

Afghan Peace on the Horizon? An Examination of Public Opinion on the Ongoing Peace Talks

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What is missing from the ongoing Afghan peace talks is public opinion: whether the Afghan people are in broad agreement with the peace process and its potential outcomes. The current study is based on the opinions of 704 people from across twenty-five provinces of Afghanistan. The study uses a quantitative and qualitative approach to delve into public opinion on the process. The general finding of this study is that while almost all Afghans want peace, most are unwilling to accept a peace deal that would cost them their constitutional gains, including human rights, minority rights, gender equality, and an Islamic republic. Besides this, most Afghans would be unwilling to vote for the Taliban in any elections.

Keywords peace talks, Taliban, public opinion, negative peace, positive peace, constitutional rights

Introduction

The efforts of the international community, led by the United States (US), to achieve peace in Afghanistan are opening a new chapter for the country. As the peace process moves toward a conclusion, the people of Afghanistan are starting to share their nuanced opinions on it. The recent efforts by the US and the signing of a deal between Washington and the Taliban in Qatar are reckoned to be a significant step toward negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government itself. What is of great importance in this regard is public opinion: whether the Afghan people are in broad agreement with the process and its provisions. While a considerable amount of research has been conducted into the specific details of the peace process, only a few studies have been conducted into public opinion on this topic and, most importantly, its potential consequences—something that has already raised concerns among both the public and the elite

in Afghanistan.

One line of research has focused on US policy toward the Afghan peace process (Thomas 2021, 1). Since 2001, Afghanistan has been at the center of US military and civilian confrontation with global terrorism in response to Al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on US soil. However, during these two decades of war against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the US has suffered considerably. Almost 2,400 US fatalities have been recorded, and Washington has spent more than US\$137 billion on maintaining its presence in the country for two decades (Thomas 2021). Nevertheless, since the Trump administration decided to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, a peace agreement seems to be closer than ever. There are still unanswered questions, though, including whether the US will pull out all its military forces before the completion of an intra-Afghan peace deal. US policy on Afghanistan is based on its own national interests. Its most prominent interest could be preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorists who might threaten the US homeland. Besides, the US wants to see a stabilized Afghanistan that can foster economic cooperation in the region (USIP 2021, 6).

Another line of research has concentrated on the inclusiveness of the Afghan peace process. The international community—particularly the United States—has been the target of harsh criticism by the Afghan people due to the exclusion of the Afghan government from the talks. A few studies have been conducted on the role of women and youth in the peace process as well (Popal 2017, 9). Afghan women have not secured a meaningful place in the process for a myriad of reasons. Traditionally, in Afghanistan, women were not supposed to be involved in high-level decision making and their roles were not considered central to peacebuilding. Another factor is that while the international community initially emphasized the inclusion of women, they have recently become less concerned about the absence of proportional representation of women and youth in the peace process. Women, youth, and minorities are predictably absent from the Taliban delegation at the peace negotiations. Another study by the RAND Corporation tries to develop a comprehensive strategy for the peace process (Miller and Blake 2019). This study focuses on what internal and external actions should be taken to produce a lasting peace. A ceasefire, political arrangements, an amnesty for the perpetrators of violence, and a transitional government are the main components of this plan. Both lines of research have neglected to gather the opinions of Afghans themselves on the peace process and the price they are willing to pay for it. To fill that gap, the present authors conducted a survey to evaluate people's ideas, beliefs, and understandings of the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan.

The most important finding of our survey is that Afghans are almost equally divided on the issue of a peace deal with the Taliban. Many Afghans distrust the Taliban, and the majority believe that the Taliban will not cease its violence after concluding a peace deal with the Afghan government. Not surprisingly, women

and ethnic minorities are even less optimistic about the Taliban's willingness to end the violence after a peace deal.

After twenty years of constitutional government and some socio-political freedoms, Afghans would not be satisfied with no more than a negative peace: for example, most respondents are skeptical about a peace that does not include respect for human rights, including women's rights and the rights of minorities. A majority of respondents insist on the continuation of republicanism, fairer elections, and a representative government after a peace deal. Unsurprisingly, both men and women reject peace without elections. An Islamic emirate would not be acceptable to a super majority of Afghans, as shown by the survey results. Afghans believe that an interim government is not the way to facilitate the peace process. Also, a majority of Afghans are not entirely sympathetic to the notion of sharing power with the Taliban.

Methodology

Our survey was conducted in different provinces of Afghanistan using a mixed approach of both quantitative and qualitative research to explore public opinion on the peace process. It was conducted between the fall of 2019 and spring of 2020. A comprehensive questionnaire was prepared to gather large amounts of information in a short period of time across the country. The researchers distributed the questionnaire in person and recorded the responses for further analysis. Besides this questionnaire, the researchers used other methods, such as mail and telephone surveys. To aid our analysis of Afghans' views on the peace process, we also recorded details of the respondents' backgrounds, including education, gender, and ethnicity. There were 704 respondents across twenty-five provinces, 31 percent of whom were female and 69 percent male. In terms of ethnicity, 39 percent were Pashtuns, 31 percent Tajiks, 20 percent Hazaras, and 10 percent were from other ethnic groups. The ethnic composition of our sample corresponds to that of the country as a whole. The respondents came from both rural and urban areas, but there was no clear segregation of urban and rural respondents. As many as 40 percent of the respondents said they had received secondary education, while 12 percent had only been educated to primary level, and 5 percent had received no formal education. Interestingly, the remaining 43 percent of respondents did not disclose their educational backgrounds. The survey had some limitations. Most importantly, while it covers the entire country geographically, the number of respondents represents only a small proportion of Afghanistan's population of more than 30 million. Additionally, despite concerted efforts to reach out to them, only 31 percent of our sample consisted of women and only 5 percent had received no formal education. The survey used the snowballing sampling or chain referral sampling method. The survey was

conducted by students of the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) who were members of the university's Survey Club.¹ They reached out to their friends, friends of friends, relatives, and fellow provincials. They conducted the surveys in person, over the phone, by email, social media, and online. Surveying a war-torn country presents many challenges—one common one being refusal to take part for fear of execution by the Taliban.

The first part of this study consists of an evaluation of public opinion on the ongoing peace negotiations with the Taliban in Doha. The second part contains analysis of those parts of the survey concerning some of the constitutional questions that the Taliban have raised, including their demand for the current republican regime to be replaced by an emirate. In the third section, we examine public opinion concerning some of the potential costs of a peace deal with the Taliban, including the implications for human rights, gender equality, minority rights, and other constitutional gains the people of Afghanistan have made in the past twenty years.

Public Opinion on the Ongoing Peace Negotiations

There are some fundamental issues about the peace process that have raised concern among Afghans since the initiation of the dialogue between the Taliban and the US government. In our survey, respondents were asked about a potential peace deal, an end to violence by the Taliban, an interim government, transitional justice, and power sharing.

