

Political Participation of Women in Afghanistan in the Present Set-up

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Women have been playing the most significant role in the overall structure of the society and socio-politico fabric of the state. A country can do well where they are given their due rights and given the opportunity of working shoulder to shoulder with men. The focus of this study is to analyze the role played by women in Afghanistan with special reference to the comparative analysis of the Taliban and the post-Taliban era. They have become very active in the post-Taliban era on account of their increased role as a consequence of the allocation of 27% seats in the legislative assembly of the country. The objective of the study centers around analyzing the social and political participation of women in the country, while research questions focus on different hurdles in the way of their political participation, challenges and issues posed by the non-state actors, and the extent to which women have been successful in achieving their goals. The paper focuses on the present status of women with regard to their participation in the social and political activities of life. The theoretical framework of this study is given by the 'Theory of Victimization' which circles around five basic tenets by providing foundations to the role played by the women in the war-stricken country of Afghanistan.

Key words: *Women, Politics, Participation, Challenges, Issues, and Social Aspects.*



Introduction

Women have a great role to play in the social and political spheres of life in all parts of the world. They can work shoulder to shoulder with men for the peace, progress and prosperity of a state. Their participation and involvement in the affairs of the parliament and civil society has tremendously increased since 2001 when the Taliban were dethroned from powers of the government by the United States and her allied powers (Sopko, 2021). It was the international community that have triggered women to participate in the social and political affairs of life. They have been able to capture seats in the Afghan parliament and actively participate in the various activities of life. They have been able to vote in huge numbers during the national elections and participated aggressively in advocating the protection of women in an individual capacity as well as a collective capacity. Despite all the efforts made by the international community for the participation of women in the political sphere, women politicians and civil society members continue to have limited influence on policy, while at the same time they are confronted with disproportionate intimidation and violence on a daily basis.

Problem Statement

Women have been deprived of their due rights in Afghanistan for a long time on account of the type of government that ruled over the country. They have faced this dilemma during the Taliban regime and even during the post-9/11 incident when they were subjected to many hardships thus incapacitating them to remain active in the social and political spheres of life. However, in the post-9/11 event, efforts were made to increase their seats in the parliaments and give them more responsibility in the sphere of government. The focus of this paper is to analyze the role of women with respect to their participation in the social and political life of the country.

Objective

To analyze the social and political participation of women in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 syndrome

Research Questions

- i) What are the hurdles in the way of their political participation?
- ii) How do they face the challenges and issues posed by the non-state actors?
- iii) To what extent have they been successful in achieving their goals?

Significance

This study is very significant since it deals with a very sensitive issues of girls and women that play a key role in the overall development of a country, but they have been deprived of this right in Afghanistan for a long time. This paper analyses the various factors that stand in the way of their active participation, threats and challenges posed by the non-state actors, the status of women in the current set up of the government and the their active participation in the overall structure of the affairs of the state.

Methodology

This study relies on the qualitative approach mostly relying on secondary sources for which the theoretical framework of ‘victimhood’ has been utilized to give a practical analysis of the women participation and challenges in their way. The theory gives a true picture of the distinction between the ‘victim’ and the ‘perpetrator’ as a result of a clash of interest (Jacoby, 2014). The paper aims at the formulating a political theory of victimhood focusing on making a distinction between victimization as an act of harm perpetrated against a particular person or group of persons and victimhood as form of a collective identity based on that harm (Jacoby, 2014). Looking in this perspective, the women have been victimized in Afghanistan during the different phases of history and particularly during the Taliban Regime when they were deprived of their active participation in the different walks of life.

Theoretical Framework

The theory gives five different stages experienced by the victims encompassing from the act of victimization to the recognition of victim-based identity. These include a) structural conduciveness b) political consciousness c) ideological concurrence d) political mobilization and e) political recognition. The paper elaborates these stages from the practical examples of women in Afghanistan. Firstly, as an identity, victimhood gains more prominence in societies that recognize justice. Secondly, victimhood accompanies a struggle for recognition. Thirdly, victim rivalries complicate straightforward analysis of victimhood in the conflict zones. Fourthly, it is political mobilization that creates awareness among the women for their rights in the society and finally, the political recognition of the rights of the victimized people by the perpetrators.

