
Stop the “No Plan” Plan: Start a New Political Process

Charles Ramsey

RFI Senior Fellow and Resident Scholar at Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion

Afghanistan: The Next Chapter
Cornerstone Forum Series

More than one year after the Taliban’s nearly unimpeded takeover of Afghanistan, religious freedom and associated rights in the country are spiraling towards an all-time low. The modest gains in these freedoms made over the past two decades risk complete erasure. The withdrawal of NATO forces and subsequent rapid fall of the previous government in 2021 sparked an emergency evacuation of the international community and of Afghans who supported their work. With energies focused on the closure of diplomatic offices and the withdrawal, there has been limited contact with actors remaining in Afghanistan.

This series invites scholars, diplomats, and regional and policy experts to share their insights into the country and provide recommendations to ensure protections for religious and ethnic minorities and other vulnerable communities, including women and children, across the country.

The world watched in dismay when provincial capitals in Afghanistan fell to Taliban forces in rapid succession in the summer of 2021. With more than 160 extra-judicial killings in the first half of 2022 and the recent spate of terrorist [attacks](#) targeting mosques and schools, violence continues to escalate. Circumstances today are dire, and many face danger, hunger, loss of opportunity in education and employment, and the continued uncertainty experienced in the absence of a peace forged through a political process inclusive of the principal constituencies. Simply stated, at this point there is no plan for Afghanistan.

Meanwhile the people suffer. There is a shortage of basic needs and services, and people do not feel safe. Attacks against schools and places of worship, like at the school in Kabul which killed 53 people, including 46 girls and women, and wounded more than 110 others, is yet another example of the continued atrocities that have paralyzed society and that hold Afghans in a grip of fear.

Time is of the essence. The present regime is neither equipped nor authorized to rule on behalf of the Afghan people. It is a self-described caretaker government that is not designed to be – nor is it progressing to become – a functioning provider for the services of the nation or the needs of the people. The current situation is not tenable and it is not of neutral value. More time is not going to

bring greater security and better governance, but rather further deterioration and the exacerbation of tensions with neighboring countries in the region. The vulnerable are exploited, sections of society are denied basic rights, and violent skirmishes between factions are rapidly descending into full blown war.

The Taliban is not living up to their end of agreements. Promises have not been kept, and one is hard pressed to find any indicators of change. The assurance that militant groups would not be allowed to operate from Afghanistan was a central element of the deal Washington signed with the Taliban in 2021, which led to the withdrawal of U.S. troops. But a UN Security Council report released in June 2022 warned that the [Taliban and al-Qaeda](#) remain close, which was dramatically evidenced by the presence and subsequent elimination of Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul on July 31, 2022. This further adds to the deficit in trust between the United States and the Taliban, as it undermines attempts towards functional cooperation. This alone is more than enough to make the case for more robust engagement with other factions, but there are other unkept promises as well.

Again on October 14, 2022, the regime announced that [women](#) will have rights according to Islamic law to work and to study, but there are no signs of implementation. Women of all ethnicities continue to be denied access to learning and employment, and are required to travel with a male chaperone, unlike any other Muslim majority nation. The Taliban [promised pardons](#) and have made assurances of safety to all who fought against them including government officials, the police and the armed forces. But instead of amnesty there have been executions, searches, intimidation and threats. This has created a climate where most opposition leaders do not feel safe to return or welcomed to engage in substantive dialogue.

The Taliban also promised security for embassies and foreign organizations, but there is neither the commitment nor the capacity to provide these, as seen most recently in the attack on the Russian embassy in Kabul. The regime promised to eradicate poppy production and to end the narcotics industry, but Afghanistan continues to be a leading hub for the production and trafficking of drugs such as heroin. UN monitors say the illicit drugs industry continues to be a major source of revenue in the country, bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

The collapse of the elected government, and the system of representation forged over the past 20 years, has left a gaping void of leadership. Power now is concentrated in the hands of Pashtun leaders affiliated with the Taliban. Afghanistan, however, is home to peoples of diverse languages, ethnicities, religious beliefs, and political affiliations. Bonds are built by consensus and sustained through mutually beneficial relationships. A functional unity that abides and that endures, therefore, takes time to cultivate and must be grounded in shared values and commitments. The needs of the nation are many, but perhaps the most pressing of these at present is that of *vision*. The greatest movements forward have at times germinated from collapse, when a new clarity emerged along with

a shared story of who we are as a people, and where we are going, and how we can move forward from here.