Cancellation of Peace Negotiations

The US and the Taliban signed an agreement aimed at bringing peace to Afghanistan after more than eighteen years of conflict that is still ongoing (BBC News 2020). This was a conditional agreement signed on February 29, 2020, in Doha, the capital of Qatar (Shah and Nordland 2018). On February 27, 2018, President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan had proposed the initiation of a peace process at an international conference in Kabul (Faizy and Bengali 2018). US officials subsequently held a secret meeting with members of the Taliban in their political office in Qatar in July that year. However, the negotiations were cancelled by President Donald Trump on September 7, 2019, after the Taliban claimed responsibility for a car bombing in Kabul which killed twelve people including one American soldier (Aljazeera 2019). This survey was conducted between the cancellation of the initial US-Taliban negotiations and the restarting of talks which led to a deal between the two sides. This timing meant that one very important question in the survey was: "Are you happy that the peace negotiations between the US and the Taliban were cancelled?" Surprisingly, 45 percent of respondents were happy with the cancellation, 42 percent were unhappy, and the remaining 13

Figure 1. Opinion on the Cancellation of the Peace Negotiations between the US and the Taliban

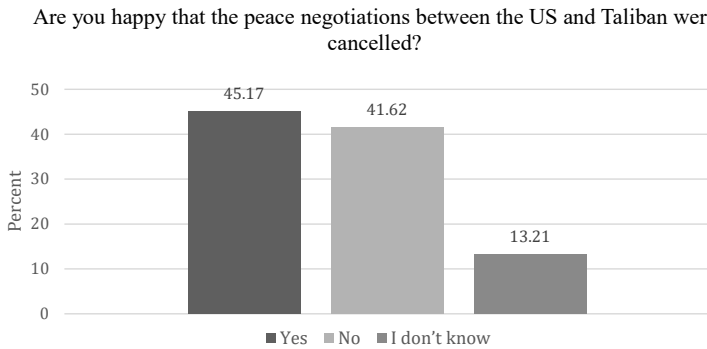


Figure 2. Opinion on the Cancellation of the Peace Negotiations between the US and the Taliban, by Ethnicity



percent offered no answer.

There are a number of reasons why almost half of the population would approve of the cancellation of the US-Taliban negotiations. The fear all along has been that a peace deal with the Taliban would lead to the amendment of the constitution in a way that would affect people’s lives considerably. The Taliban claim that the 2004 constitution lacks religious (Islamic) legitimacy. They say they would only be satisfied with an Islamic emirate, something which they have time-and-again failed to describe in detail. Afghans fear that the Taliban might reestablish the emirate that they imposed by force between 1996 and 2001 (Pasarlay and Mobasher 2020). However, the absence of a peace deal would mean the continuation of a war that has taken a heavy toll on people’s lives and property for decades now. This is perhaps why the other half of the population saw the cancellation as a missed opportunity.

Men and women were equally divided about the cancellation: 43 percent of

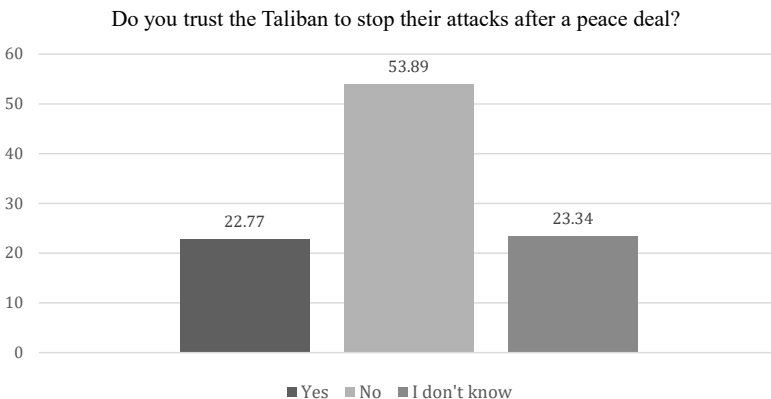
female respondents and 46 percent of male respondents were happy about it, and while 40 percent of women and 42 percent of men were unhappy, the remainder expressed no opinion. The ethnic groups were also almost equally divided between those who applauded the cancellation and those who did not. Around 47 percent of Pashtuns, 42 percent of Tajiks, 48 percent of Hazaras, and 45 percent of other ethnicities favored the cancellation, whereas 41 percent of Pashtuns, 46 percent of Tajiks, 36 percent of Hazaras, and 38 percent of other ethnic groups were against.

Does a Peace Deal Guarantee the End of Violence?

One of the main concerns of Afghans regarding the outcome of a peace deal is whether the Taliban will cease their attacks on both military personnel and civilians. The US-Taliban deal seems to have brought no reduction in violence in Afghanistan. On the contrary, a recent report by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) indicates that the number of civilian casualties due to Taliban attacks has actually increased since the US-Taliban peace deal (Mukhtar 2020). Taliban attacks increased by 25 percent in 2020 compared to a corresponding period in 2019 (George 2020). After the Taliban’s Eid al Fitr ceasefire, they carried out an average of thirty attacks on Afghan forces each day (Amiry 2020). Reflecting on this, a US official suggested that the Taliban “have no intention of abiding by their agreement” (Kube, Dilanian, and De Luce 2020). Therefore, respondents were asked whether they thought that the Taliban would cease their attacks after a peace deal. A majority (54 percent) said they believed the Taliban would continue their attacks even after a peace deal was signed with the Afghan government. Only 23 percent of respondents thought that the Taliban would cease their attacks after a deal.

Men and women responded slightly differently to this question. Over 66 percent of women thought that Taliban violence would not stop after a peace deal,

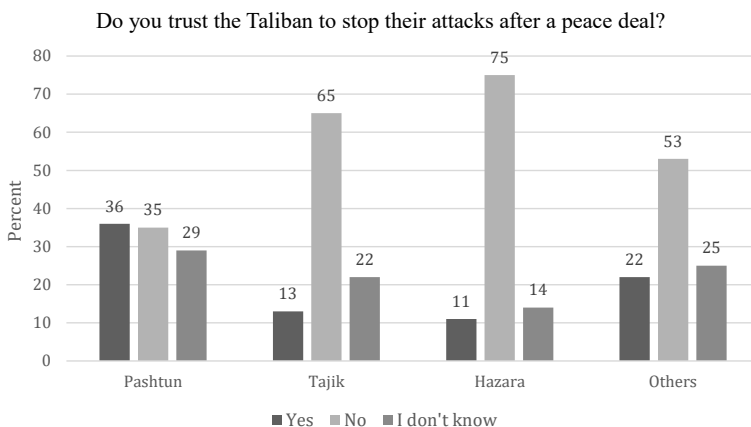
Figure 3. Opinion on Trusting the Taliban to Stop Their Attacks after a Peace Deal



compared to 49 percent of men. Women's pessimism may be a reflection of their fear of a return to the dark and oppressive era of the Taliban regime, and the fact that they continued to be the prime victims of Taliban violence after 2001. In a more recent example, when the Taliban took over Afghanistan's Kunduz Province in 2015, they attacked women's shelters and women's radio stations, and Taliban military and civilian personnel committed rape in the women's prison and a university dormitory in Kunduz (Haidary 2018). Maryam Husseini, who suffered from the Taliban attacks and lost her sister, Najiba, told Aljazeera, "I will never forget what the Taliban have done to my family. Peace cannot come overnight by just signing a paper. This peace deal disrespects the one I lost, my sister."