In the first stage, it envisages that a society which is worn by conflicts and civil war is more prone to victimization of the oppressed class by the oppressors. But it is the actually the sense of victimization that gains impetus in societies that do recognize justice. It is a fact that Afghanistan has been a war-stricken country since the intervention of the Soviet Union in 1979 but the search for justice has always been there that has given primacy to the women to fight for their rights and participation in the affairs of the state. In the second stage the sense of

victimization gives birth to the struggle for recognition of what is missing in the existing circumstances of life. This has led to the recognition of the rights and active participation of women in the socio-political spheres of life. In the third stage, rivalries between the victimized and the perpetrator may complicate the situation further whereby converting the whole zone into a conflict zone resulting in a tug-of-war game between the two opposing parties. A meticulous look into the state of affairs in Afghanistan shows that there has been a clash of interest between the two in the past and even now but again this has to be determined by the future form of government in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Tariq, 2021).

At present, women enjoy active participation and involvement in the socio-political spheres of the country on account of their greater number of seats in the parliament of the country, almost 27% of the legislative assembly. But the US withdrawal from Afghanistan will determine whether women will be able to maintain their current status in the country or they will face the same fate as they did in the past (Tariq, 2020). In the current state of affairs, it is political mobilization by the women that has enabled them to participate in the in the socio-political spheres of life as a consequence of their increased number of seats thus enabling them to work for the entire women community. In the last stage, both the stakeholders and non-stakeholders (Taliban) have agreed to the demands of the women by allowing them to work shoulder to shoulder with men for the betterment of the country. In most of the cases, at the local level, the Taliban have even allowed the girls and women to attend schools and partake of social and political affairs of the country, which is a sign of a good omen. But the most important and determining factor will be the post- US withdrawal scenario from Afghanistan that will decide the future politics of the women in the war-stricken country of Afghanistan.

Moreover, it is also significant to mention that nothing can be said with certainty with respect to the complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan as ex-president of US, Donald Trump had fixed May1, 2021 to be the culminating stage of complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan whereby he made certain hasty decisions in his tweet and public meetings focusing on the withdrawal (Tariq D, 2021). But now, the Biden administration has extended the date to September 11, 2021 as the final date for the complete withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan (Al-Jazeera, 2021). Pentagon Press Secretary, John Kirby has reiterated that any untoward incident by the non-state actors in Afghanistan would not affect the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This will be a very fruitful step towards the future of the country as she would be in a position to govern their country as they would exercise their free choice in the management of their internal and external polices and maintain security of the country with no assistance from the foreign troops.

Keeping in view the theoretical framework of the study, it does fulfill all the pre-requisites of victimization as enshrined by the Jacoby in 2014 in his article, “A Theory of Victimhood: Politics, Conflict and the Construction of Victim-based Identity”. The period of Taliban

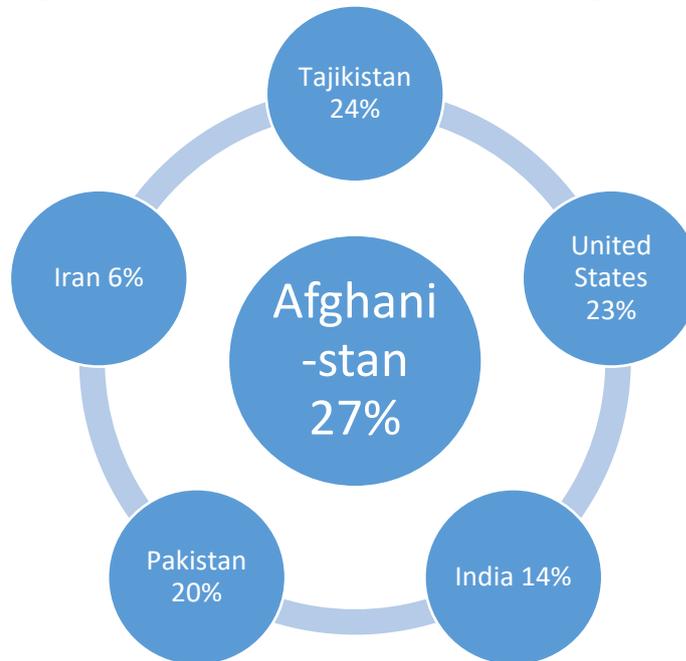
Regime was an era when they were not given participation in the socio-political spheres of life since the Taliban believed in the imposition of strict Islamic laws that was also one of the causes of their dethronement from the power. The post- 9/11 episode in Afghanistan gave the opportunity to the various stakeholders including women to participate in the affairs of the state. This enabled the women to be active in their own sphere of activities. The government of President Hamid Karzai and subsequent democratic governments had the same ideological harmony with regard to the women's participation in the social and political spheres of life that brought about their active involvement in the country. Besides, the political mobilisation of the women coupled with their untiring struggles for their rights, also played an important role in giving them their active participation in the various fields of life. This got practical manifestation in the form of political recognition by the government and other legal stakeholders of the country.

