Afghanistan
A Transformation in Progress
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EDUCATION
Afghanistan’s Bright Token for the Future
In a small, sunlit classroom in a public school in western Kabul, a group of 25 girls, sitting on wooden chairs and leaning on the tables, repeat lines from their Dari textbooks. Following the recitation of their teacher, the students’ voices echo across the poorly-lit corridor of the school, creating a pleasant environment of learning. These students, between 9 and 11 years old, study in the fourth grade.

“I study with a lot of passion so that I will become a doctor and treat my people,” says 9-year-old Fatima, who wears black school uniform and a white headscarf. “I love studying because it’s how we can guarantee a bright future for ourselves and our country.”

Fatima is one of millions of school students who attend school every day, from the caves of Bamyan to the dusty deserts of Kandahar. This is a number that forms almost one third of the population of the country.

Education in post-Taliban Afghanistan is one of the most significant achievements of the country. During the Taliban regime in 2001, Afghanistan had less than 900,000 students—all of them boys. Today the number has increased more than tenfold, with girls forming almost 38 percent—3.5 million—of students. These students study in furnished classrooms, caves, tents, tree shades, and even under harsh sun in impoverished parts of the country.

According to the Ministry of Education, 9.5 million Afghan children attended school in 2016, an all-time high enrollment and a revolutionary 1,188% increase in students since 2001. University enrollment has also increased to an all-time high of 300,000 students. 2016 alone saw an enrollment increase of 1.1 million school students.

This is a revolutionary achievement that can be attributed to the generous assistance of the international community, supportive policies of the Afghan government and, most importantly, the desire of the Afghan people to be constructive members, rather than a burden on, society.
Education is the second highest area of government spending, second only to security. Since its establishment in late 2014, one of the National Unity Government’s primary focuses has been upgrading education in the country. According to the Ministry of Education, the government has worked to enhance the infrastructure supporting students, with 1,720 schools—11 percent of Afghanistan’s total schools—built since 2014. In 2015, the government provided more than 900,000 jeribs—or more than 440,000 acres—of land for building new schools. Students study a nationally standardized curriculum and the government distributed 35 million textbooks in 2015. Teacher training programs trained nearly 82,000 teachers across 48 teacher training centers in 2015. As part of an attempt to increase the presence of female teachers across the country, the government, with the help of international donors, started a program in which they have deployed 300 female teachers to provinces facing a lower presence of female teachers. These teachers will not only teach classes, but will also train new female teachers, with the goal of improving the teacher gender balance.

Afghanistan’s achievement in the realm of higher education is another success story. Since 2001, not only has the capacity of existing universities expanded significantly, but 124 private universities have been established—something that did not exist under the Taliban. These universities, most operating on early morning or evening shifts, offer the opportunity for both full-time students and the working class to advance their knowledge.

The national gains in the realm of education can be described not only by quantity but also quality. National experts review the education curriculum once in three years and incorporate new changes to keep textbooks up to date.
Afghanistan’s public and private universities, for the first time in the history, have started Master’s degree classes. According to a 2015 survey conducted by the Asia Foundation, 72 percent of citizens are satisfied with available educational opportunities.

“After three decades of war, we have stepped into a period of progression,” says Roya Hashimi, a teacher in a Kabul city school. “The educational curriculum in Afghanistan is much better than the time I was a student. This, and watching the kids coming to school with so much enthusiasm, makes me hopeful for the future of Afghanistan.”

In large part due to increased access and quality of education, literacy has dramatically increased in recent years, rising from 12 percent in 2001 to 38 percent today. The government has initiated more than 15,000 literacy courses across the country, with 411,843 students at these centers in 2015. The government has also broadcast 28 radio and 22 television educational programs, in an effort to increase the presence of educational materials outside of classrooms. While literacy has dramatically improved across the country, literacy rates remain low, and the government is mapping out a five-year plan to further tackle illiteracy.

While student enrollments are at an all-time high and the state of education has dramatically improved since 2001, Afghanistan has much work to do before all eligible students are enrolled in and attend school, and all students are offered high-quality educations. With the commitment of the government and continued support of the international community, Afghanistan can provide high-quality, universal education to the future doctors, politicians, teachers and caretakers of the country.
WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

An Emerging Story of Success

Rahima Zarifi, Director of Policy and Planning at the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, is a storyteller. Sitting in her Kabul office, an over-flowing garden of roses growing outside her window, she talks about women’s progress in Afghanistan. “It’s a success story,” she says, looking up from a soon-to-be released report outlining the government’s 5-year strategic plan for the inclusion of women in society, “Afghan women have endured so much, and come so far.”