Hazaras, among all the ethnic groups, are the most pessimistic about the ability of a peace deal to end the violence. Over 75 percent of Hazara respondents said they thought the Taliban would continue their attacks even after a political settlement. Hazaras continue to be a prime target of Taliban and ISIS suicide bombers, one example being a suicide bombing of an academic center in Dasht-e-Barchi, Kabul, in February 2018 which killed thirty-four students and wounded fifty-seven (Constable 2018). Hazaras believe that a peace deal would only intensify the attacks against them. "If the Taliban get back, the Hazaras will be massacred," said Maryam Tofan, a Hazara mother-of-three whose husband was killed by the Taliban in eastern Ghazni Province (Zucchini and Faizi 2020). The Taliban are accused of directly targeting and persecuting minorities when they were in power during the 1990s (Sarwan and Siddique 2018). Hazaras and other minorities are afraid that a peace deal, far from guaranteeing their security, will only lead to more oppression. Pashtuns have the lowest percentage (35 percent) of respondents who believe that a peace deal will not end violence in Afghanistan. The Taliban are predominantly Pashtuns, although they have a very few members from other ethnic groups. As many as 65 percent of Tajiks, on the other hand,

Figure 4. Opinion on Trusting the Taliban to Stop Their Attacks after a Peace Deal, by Ethnicity



take a pessimistic view.

Does a Provisional Government Have Public Support?

Afghanistan experienced an interim government in 2001-2002, established as a result of the 2001 Bonn Agreement (Dobbins et al. 2003), when the collapse of the Taliban left a power vacuum in Kabul. This government facilitated the setting up of the military, the civil administration, democratic institutions, and so on, as well as developing the economy and expediting humanitarian efforts (Dobbins et al. 2003). With a potential peace deal on the horizon, many elites inside Afghanistan are thinking that an interim government is inevitable; yet many others question the need for such a provisional government when electoral institutions (admittedly flawed ones) are already in place (Sadr 2019). There is little likelihood of the Taliban compromising on the continuation of the current government (Thomas 2020). An interim government is favored by most Taliban representatives because they see it as an opportunity to have their agenda—which is in contradiction to the current constitution—fully or mostly implemented. Respondents were asked if they favored an interim government that would ensure peace and political transition.

As we can see from Figure 5, over 45 percent of respondents said that they would favor an interim government if it could bring peace to Afghanistan while 52 percent took the opposite view. This indicates that a majority of Afghans think an interim government unnecessary, probably because they fear it would threaten the constitutional rights they have achieved, regardless of how poorly the current regime has functioned. Breaking down the responses based on respondents’ level of education, we find that only 40 percent of respondents with secondary education are in favor of an interim government compared to 58 percent of those with only primary-level education and 89 percent of those with no

Figure 5. Opinion on whether There Should Be an Interim Government

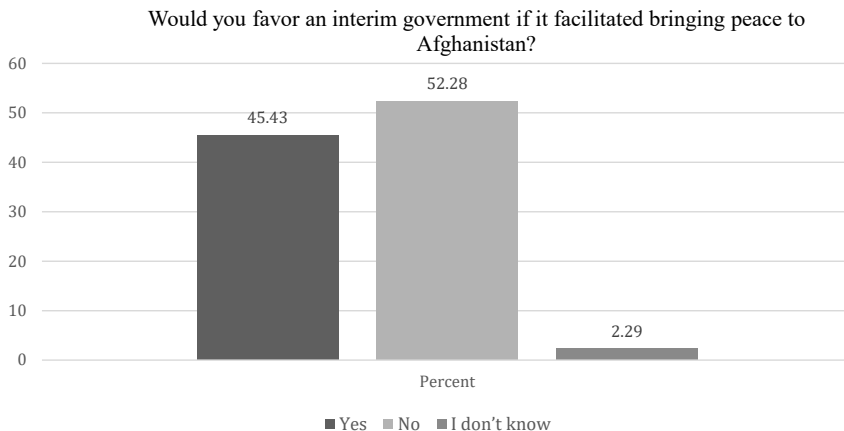
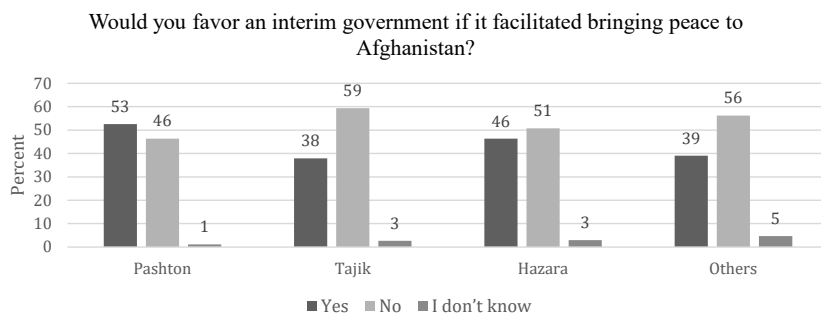


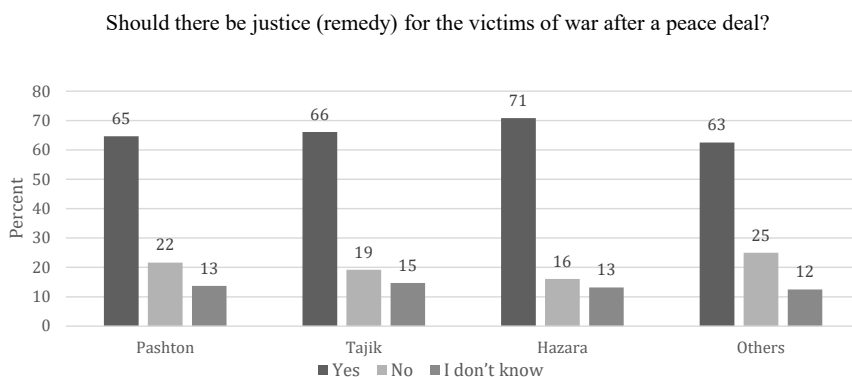
Figure 6. Opinion on Whether There Should Be an Interim Government, by Ethnicity

formal education. It seems, therefore, that level of education does affect people's understanding of how an interim government would play out.

There are slight differences among the ethnic groups on this question. A majority (53 percent) of Pashtuns said they favored an interim government if it facilitated peace. By contrast, 46 percent of Hazaras gave a positive answer to this question and 51 percent responded negatively. Only 38 percent of Tajiks wanted to see an interim government compared to 59 percent of them that did not. Of the other ethnicities, around 39 percent of them were in favor of an interim government if it could facilitate peace while 56 percent of them disagreed.