Women's Seats in Parliament

It was the fall of the Taliban government and the consequent Bonn Agreement of 2001 that gave unprecedented opportunities to the women for political participation and involvement in the various activities of life (Sopko, 2021). In the Emergency *Loya Jirga* of 2002 that made provision for the appointment of an interim government, women were given 180 out of 1500 delegates (Emadi, 2008). During the 2003 Constitutional *Loya Jirga* 114 out of the 504 delegates were women (Oliver Lough, 2009). In the elections of 2004, women were able to capture a majority of seats following the enforcement of a Constitution that reserved 68 seats of the total 249 in the Lower House of the parliament and 17 out of 102 seats in the Upper House of the parliament (Afghanistan, The Constitution of Afghanistan, Article 83 and 84 :AREU, Women's Rights, Gender Equality, and Transition: Securing gains, moving forward,, 2013). Owing to the active participation of women in the political sphere of the country, after the parliamentary elections of 2018, women captured 67 seats of the total of 316 seats in the Lower House while in the Upper House, they got 19 seats, thus the total strength of the women in both Houses of the parliament stands at 86 (Afghanistan, Inter- Parliamentary Union, "Afghanistan", 2020). It is worth-mentioning that the proportion of seats held by women in the Lower House is 27%, which is higher than the proportion of seats held by women in the United States, in Pakistan it is 20%, in Iran it is 6%, Tajikistan it is 24% while in the India it is 14% (Bank, 2020).

Keeping in view the comparative analysis of the various countries, it is crystal clear that women in Afghanistan enjoy more seats than most of the countries of the world. Having 27% representation in the parliament of the country, the ratio of women is much more than that of most of the liberal and democratic countries. Here the most important thing is to preserve the current strength of women seats in both Houses of the parliament after the US forces leaves Afghanistan as per the terms and conditions of the US-Taliban Agreement, followed by the

intra-Afghan Talks (Tariq, 2020). Women representation in the legislative assemblies of the various countries is given in the following graphical way through their percentage.



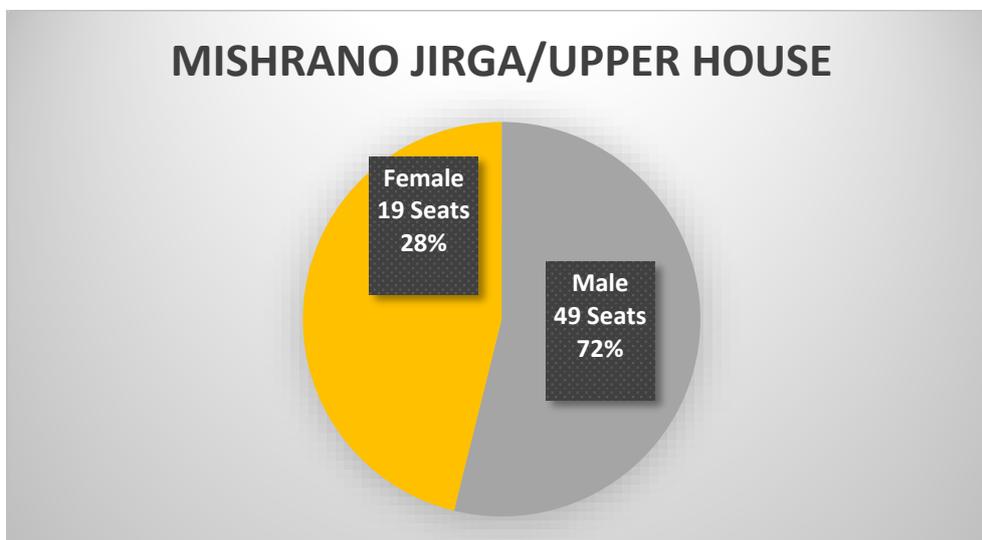
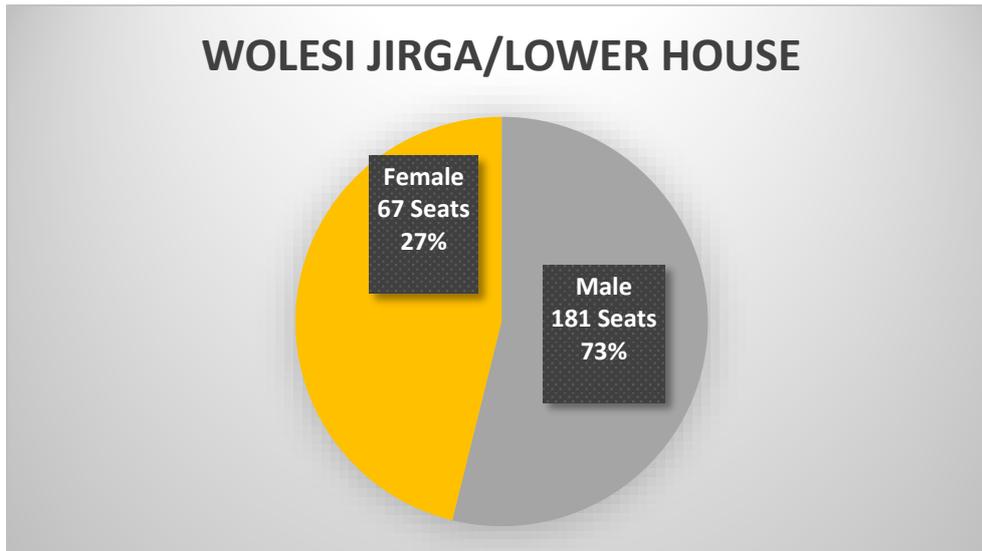
Of all the countries mentioned in the table, Afghanistan holds the greatest number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of the country, which shows the importance of women in the political spheres of the country.