The United States and its allies must pursue a more robust engagement with representatives of Afghanistan's diverse constituencies. There are calls for the establishment of an [international group](#) to engage with the Taliban leadership, but this approach is too narrow in focus. It may at first seem functional, or better than nothing, but it will not produce results consistent with the aspirations of the Afghan people. A better way is that proposed by US Special Representative Tom West who has called for Afghans, those who are both inside and outside their country, to organize and speak with one voice to their communities and to the Taliban. This type of organization cannot happen without support, and this is precisely where the international community can rally and re-engage.

Currently there is no unified strategy to coalesce support and to seek ways to move forward. There is no process to help revitalize the political process. But most importantly, there is no clarity on who represents the people of Afghanistan. There are informal networks who remain active in consultation, but these do not have the necessary support to present their ideas in a formalized and actionable manner. At this point, it is not clear who speaks for the diverse constituencies of the land and who needs to be at the negotiating table. There are capable and experienced individuals, but no cohesive effort to map these actors or to bring them together onto a unified platform.

If there is a silver lining to be found, it is that there is a new generation of capable and committed Afghans that span the great diversity of the nation and who are hungry to engage. There has been considerable investment in the education and training of new leaders who now are watching for the opportunity to step forward and serve their country. These are former ambassadors, elected representatives, and cabinet members. They are now located in Afghanistan, in neighboring countries, and literally around the world. This is a generation of bridge builders who remain deeply connected with their own communities, culture, and language, and who are also fluent in other major languages, digitally native, and actively attuned to global conversations. There is no future for Afghanistan without their participation, and the global community has a role to play in seeing these come forward to give voice and vision for their country.

There must be a forum for bringing this generation of leaders together. There is a pressing need to identify, gather, and resource a diverse representative leadership who can outline a plan for strategic action. Such forums, given adequate time and support, allow representative leaders to probe ideas, virtues, sources of authority, and shared beliefs that form the basis of a flourishing society. This is not starting from scratch, but rather it is the convening of leaders who can draw from and build upon their training and professional experience to express the desires of their respective communities and to address the circumstances particular to Afghanistan today.

The Taliban's policies have been met with resistance from the international community, the constituencies of formerly elected representatives, and from within the ranks of the Taliban itself. The resistance has purchased [precious time](#) for new possibilities to arise. There are those willing to come to the table and to explore a way forward, but time is of the essence because that window will not remain open for long. U.S. support in underwriting and facilitating such engagement is the need of the day.

Charles M. Ramsey is a Resident Scholar at the Baylor University Institute for the Studies of Religion, a part-time lecturer in the Department of History and an Associate Chaplain. Prior to joining Baylor University, Ramsey was Assistant Professor of Religion and Public Policy at Forman Christian College (Lahore, Pakistan) with dual appointments in the Department of Religion and the Center for Public Policy and Governance (Peace Studies).

He holds a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from the University of Birmingham (UK), MA in the History of Religion from Baylor University, PGC in Poverty Reduction from the Centre for Development, Environment, and Policy at University of London (SOAS), and BA from Baylor University (University Scholar, Phi Beta Kappa).



All views and opinions presented in this essay are solely those of the author and publication on Cornerstone does not represent an endorsement or agreement from the Religious Freedom Institute or its leadership.

Permanent Link:

<https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/2016/6/12/introducing-cornerstone>

The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security

Religious Freedom Institute
316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE | Suite 501
Washington, D.C. 20003
202.838.7734 | rfi.org