Justice and a Remedy for the Victims of War

No government and no court has ever forced any group to pay reparations for the heavy toll that war has taken on civilians in Afghanistan—not Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hezb-e-Islami Party, not the Mujahideen, and not the communists. It looks as though the peace deal with the Taliban will not yield any reparations either. We took this into account and asked people whether there

Figure 7. Opinion on Justice and Remedy for Victims of the War after a Peace Deal, by Ethnicity

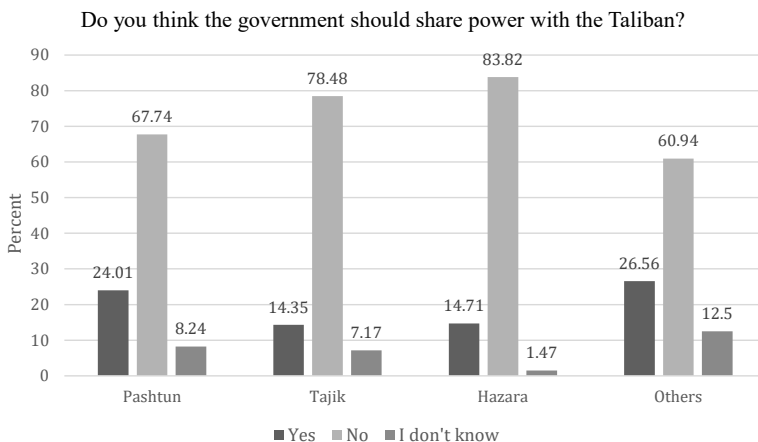
should be justice and remedies for the victims of war. In general, 66 percent of the respondents were in favor of there being a remedy for the victims while 20 percent were not. The remaining 14 percent did not express an opinion. These results show that a supermajority of people value transitional justice going hand in hand with peace.

A majority of all the ethnic groups favored justice for victims and retribution against the perpetrators of war crimes—65 percent of Pashtuns, 66 percent of Tajiks, and 71 percent of Hazara. The percentages against were 22 percent for Pashtuns, 19 percent for Tajiks, and 16 percent for Hazaras. One of the survey respondents said that millions of people have suffered and therefore it is almost impossible to offer reparations for all war crimes.

Power-Sharing with the Taliban?

A major concern regarding a peace deal is whether and to what extent political power would have to be shared with the Taliban. On this issue, Afghans’ views seem to differ according to their educational and ethnic backgrounds and beliefs. Power-sharing concerns the structure of the government and the way power is allocated to different political contenders. It would be challenging because of the different worldviews that the Afghan government and the Taliban hold regarding governance, democracy, the role of Sharia, and many more pressing issues. There are major obstacles to any form of power-sharing, and talks could be disrupted by a “mix of mistrust, opposing ideologies, ongoing violence, regional interference, [and] internal political differences” (Thier 2019). Educated Afghans, who are well aware, based on their observation of other peace deals around the world, that power-sharing will lead to drastic changes in the political system and the lifestyles of ordinary people, contend that it should not take place. For example, a

Figure 8. Opinion on Power-Sharing with the Taliban, by Ethnicity



majority of respondents with secondary or only primary education—70 percent and 83 percent, respectively—were opposed to power-sharing with the Taliban. While they were in power, the Taliban adopted radical policies based on a rigid interpretation of the Quran that was opposed to any form of modernization (Brahimi 2010). They excluded women from governance processes and repressed people from ethnic groups other than their own. Only 24 percent of Afghans with university degrees thought that power-sharing with the Taliban was essential.

A majority of both male and female respondents were opposed to power-sharing with the Taliban (71 percent and 80 percent, respectively). The condition of Afghan women has improved a lot over the last two decades, and they are not willing to move backwards. Similarly, there seems to be a consensus among ethnic groups against sharing power with the Taliban: 68 percent of Pashtuns, 79 percent of Tajiks, 84 percent of Hazaras, and 61 percent of other ethnicities were against it.

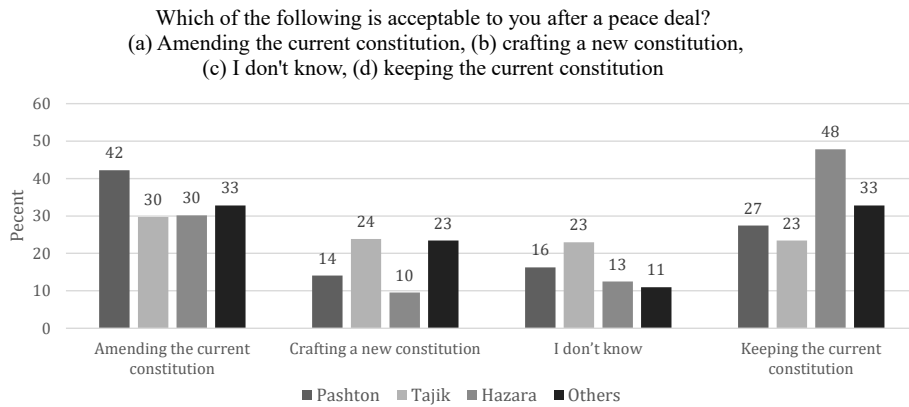
Interestingly, contrary to conventional assumptions, a majority of Pashtuns were against sharing power with the Taliban. Pashtun unwillingness regarding power-sharing may have its roots in the radical policies and terrorist activities of the Taliban, which have adversely affected Pashtuns more than any other group. Tajiks and Hazaras have a long history of war with the Taliban, most of whom are of Pashtun ethnicity (BBC News 2019). This is especially true of Hazaras, who due to their practice of Shia Islam were systematically oppressed by the Taliban during their rule (Kachiar 2020). But overall, ethnic groups did not differ much in their responses, and most of them were not sympathetic to power-sharing with the Taliban.

Public Opinion on Constitutional Changes

The Taliban have demanded some significant changes in the system of governance and social and cultural norms that would fundamentally affect people's lives and would require a new constitution. To understand the Afghan public's perspective on these fundamental issues, respondents were asked questions concerning a potential compromise on the constitution and changes in the political system, particularly elections.

Peace at the Expense of the Constitution

One important issue on which the Afghan government and the Taliban differ fundamentally is the constitution of 2004. The Taliban are demanding a new constitution as they believe the current one is invalid because it is based on democratic principles “imposed by the West” (Mashal and Abed 2019). The Taliban favor a Sharia-based constitution, which they have barely described in detail, only going so far as to suggest the exclusion of any article that contradicts

Figure 9. Opinion on the Constitution after a Peace Deal, by Ethnicity

Sharia principles (Mashal 2019a). When the Taliban were drafting a new constitution during their Islamic emirate, they included provisions that limited women's rights to education and other social, economic, and political rights (Mashal 2019b). The current Afghan government, on the other hand, wants to keep the existing constitution. The government promotes girls' education and offers opportunities for women in public administration.