During the first tenure of Ashraf Ghani as a president of Afghanistan, three women were appointed as Women Ministers, 11 Women as Deputy Ministers and 5 Women Ambassadors, including the first ever women ambassador to the United States (Sopko, 2021). In his second tenure, the president nominated 2 Women Ministers out of a total 14 ministers in the cabinet while appointing 9 women to the 46-member High Council for National Reconciliation (Ali Adili and Thomas Ruttig, 2020).. According to Wazhma Frogh, an Afghan women activist, *“When the constitution was being drafted, we were in constant fights with the warlords and conservative men who had managed to come back into power.....while many terms such as ‘gender’ ‘constitution’ and ‘equality’ were foreign and new to us, we were advocating for women’s rights freedoms and equality. We were able to mobilize huge numbers of women at that time. Article 22 [of the constitution], which mandates gender equality before the law, which came as a result of the advocacy work that we did. It was done with a lot of help from the international community”* (Sopko, 2021).

So, during the formation of the constitution, women activists and the government functionaries had to fight against the two basic forces; firstly against the warlords who had been against the participation of women in their active involvement in the sphere of the various fields. Secondly, they had also to fight against the forces of the conservative people who have been very limited and restricted in giving women their due share in the politics of the country. It was as a result

of the efforts made by the government and the social activists that led to the triumph of the women against warlordism and conservatism. This effort made Afghanistan an enlightened country whereby women got their active involvement in the politics of the government and other social activities of life. For the first time in the history of the country, women got the maximum number of seats in the legislature and executive spheres of the country.

Graphic Representation of Male/Female in the Afghan Parliament



It is important to mention that the numbers game doesn't influence policy and legislation in Afghanistan. It is rather the quota system that helps in addressing the historic imbalances in many legislative bodies of the world. Even the numbers game matters, but only when the members are strong enough to make their influence stronger and get the prominent hand in the affairs of the legislation and other executive affairs of the country. It is tantamount to the idiosyncratic nature of the decision-making powers of the strong agents that enable them to get



an upper hand in the overall decision-making process of the country. As far as Afghanistan is concerned, women candidates, officeholders, and their family members face disproportionate threats, violence, and intimidation and security challenges from the various circles of the Taliban (Sopko, 2021). For example, in August 2013, an Afghan woman parliamentarian was kidnapped from the province of Kandahar while in another ambush an Afghan parliamentarian's car killed her eight-year old daughter (Rafique, 2019). According to a report of 2019, there is pervasive sexual harassment against female candidates where male election staff and other stakeholders ask female candidates for sexual favors in lieu of votes (Rafique, 2019). Women politicians, particularly, the most outspoken in public places also face the same fate of intimidation and threats from the male aristocracies and religious figures (Bibler & Rafique, 2019). Many women politicians and parliamentarians had to rely on the local power-brokers and patronage networks from strong peers. Like their male colleagues, female politicians must circumnavigate a socially conservative political milieu, which advocates for pro-women's legislation and might mean risking some degree of support from their own constituency (Sopko, 2021).