- 28 percent of parliamentarians are female—a proportion higher than 67 percent of countries tracked by the World Bank
- Women run 30 media outlets and 800 businesses nationally
- Three and a half million Afghan girls attend school
- Initiatives of First Lady Rula Ghani mark the first active women’s rights campaigning of a first lady since 1929
From 1996-2001, under the Taliban, women were entirely excluded from public life. After years of their faces being covered by burqas, the women of Afghanistan have made extraordinary progress in the realms of government representation, professional opportunities, education and their full inclusion as members of society. Afghan women are increasingly becoming part of the country’s local, provincial and national governments. Twenty-eight percent of Afghanistan’s parliamentarians are female—a proportion higher than 67 percent of countries tracked by the World Bank, including France, Canada, Poland, Australia and the United States. More than 20 percent of civil service employees are female and 10 percent of government leadership positions are held by women, including four cabinet members, 240 judges, eight deputy ministers, two ambassadors and the deputy chair of the High Peace Council, the body mandated to handle peace affairs with the Taliban and other insurgent groups. The Women in Government Program places 3,000 female university graduates in paid civil service internships, giving them the skills and experience for their future careers.

“IT IS MY PERSONAL COMMITMENT AND THE COMMITMENT OF THE NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT TO ACTIVATE THE PRESENCE OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN ALL SPHERES.”

President Ashraf Ghani

Job opportunities across sectors have hugely increased for Afghan women. A record two-thirds of the population believes women have the right to work outside of the home, according to the Asia Society’s 2015 Survey of the Afghan People. Women have increasingly become involved in Afghanistan’s security forces. The Strategy and Action Plan for the Integration of Female Police has introduced 1,300 female police officers.
to Afghanistan's national force, and more than 2,000 armed service members are female. Three thousand seven hundred females comprise 20 percent of the nation's doctors. More than 2,000 women work in the private media, with more than 30 media outlets and 800 businesses headed by women. In April 2016, female music conductor Negin Khpalwak led the debut performance of the country's first all-female orchestra. Afghan athlete Mastoora Arezoo was born in Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban. "In school, boys had access to sports facilities while girls were told to occupy themselves with chores," she says, "I got tired of this." She went on to found a youth sports publication, assume the presidencies of the National Badminton Federation and Asia's Badminton Federation and become Afghanistan's National Sports Ambassador.

President Ashraf Ghani has repeatedly emphasized his government's commitment to the cause of women. Initiatives of First Lady Rula Ghani mark the first active women's rights campaigning of a first lady since Afghanistan's Queen Soraya, who was First Lady from 1919-1929. In May 2016, Afghanistan hosted the Third International Symposium on Empowerment and the Role of Women in Afghanistan. "[Afghan women] want progress equal to men and an equal and multidimensional role in the country's development," President Ghani said at the conference, "It is my personal commitment and the commitment of the National Unity Government to activate the presence of Afghan women in all spheres." Today, three and a half million Afghan girls attend school, with nearly a third of that number newly enrolled in 2016. The National Unity Government has endorsed a plan to introduce female deputy directors in all 34 Ministry of Education provincial offices. In an effort to increase female teacher representation, the General Partnership for Education Program has sent 300 female teachers to six provinces with historically disproportionate teacher gender representation.

Despite this progress, Afghanistan has a long way to go before its women are full and equal citizens, both under law and in practice. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that 46 percent of girls are married before the age of 18, and only 21 percent of girls nationally complete primary school. Female illiteracy is above 80 percent, and stigma against females working remains prohibitively high in many parts of the country.
The Ending Violence Against Women law has yet to be ratified by parliament, and Afghanistan has among the highest rates of gender-based violence and maternal mortality in the world. While Afghanistan has made remarkable progress in the state and rights of women over the past 15 years and the 2016 Symposium put forward a cohesive and comprehensive set of recommendations and goals, there is much need for international support to ensure the continuation of improved rights and sustainability of Afghan women’s rights.

“In the past 15 years, we have come a long way, says Simin Barekzai, a female Member of Parliament, “The commitment of the National Unity Government is promising. But the mission will remain difficult because in 2001 we started from a very low point—a situation where women were not even allowed to come out of their houses. We still have a long journey.”
AFGHANISTAN has gained an international reputation as a lost cause, a country stuck in a cycle of corruption, violence and drugs. However, the Afghanistan of 2016 offers a different reality—a reality that presents a stark difference from widespread opinions held in many Western capitals. Since 2001, Afghanistan has come a long way. The national GDP has expanded more than eight-fold in the past 15 years. According to the World Bank, GDP per capita has more than tripled from $190 in 2002 to $620 in 2015. Despite gloomy predictions, the past two years have witnessed particularly remarkable progress, marked by significant anti-corruption measures and relative economic growth.