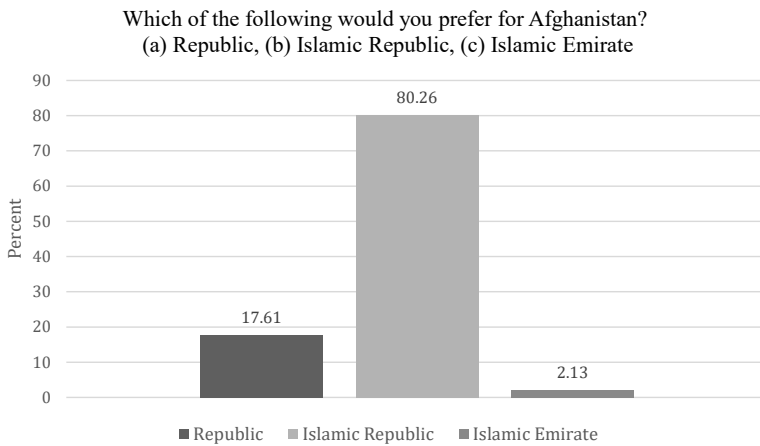
In order to learn what Afghan people feel about any potential compromise on the constitution, they were asked whether they would be in favor of amending the current constitution, replacing the constitution, or leaving the existing constitution as it is. In general, 35 percent of respondents were in favor of amending the current constitution, 30 percent wanted no change, while only 17 percent opted for a totally new constitution (which would be the Taliban's option).

Ethnic groups do differ slightly in their answers to this question. About 48 percent of Hazaras said they wanted to keep the current constitution compared to 27 percent of Pashtun, 23 percent of Tajiks, and 33 percent of other ethnic groups.

A Republic versus an Emirate

Throughout history, Afghans have experienced different forms of government: empires, emirates, kingdoms, and representative governments (PBS 2011). The Taliban established an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan in 1996 which ended with their collapse in 2001 (Maizland and Laub 2020). The emirate was replaced with an Islamic republic through the constitution of 2004. Recently, the Taliban have claimed that they would only be satisfied with an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan. This triggered a reaction from the government as well as from several dominant political factions who argued that the current constitutional, Islamic republic is irreplaceable. We considered that it was important to gather public opinion on this topic by giving respondents three options to choose from: (a) a republic,

Figure 10. Opinion on Preferred Form of Government

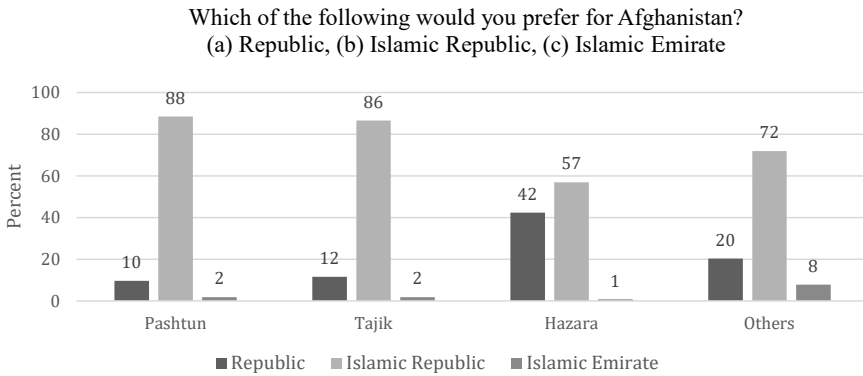


(b) an Islamic republic and (c) an Islamic emirate. Around 80 percent of our respondents opted for the current system, an Islamic republic, while 18 percent expressed a preference for a republic, and the remaining 2 percent opted for an Islamic emirate.

During their Islamic emirate between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban banned secular education and replaced it with religious education. Restrictive policies were applied to women in all areas of their social, economic, and political lives (Marsden 2001, 16), including banning their access to schools and workplaces (Barr 2020). After the collapse of the Taliban in 2001, three million girls returned to schools (Qazi 2020). More recently, when the Taliban took control of part of Kunduz Province in 2016, they banned secular subjects such as English, sport, and social sciences, and replaced them with religious subjects (Liuhto 2016). They also prohibited girls from attending school. In some areas, they would allow girls aged eight years old or younger to go to school, but they were only taught religious subjects (Liuhto 2016). The experience of living under an Islamic emirate and the more recent experience of women in areas controlled by the Taliban have reduced the popularity of this group's proposed regime.

The high degree of popularity enjoyed by an Islamic republic among all groups may be attributed to the considerable political, economic, and social changes that have taken place in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Participation in elections has been enhanced, and the Afghan people are demanding more participation, representation, and accountability. People have access to a pluralistic media and are increasingly using their rights to freedom of thought and expression against the government. Additionally, since the Bonn Conference, the Afghan government has introduced a set of policies for empowering women, including allocating a specific quota for them in the political structure of government

Figure 11. Opinion on Preferred Form of Government, by Ethnicity



(IDEA 2020). In post-Taliban Afghanistan, one of the most observable achievements is the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs which is tasked with protecting and promoting women's rights (Katzman 2009). All these achievements have enhanced the popularity of the current Islamic republic. Among our respondents, 84 percent of women and almost 78 percent of men expressed a preference for an Islamic republic. Interestingly, more men (20 percent) than women (14 percent) favored a republic over either an Islamic republic or an Islamic emirate.

It is noteworthy that an Islamic republic is popular among all the ethnic groups, probably because they fear a return to an Islamic emirate like the one they experienced under the Taliban. That is perhaps why only 2 percent of Pashtuns and Tajiks, and 8 percent of other ethnic groups favored an Islamic emirate, and the percentages in favor of an Islamic republic were 88 percent for Pashtuns, 86 percent for Tajiks, and 72 percent for other ethnic groups. Hazaras were somewhat different from the other groups, with over 42 percent of them expressing a preference for a simple republic, although the majority (57 percent) opted for an Islamic republic.

Peace in the Absence of Elections?

Elections have been one of the most sensitive issues since the onset of the peace negotiations. In 2019, Afghans and their international allies diverged over whether the presidential election should be delayed because of imminent peace negotiations between the government and the Taliban (United Nations 2019a). According to the government, the election was a priority for achieving a durable peace. "Legitimacy of peace cannot be achieved without elections," said Sediq Sediqi, spokesman for the president (Faiez 2019). In an article published in the *New York Times*, he said that the nation had sacrificed so many years so that Afghanistan could have a stable republican government, and that not holding the