Women have suffered a lot during the 40 years of Afghanistan war while they have been longing for peace in the country so as to carry on their normal activities of life (Barr, 2020). They have also been feeling the sense of inequality which encourages them to fight for their equality since the fall of the Taliban Regime. In their fight against inequality, they have been successful and now they are ministers, governors, judges, police and soldiers. Their success has been to such an extent that they have a lion's share in the Afghan parliament, more than do the women have in their Congress. But it is also a bitter fact that the Afghan women's right activists are confronted with the resistance from the Afghan government coupled with lack of support from the international donning agencies. This has compelled them to fight alone for their rights at the negotiating table for peace talks. This exclusion coupled with persistent discrimination of the Taliban against women and girls have resulted in the increased fears among the women's circle adding further to their worries for their rights (Barr, 2020).

Though the US-Taliban Deal of February 29, 2020 mainly focusses on the US withdrawal from Afghanistan yet it paved the way for the political participation of women in different activities of life. It provided for the initiation of steps regarding the various rights and duties of women in a democratic country. It is also worth mentioning that the Taliban Regime from 1996 to 2001 was a period of notoriety while denying women and girls access to education, employment, freedom of movement, health care and subjecting them to violence including public lashing or execution by stoning to death (Barr, 2020). But there has also been a change in the attitude of Taliban towards women and girls as they allow them to attend the educational institutes and that too was in response to the pressure posed by the community members. This is just the soft side of the picture while the dark side of the picture says that there have been attacks of violence against the 'Girls Schools' coupled with act of blocking women and girls from exercising many of their basic rights, while at the same time, remaining opposed to gender equality (Barr, 2020).

Women's Increased Role

In February 2021, a Taliban leader while talking about building an Islamic system stated that they are concerned with shaping a system where all Afghan will have equal rights and particularly the rights of women, ranging from the right to education to the right to work as granted by Islam - these are guaranteed and protected (Barr, 2020). Cynics are of the view that women enjoyed equal rights even during the Taliban Regime as enshrined by the Islamic jurisprudence (1996-2001). So, there are mixed views about the education of girls and various activities of women in the social and political sphere of life. As of 2019, of the 9,708 elected community development council 50% members were women, which shows their equal representation to men in the developmental sphere of life (Sopko, 2021). More importantly, of the 87% of community development, included at least one priority project for women (Bank, Citizens Charter Afghanistan Project, Implementation Status and Results report,, 2019). A report of the World Bank in 2015 reveals that women's participation in the developmental councils have high rates of participation and socialization outside the household, more than women who don't participate in the developmental sphere. The report further reveals that women's participation to mediate in the resolution of disputes and aid allocation has increased by 21 % and 14% respectively (SIGAR). It also enshrines that men's acceptance of women's participation in the councils has raised to 22%. This report was in harmony with the report of 2012 conducted at the national level of Afghanistan stating that 2/3rd of Afghans were more comfortable with the membership of women in the District Councils (State, 2012).

It is significant to note that women have increased their influence in almost all spheres of life in the post-9/11 scenario in Afghanistan because of the democratic set-up that has come into being as a result of the dethronement of the government of the Taliban. Previously, they were denied most of their rights in the political and other developmental spheres of life. The Taliban claim that women have never been deprived of their due rights of political participation yet the Taliban have urged them to observe strict Islamic laws which was not acceptable to most of the liberal-minded women. Even at the local level the Taliban have agreed to the demands of the local population by allowing girls to continue their education and allow women to participate in the political and developmental sectors of the country. This move by the Taliban omens well for the future political stability and prosperity of the country and may lead towards a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan. But the real picture of women's participation in the political domain of the country would come when the US forces completely withdraw from Afghanistan and the Taliban get a share in the stalk holding of the country.

Due to the strict observance of the Islamic law and to some extent the self-styled rule of the Islamic law by the Taliban during their previous regime of 1996-2001, the Taliban faced harsh criticism from the international community that basically led to their downfall. It is expected that they might change their strategy of dealing with the women in all the spheres of life in case they ascend the throne of the country. This will enhance the image of the Taliban in the eyes



of women, other stakeholders in Afghanistan, their neighboring countries and above all the international community. In this way, the Taliban will be in a better way to rule over Afghanistan, where they will not face criticism at the national, regional and global level rather would receive applause and not turn the international community against them. The Taliban also need to bring about changes in their attitude towards the overall social, educational and political spheres of life so as to get adoptability to the national as well as the international environment.