2015 marked an all-time high of $570 million in exports—a $150 million increase from 2013, according to the Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization. The government has implemented extensive reforms that have helped boost domestic revenue by 21 percent from 2014 to 2015. In 2015, Afghanistan not only met an International Monetary Fund (IMF) revenue collection target for the first time in 15 years but also exceeded the target by more than $315 million, which led to more than $90 million in World Bank assistance. All sources of domestic revenue increased in 2015, according to the World Bank, with tax revenues increasing by 14 percent and customs duties by 17.2 percent from the previous year. Non-tax revenues recorded the most significant increase, growing by 46 percent. As a result of reforms to both revenue collection and expenditure, the fiscal position improved significantly in 2015.
Domestic revenues increased to more than 10 percent of GDP in 2015, which marked a 1.3 percent increase from 2014. Total government expenditures increased less than one percent from 2014 to 2015.

The National Unity Government has made anti-corruption a national priority, enacting a number of concrete measures to crack down on corruption. The government has set out a five-year financial management plan, called the Public Financial Management Reform Project II, which maps out the country’s long-term path to financial sustainability. The plan focuses on major reforms including a clear articulation of national priorities, reformed budget process and investment in processes that will eliminate corruption and improve efficiency.

A second plan, The Afghanistan National Development Strategy, aims to lead Afghanistan towards self-sustainability, lead the international community’s support towards priorities set by the government and transform Afghanistan from an import-heavy to an export-heavy economy. As part of an anti-corruption campaign, more than 90 percent of state officials, including the President and Chief Executive Officer, have publicly declared their assets.

The government has also established a special commission, the National Procurement Authority (NPA) to take results-oriented action against corruption. President Ghani oversees the Authority, and CEO Abdullah and many ministers actively participate in the group’s activities, demonstrating a direct national government interest in anti-corruption efforts.
The NPA has reviewed over 900 contracts, worth $2.5 billion, and has saved a total of $208 million that would have been otherwise lost to corruption. Over the past 12 years, Afghanistan has achieved an eightfold increase in revenue collection, reaching $1.9 billion in 2015, according to Ministry of Finance data. The National Unity Government has implemented a series of reforms that have sparked economic growth. For example, the National Unity Government introduced a new tax law, called the Tax Administration Law, which provides a legal framework for managing a centralized taxation administration. The government also took measures to deepen the tax base and formalize tax obligations for small taxpayers by conducting a comprehensive taxpayer assessment in Kabul.

This assessment was the first step in the digitization of a tax registration system for thousands of small taxpayers, and records GPS coordinates of businesses to create a Geographic Information Map for future years of tax collection.

Afghanistan lies on major trade routes in the region and beyond, and customs taxes form 46 percent of the country’s national revenue. The customs system in the country has been historically besieged by rampant corruption. To address this issue, the Afghan government implemented a set of reforms which led to the dismantling of outdated systems, dismissal of 25 percent of customs officials on corruption charges, a new generation of highly trained technical staff and the establishment of a strict oversight system.

“Afghanistan must fight corruption, and lay down our plan to address the significant challenges that lie ahead and our path to self-reliance.”

-Eklil Hakimi, Minister of Finance
The introduction of the Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA), which has been implemented in 98 percent of customs locations, offers a modernized and more customer-oriented process to address the growing revenue gap that had emerged with the reduction of the international financial aid. A second system, Standard Integrated Government Tax Administration System (SIGTAS), further digitizes the tax administration process.

These reforms and the National Unity Government's commitment to rooting out corruption, increasing domestic revenue and reducing reliance on foreign aid, has sustained the country's economic growth, which according to the recent World Bank is projected to be 3.8 percent by 2018.