Figure 12. Opinion on Peace and Elections

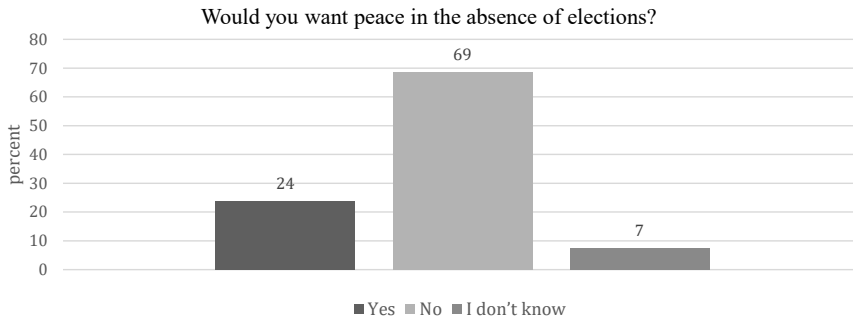
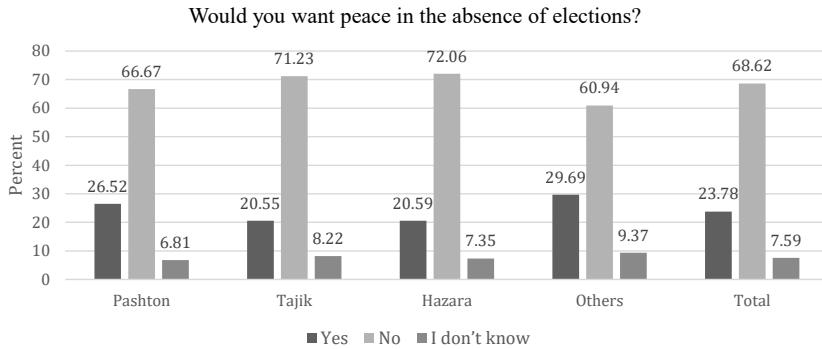


Figure 13. Opinion on Peace and Elections, by Ethnicity



election would be a setback for the country (Mashal and Abed 2019). Eventually, the election was only delayed although there were considerable irregularities. The Taliban have been against holding elections all along, as they consider elections and other democratic institutions to be anti-Islamic. This tension prompted us to ask our respondents whether they wanted peace in the absence of elections, as the Taliban has demanded. Overall, 69 percent were against a peace deal that would put an end to elections and representative government, and only 24 percent would be satisfied with peace alone.

Ethnic groups do not differ in their opinions on peace in relation to elections. A large proportion of Pashtuns (67 percent), Tajiks (71 percent), and Hazaras (72 percent) indicated that they did not want peace at the expense of elections. Only 26 percent of Pashtuns, 20 percent of Tajiks, and 21 percent of Hazaras opted for peace even in the absence of electoral democracy.

The Likelihood of the Taliban Succeeding in a Democratic Election

The Taliban have not shown any interest in elections, but based on interviews with some Taliban members, Osman and Gopal (2016) reported that the Taliban

Figure 14. Opinion on Voting for the Taliban in Elections

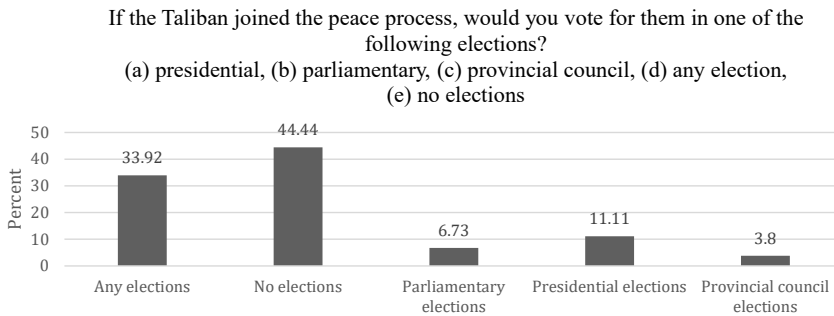
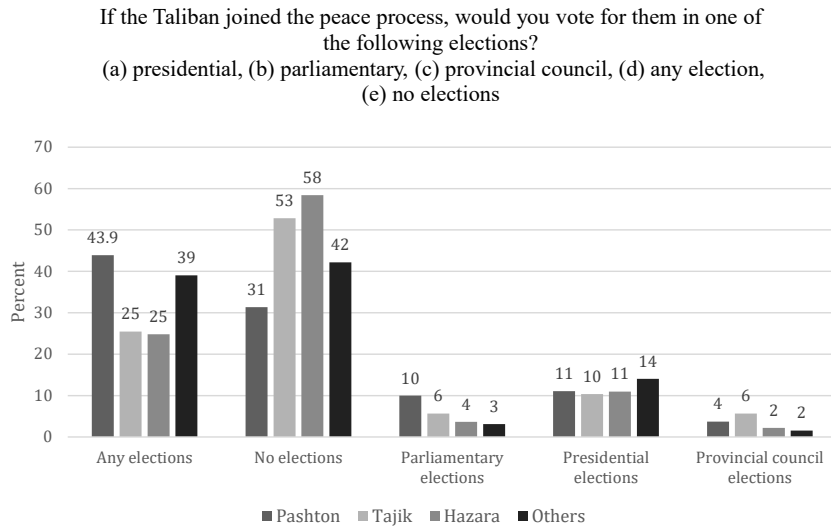


Figure 15. Opinion on Voting for the Taliban in Elections, by Ethnicity



do not have a problem with elections per se, but they doubt whether they would be useful to them (Osman and Gopal 2016, 21). They are mainly concerned with the outcome of elections, thinking they might not win (Osman and Gopal 2016, 22). The report references an article by a Taliban member who reflected on this, remarking that elections did not empower the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Osman and Gopal 2016, 21). Vice President Amrullah Saleh has said that he is “ready to meet them [the Taliban] at the ballot box” (Saleh 2020). Assuming that both sides could agree on a democratic system, the question is, what are the chances of the Taliban winning an election?

Respondents were asked if they would vote for the Taliban in any elections—presidential, parliamentary, or provincial council elections—after a peace deal. Over 44 percent said they would not vote for the Taliban in any election, although

34 percent said they might vote for them. Only 11 percent of respondents said they would vote for them in a presidential election, 7 percent in a parliamentary election, and 4 percent in a provincial council election. Only 20 percent of female respondents said they would vote for the Taliban in any election. Considering their experience of Taliban rule during the period 1996-2001, it is no wonder that women do not want to give more power to the Taliban. Based on the responses to our survey from different ethnic groups, 44 percent of Pashtuns, 25 percent of Tajiks and Hazaras, and 39 percent of other ethnic groups would be willing to vote for them in any election.

Negative Peace versus Positive Peace: The Issue of Rights

For most countries, when they want to initiate peacekeeping and peacebuilding steps, the question that matters most is what will be the cost of peace. To understand respondents' views on this, they were asked what price they were prepared to pay for peace in terms of human rights, gender equality, and minority rights. In other words, we were asking if peace is really worth the sacrifice of those rights. Since the start of the peace process in Afghanistan, there have been a lot of studies that have discussed the cost of peace. It has frequently been argued that Afghanistan should not lose the democratic achievements of the post-Taliban era—achievements that range from respect to diversity, democracy, minority rights, constitutionalism, and many more (Hindu 2020). Those who would protect those achievements suggest that while peace is every Afghan's dream, this does not mean that the country should take a step backward in its history. Issues such as humans' rights should not be compromised (Kirchner 2020). Indeed, according to recent research, a big portion of the Afghan population is not prepared to sacrifice constitutional rights for the sake of peace (Ahmadi 2019). There are also differences among Afghanistan's international allies in this regard. It has lately been suggested that those countries which are arguing for stability rather than real peace will not have a comprehensive strategy for a post-peace deal Afghanistan (Kirchner 2020). This issue will be further scrutinized from different angles in the sections below.

