growth of NGOs, most of them built in the name of women, in last few years. Today, over 3000 NGOs are working. But the NGOs are in general seen as an opportunity to make money. Corruption remains their hallmark. The foreign aid has mostly been channelled through the NGOs.

The Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), formed in 1978, remains the only vital women body besides few individuals genuinely working for the women cause. Malalai Joya, for instance, has emerged as a symbol of resistance. A member of parliament, Joya is vocal in criticising warlords and US occupation.

### **Bella Saba**

---

### **P.S.**

\* From Viewpoint online issue no. 2, May 28, 2010:

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/fullstory.php?t=Afghanistan%27s%20struggling%20civil%20society&f=full-5-may-28.php&y=2010&m=may>

\* Bella Saba is an Afghan activist.