Women have also been very active in the voting system of the country. Before 2018, fraud in female voting was a common phenomenon, facilitated by the practice of exempting women from having photographs on their National Identity Cards. This also resulted in the facilitation of proxy voting, where men could easily vote for women or outright fraud (Sopko, 2021). This could result in the overall change of election process since most of the women of Afghanistan could not vote either due to the issue of far-flung polling stations or due to domestic issues. The system of proxy voting was a common practice in some countries of the world. The introduction of biometric voting system helped a lot in curbing this practice. But the decision of the Independent Election Commission in 2019, made it mandatory for women to have photographs of voters on the day of election and were trying to force poll workers to turn away women who were not willing to comply (Sideqi & Karemi, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusion

The Bonn Agreement made a landmark in the history of Afghanistan since it enabled the women of the country to fight for their rights and remain active in the social and political aspects of life. Prior to this agreement, women were mostly confined within the four walls of the houses particularly during the regime of the Taliban. This agreement paved the way for the future set-up of the political participation of women in the legislative assembly of the country. There had been a gradual increase in the number of their seats. As a consequence of these efforts, women in Afghanistan enjoy more seats than that of most of the upholders of liberal democratic setups in the world. It is laudable to note that in Afghanistan women have 27% representation in the parliament of the country which is comparatively higher than that of the 24% representation of Tajikistan, 23% of the United States, 20% of Pakistan, 14% of India and 6% of Iran.

The most challenging thing is to be determined by the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 since this will make the things go directly into the hands of the ruling class of the country with no interference from the foreign forces and assistance in matters of security. Till now, they have been enjoying some privileges in the educational, social, political and executive spheres of the country despite the fact that they do face resistance and hardships in some areas from the Taliban and other non-state actors, yet they don't hesitate to carry on with their routine life and daily activities. Even during the first tenure ship of



President Ashraf Ghani, they were able to enjoy participation in the legislative, executive and other important portfolios in the country.

It is an admitted fact that what the women have achieved in Afghanistan is not something to be achieved within a short span of time. The history of the country is testimony to the fact that this achievement has a long history of 40 years' struggle through the different phases of the country. The struggle was initiated in 1979 when the Soviet Forces intervened in Afghanistan when they were governed by almost the Soviets during the period of 1979 to 1988 when the Soviet Forces withdrew from Afghanistan as a result of the Geneva Accord, giving a time frame for the total withdrawal of the US forces from the country. This was followed by the Taliban Regime which lasted for about five years ruling the country in observance of strict rules of Islamic law but also to some extent of their self-styled interpretation of the Islamic law which gained them great abhorrence in the eyes of the international community. The government of Taliban is usually referred to as the government by non-state actors since they rose to power by force and no democratic process. Their dethronement came as a result of the US intervention in Afghanistan by declaring the war against terrorism since the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks was alleged to have taken shelter in Afghanistan. Subsequent democratic governments in Afghanistan made enough allowance for women to participate in almost all walks of life. This was only possible by giving them more representation in both Houses of the parliament of Afghanistan. At present, women have more seats in the parliament of the country as compared to the United States, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Iran. They even have more representation in the legislative assembly of the country than the mentioned countries. It is also pertinent to mention that the US-Taliban agreement, although it does not say anything explicitly about the social and political participation of women, yet it does provide for the women to be active members of the government.

It is expected that in the post US-withdrawal scenario by September 11, 2021 women would enjoy the same social and political rights as are enjoyed by them in the current set up of the government. This right has been recognized by most of the Taliban at the local level either on account of pressure from the local population or on account of their leniency in their policy towards women so as to gain sympathy in future. Moreover, it is necessary for the Taliban to remain lenient towards women by providing them full liberty, freedom of thought, freedom of expression and freedom of free assembly for their rights. Afghanistan is passing through another transition where most of the international community look at the Taliban for ascending the throne of the country. One thing is also worth-mentioning that if the Taliban come to the throne of the country, they might be cautious and careful since the greatest reason for the downfall of their previous regime was their harsh attitude and self-styled form of government. After all, one should always expect good from others whether the Taliban or other stakeholders.

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast
Man never is, but always to be blest”



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