The Human Rights Costs of Peace

One of the issues in which the Afghan government and the international community have invested a great deal since 2001 is the promotion of human rights in Afghanistan. The Bonn Conference of 2001 and Afghanistan's 2004 constitution represented a huge improvement in human rights, at least in government-controlled areas of the country, and one significant event was the creation of a national human rights commission (Human Rights Watch 2002). The protection and promotion of human rights constitute a central concern for

Figure 16. Opinion on Peace at the Expense of Human Rights

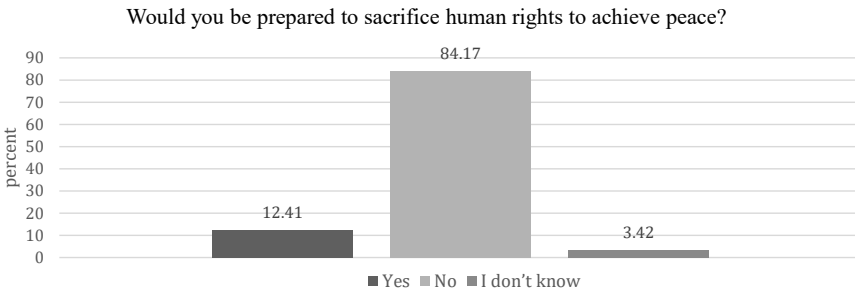
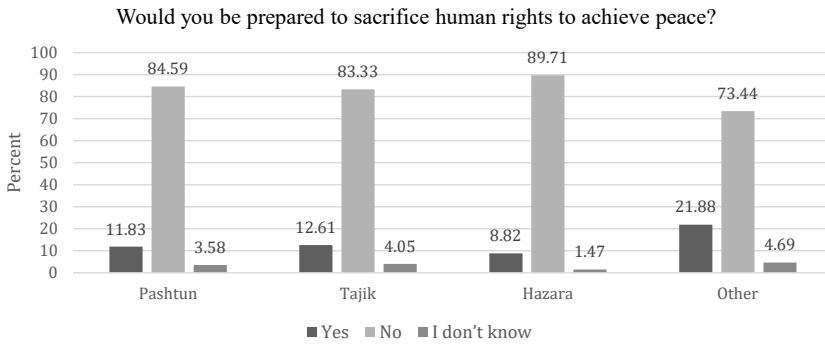


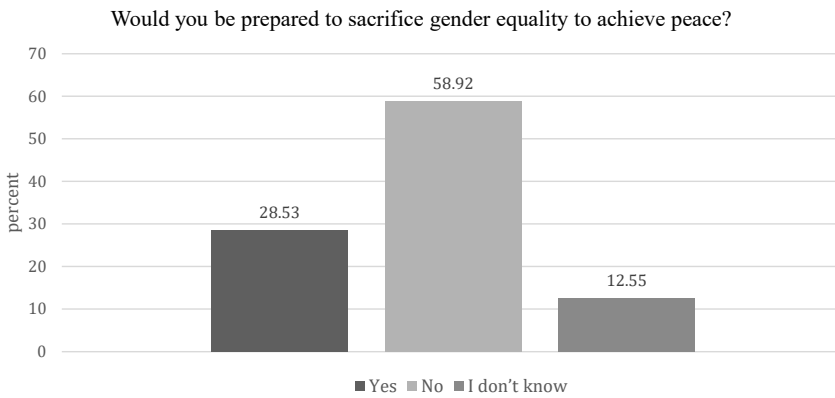
Figure 17. Opinion on Peace at the Expense of Human Rights, by Ethnicity



many with regard to the peace negotiations with the Taliban. There has always been a sharp difference between the government and the Taliban on the issue of human rights. While the Afghan government supports the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, grounding it in Islamic principles, the Taliban's rigid interpretation of Islam contradicts these provisions.

What do Afghan people think about the prospect of a peace deal that would cost them their human rights? When asked this question in the survey, 84 percent of respondents said they do not prioritize peace over human rights. For many, peace means not only the absence of war but also an assurance of human freedom, justice, and equity without which peace cannot usually be sustained (Arbour 2014). There was no difference between male and female respondents on this issue, as 83 percent of females and 84 percent of males said they did not want peace at the expense of human rights. However, some respondents had a different interpretation of peace, mostly emphasizing the termination of war. This group constituted 12 percent of our respondents.

There is unanimity among the ethnic groups in favor of peace accompanied by respect for human rights. Around 85 percent of Pashtuns, 83 percent of Tajiks, 90 percent of Hazaras, and 73 percent of other ethnic groups see human rights

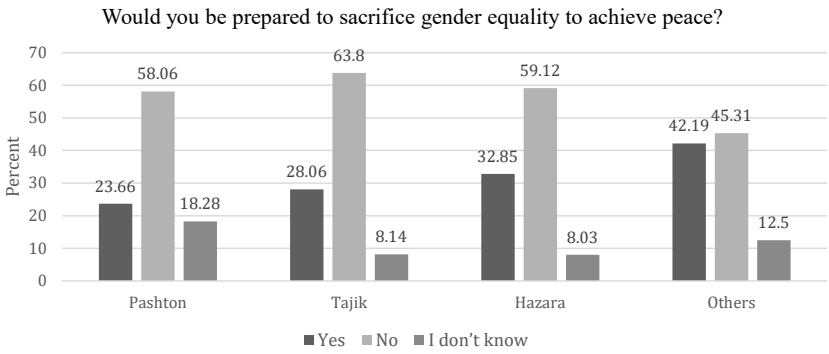
Figure 18. Opinion on Peace and Gender Equality

as an essential component of any peace deal. The notion of positive—rather than negative—peace has gained momentum in Afghanistan because of the people’s engagement with civil rights activities and their direct contact with developed countries which are firm supporters of human rights in Afghanistan (Ahmadi 2019).

Peace at the Cost of Gender Equality?

Around 59 percent of Afghans want a peace deal that would not reverse progress in gender equality; however, 29 percent do prioritize peace over gender equality. Gathering public opinion on this issue is important because of the Taliban’s views on the role of women in Afghanistan. When the Taliban ruled almost 90 percent of Afghan territory, they deprived women of their natural rights and imposed harsh policies on them such as forcing them to wear the burqa (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2001). Under the Taliban, women were denied education, allowed only limited access to healthcare, and were not permitted to visit the bazaar without their male guardian. Any violation of these rules would lead to public lashings and beatings (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2001). Women have made considerable progress since the fall of the Taliban regime (United Nations 2019b). The number of women participating in society, the economy, and the political arena has increased considerably, and parity of political participation has also developed in recent years (United Nations 2019b). A specific quota for women representatives (sixty-eight seats) in the National Assembly has ensured their involvement in important decision making. Their tangible achievements and their active participation in societal affairs have impelled them to stand against a potential peace deal that would threaten the gains they have made in terms of rights and freedoms. Compared to 57 percent of male respondents, over 64 percent of female respondents rejected a peace deal that would reverse gender equality. However, 27 percent of women and 29

Figure 19. Opinion on Peace and Gender Equality, by Ethnicity



percent of men did not consider gender equality to be a red line in any peace deal.