While the country has made outstanding progress towards sustainability, Afghanistan still remains dependent on foreign aid, with international aid roughly equal to GDP. Corruption in many layers of the government remains a major challenge. Unemployment is high, which fuels violence and political instability. All of these indicators point to the fragility of the achievements of the country in the past decade, particularly in the past two years. That's why it is of paramount importance that the National Unity Government maintain its course vis-à-vis concrete reform attempts and Afghanistan's international allies support the country through difficult but promising times. Afghanistan must become a constructive member of the global community of democracy rather a liability to the world.
MEDIA

The Anchor of Afghanistan’s Nascent Democracy
Under the Taliban, the free media didn’t exist in Afghanistan. During this time, from 1996-2001, there were zero Afghan independent journalists, zero access to internet and zero independent radio stations or publications. Television was illegal. Under strict purdah laws, women were confined to homes and forbidden from working, including in the media. Taking a photograph of any living creature or conducting an unauthorized interview was punishable by flogging or imprisonment.

Against Afghanistan’s harsh historical backdrop of extreme suppression and control, a new media reality has emerged. From the void of 2001, more than 1,400 independent media outlets have grown, including 75 television stations, 200 radio stations and more than 1,200 print media outlets. In 2001, the only independent media workers in the country were foreign correspondents, whose activities were closely monitored by the Taliban regime. Today, more than 12,000 male and female media workers investigate and report Afghanistan’s current events, facilitating a transparent media landscape and public access to information. More than 2,000 journalism students study in universities across the country, training to be the voice and debate of Afghanistan’s future.

It’s a story often told in numbers, but rarely in terms of its deep impact on Afghan society. Free and open media has played a fundamental role in strengthening Afghanistan’s nascent democracy, promoting human rights and exposing corruption. Information sharing and communication have assisted in bridging the gap between Kabul and the rest of the country—one of Afghanistan’s historical challenges. This transformation has changed the very fabric of Afghan society, enabling Afghans of all backgrounds to communicate and understand each other. It has established a new precedent for news media independence and offered a new generation of Afghans the opportunity to peacefully mobilize, organize and demand accountability from public officials. The new media landscape has provided a means for self-expression, individual identity and participation in the national democratic process.
Afghanistan’s National Unity Government, which was established in 2014, has repeatedly emphasized the importance of free media and freedom of expression, providing both legal frameworks and moral support for freedom of the press in the country. Freedom of expression is a constitutionally guaranteed right and a Mass Media Law prohibits censorship and guarantees citizens the right to information. Within the first few weeks of taking office, President Ashraf Ghani endorsed the Access to Information Law, facilitating transparent access to information. This endorsement marked a major shift in the media landscape, reassuring the media and public that access to information is not only an international ideal, but a value to which the Afghan government is deeply committed. The National Unity Government finalized the Statute on Founding and Activity of Private Mass Media, which guarantees the rights of journalists and media workers working for the private media outlets. The government directed all government spokespersons to give public comment or press conferences at least four days per week.

The Afghanistan Journalists Safety Committee reported a 43 percent decrease in violence against journalists in the first six months of 2015, as compared to the same time period the previous year—something that can be attributed to the actions taken by the National Unity Government in support of journalists’ safety.

“Without doubt, freedom of the press is one of the main pillars of our nascent democracy.”

President Ashraf Ghani

In January 2016, President Ghani issued a decree obligating all government workers to assist journalists with provision of information, ordering security organizations to take concrete and meaningful measures towards journalist safety and incorporating best practices for treatment and provision of information to journalists within security forces curriculum. The decree also directs relevant government agencies to re-open all unaddressed or dismissed cases since 2001 against murdered journalists.
Celebrating World Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2016, President Ghani honored more than a dozen journalists with the country’s highest medal and appreciation letters, marking the first time in the country’s history that the medal was awarded to a civilian. President Ghani appointed an Ambassador at Large for Freedom of Expression, to promote and protect the free press.

“Without doubt, freedom of the press is one of the main pillars of our nascent democracy,” President Ghani said. “The journalists who provide accurate and balanced investigative reports can play a vital role in institutionalizing democracy. Afghanistan’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, has also manifested commitment to journalists’ safety and freedom of the press, and has called the free media “The voice of our nation.” Against the backdrop of the withdrawal of international security forces and decreasing financial support from the international community, the National Unity Government’s support of its constituents’ rights to free information and a transparent government has not waivered.

Despite these achievements, freedom of the press and freedom of expression remain fragile in Afghanistan. January 21, 2016 marked Black Wednesday, in which the Taliban attacked a bus of Tolo TV, one of Afghanistan’s leading networks. The attack killed seven media workers and marked the deadliest day against free media in the history of the country. Afghanistan continues to suffer from increasing violence, perpetuated by Taliban and other terrorists, economic dependence and a multitude of other challenges. Yet sustained support from the international community, paired with deep commitment from the Afghan government, these gains will be reinforced and become an integral part of Afghanistan’s democracy.