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Risking a Rights Disaster

By Wazhma Frogh
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As an Afghan woman who for many years lived a life deprived of the most basic human rights, I find unbearable the thought of what will happen to the women of my country if it once again falls under the control of the insurgents and militants who now threaten it.

In 2001, when the war in Afghanistan began, the liberation of Afghan women was one of the most important justifications for military intervention. Has the world now changed its mind about Afghan women? Is it ready to let them once again be killed and tortured by militants? Does the world no longer believe in the principles it supported in 2001?

Handing over Afghanistan to those who intend to keep the country centuries behind most of the world -- to men who do not view women as human beings -- would not only call into doubt the global commitment to human rights, it would also raise questions about the commitment of Western democracies to such rights and to democratic values. Bearing in mind how fragile the Afghan government is at this moment, it will not take long for the country's women to come under attack again. The consequences will be even more bitter this time because no matter how limited our success, we have at least managed to act in the forefront of public life in Afghanistan. We have had a taste of what it's like to have rights.

And it is not us alone. On my way to Kabul's international airport recently, I noticed a crowd of taxi drivers sitting under a tree at the airport taxi stand. They were mourning the deaths of Italian troops and Afghans in the suicide attack on Sept. 17 near Kabul. As I talked with them, I realized that they were not only saddened by the deaths but frightened by what they might mean. "Today, after eight years, if the foreign troops leave . . . we will go back to the same Afghanistan that seemed like a funeral every day," one of the drivers said. "This time, the loss will be huge, because during the past eight years we have made significant progress in becoming part of the rest of the world, so much so that our enemies despise us for it."

There has been progress in Afghanistan, as many such people will tell you. But can it be maintained if Washington and its allies shift their focus solely to dismantling al-Qaeda while regarding the Taliban as a lesser threat? The answer to that question will be a life-or-death matter for many thousands of women in my country, and men as well. The fact that it is even being considered makes me wonder: Have people forgotten that it was the Taliban that put the lives of millions of Afghans at risk for the sole purpose of protecting Osama bin Laden -- thus making it clear that their loyalty was to him alone? What is to stop this from happening again under Taliban rule?

Afghans understand the need for international assistance, both for the country's development and for the strengthening of its military. This is especially evident now that the insurgency and the violence are less their own creation than an unwanted gift from the other side of the border with Pakistan.

We see some of NATO's allies rapidly losing interest in Afghanistan, even though they admit that if the country is left to the insurgents, the consequence will be many more incidents like the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. They are being persuaded by a propaganda war on the part of insurgents who seem to have convinced much of the world that they are winning the war. But in fact the enemy will win only if the international community allows itself to be influenced by this propaganda campaign.

The question to keep in mind for all parties involved is, what motivated them to come to Afghanistan in the first place? The answer: global security and the protection of human rights in Afghanistan. Are these two purposes no longer valid?

Afghans do not want to rely forever on such help. They want to take ownership of the war against terrorism and insurgents. History has proved that we have always fought in defense of our sovereignty, and that is why patriotism is central to this war. With good training and adequate weaponry, the Afghan army can win the trust of villagers, who will support it in protecting villages from suicide attackers and insurgents. To achieve this goal, the international community should work with the Afghan government as an ally and avoid creating a parallel government competing with that Afghan government.

It would be helpful to hold an international conference in Afghanistan to allow the government and parliament to come up with common solutions for all parties to adhere to. Such international engagement inside Afghanistan would give a sense of ownership to Afghans, offering a change from the international conferences of the past, where Afghans rarely found an opportunity to express their opinions and offer solutions.

At this time of violence and anxiety, it is important for the international community and the United States to reaffirm their commitment to Afghanistan rather than questioning whether it is worth defending an entire people against those who would install another brutally repressive regime under which women cannot be educated or seek to improve their lot, where "justice" is meted out in mass public executions, where repression is the rule -- and where new terrorist plots will inevitably be hatched to attack the United States and its allies.

The people of Afghanistan, and most fervently its women, desire a long-term and consistent relationship with the United States and European democracies. We do not want to become another Vietnam. We want to be an example of the success of global commitment to making the world a better and safer place for everyone, from New York to London to Helmand.

The writer is a graduate student at Warwick University in Britain and has been active in human rights work in her country. She is the recipient of the U.S. State Department's 2009 International Women of Courage Award for Afghanistan.

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