Interestingly, peace without gender equality had more support among respondents with secondary education (31 percent) than it did among those with only primary education (18 percent). No retreat from gender equality was a red line for 70 percent of respondents with only primary education compared to 58 percent of those educated to secondary level. At the same time, 44 percent of respondents with no formal education considered gender equality to be a red line while 56 percent of them did not offer any response.

More Tajiks than any other ethnic groups prioritized gender equality (64 percent), while 59 percent of Hazaras, 58 percent of Pashtuns, and 45 percent of other ethnic groups said they would not favor a peace deal that would cost them gender parity. Around 24 percent of Pashtuns, 28 percent of Tajiks, 33 percent of Hazaras, and 42 percent of other ethnic groups would prioritize peace over gender equality, while 18 percent of Pashtuns, 8 percent of Tajiks, 8 percent of Hazaras, and 13 percent of other groups expressed no opinion in this regard.

Peace at the Cost of Minority Rights?

Minority rights are the communal or individual rights of members of minority groups who “have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language” (OHCHR 1992). Since the beginning of the peace negotiations with the Taliban, minorities have raised concerns about any potential infringement of their rights as a result of a peace deal, as under Taliban rule, minorities were discriminated against (Marsden 2001, 11).

Respondents were asked whether they wanted peace at the expense of minority rights. Minority rights were seen as non-negotiable for at least 88 percent of them. Around 6 percent of respondents had no objection to a peace deal at the expense of minority rights while the remaining 6 percent did not answer this question. Very interestingly, respondents with no formal education were less prepared to compromise on minority rights than those with either secondary or only

Figure 20. Opinion on Peace and Minority Rights

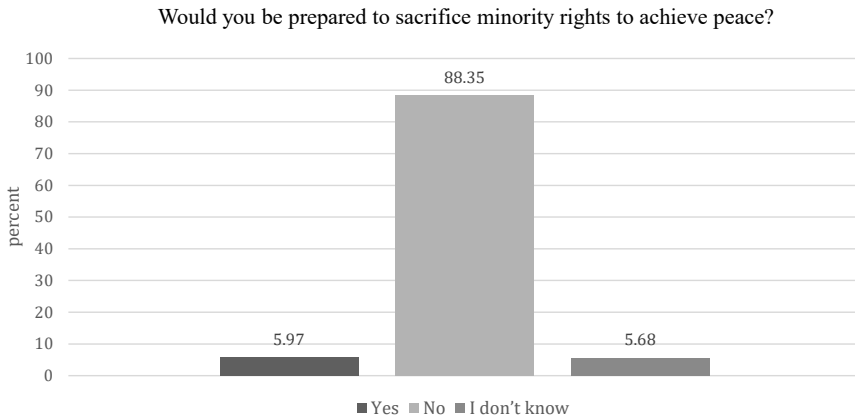
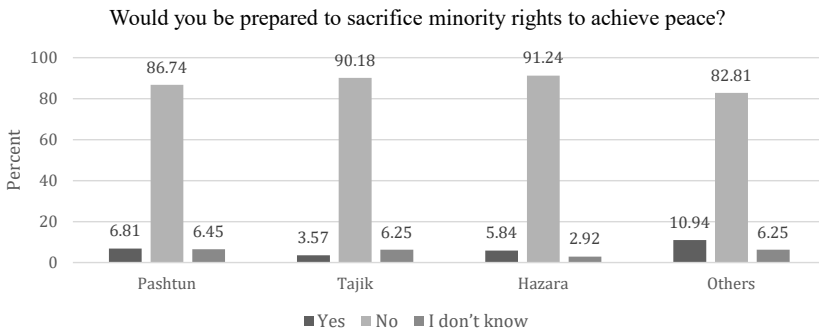


Figure 21. Opinion on Peace and Minority Rights, by Ethnicity



primary education. The percentages against sacrificing minority rights were 100 percent, 84 percent, and 86 percent, respectively. A mere 7 percent of respondents with secondary education and 5 percent with only primary education were willing to compromise minority rights for the sake of a peace deal.

The very high proportion of respondents in each of these three categories who were unwilling to sacrifice minority rights for the sake of peace could be due to their first-hand experience or witnessing of the Taliban’s discrimination against various minority groups.

Opposition to sacrificing minority rights is consistent across ethnic groups: 87 percent of Pashtuns, 90 percent of Tajiks, 91 percent of Hazaras, and 83 percent of other groups would not favor peace at the expense of the rights of minorities. Only 6 percent of Pashtuns, 6 percent of Tajiks, 3 percent of Hazaras, and 6 percent of other groups did not express a view on this question.

Contrary to what one might assume, although the Taliban are predominantly Pashtuns, a supermajority of Pashtuns were against a peace deal that would

involve the suppression of minority rights. Pashtuns and other ethnic groups, large and small, understand that working together is more practical and productive than trying to dominate one another. All the political factions have memories of the civil war that cost so many lives and economic resources. All the groups have prospered since the fall of the Taliban regime.

Conclusion

After years of war, the Afghan government is preparing to sign a peace deal with the Taliban. This survey was conducted to discover the perspectives and views of the Afghan population regarding the ongoing peace negotiations. We found that almost all Afghans are eager for peace, but they do not want peace at the expense of human rights, minority rights, and gender equality. Respondents overall were strongly supportive of human rights, but when asked about gender equality and women's rights their support was not so strong.

Most of our respondents were not interested in voting for the Taliban in any elections including presidential, parliamentary, and provincial council elections. This means that the Taliban would have little chance of winning a majority in the parliament or holding the presidency. Despite the Taliban's challenge to the Islamic nature of the 2004 constitution, most respondents said they would prefer to retain it or only amend it. A considerable majority favored an Islamic republic with regular elections rather than any other constitutional arrangement. We found that our respondents saw elections as an essential pillar of a representative regime.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank our supervisor, Dr. M. Bashir Mobasher; Dr. Kristin Ferebee, assistant professor of literature; as well as Mursal Mohammad Saeed, Madina Fazli, and other survey club members.

Notes

1. Supervised by Dr. M. Bashir Mobasher, the AUAF Survey Club is a student-led group of enthusiastic and energetic researchers at the American University of Afghanistan. Its main purpose is to gather and analyze the opinions of Afghans on various important matters through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Through its published papers, it seeks to convey public opinion to government policymakers as well as public, private, and international organizations.

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Submitted: November 8, 2020; Revised: May 5, 2021; Accepted: May 17, 2021