

Mr. President, Excellencies, Civil Society colleagues;

Good morning. I speak today as an Afghan woman who has worked for decades to advance human rights, economic empowerment, and democracy in my country. I am also a member of the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution.

I am here to brief the Security Council on the recent political developments in Afghanistan. My statement will address recent and upcoming elections, the role of women and youth in the peace talks, and the crucial importance of adhering to the constitutional framework in the current peace negotiations in order to protect the civil liberties of Afghan citizens and put my country on the road to democracy.

Elections

On the 20th of October, Afghan citizens defied threats of violence to participate in the long overdue parliamentary elections. 4 million Afghans—women and men, young and old, urban and rural—came out to vote. Women, who went to the polling centers to fulfill their civic duty at great personal risk, constituted 34 percent of voters. The participation of Afghan youth was also noteworthy—young women and men ran for office across the country, promising a more educated parliament free of corruption.

In a country scarred by ongoing conflict, the strong participation of citizens in this election was a significant achievement and an assurance that democratic institutions would be established in accordance with the constitution.

However, the elections were also marred by significant challenges that must be addressed before the presidential elections in April 2019.

The risk of violence before and on election day led to many polling centers remaining closed. At other centers across the country, voters were killed or injured by militant attacks, roadside bombs, or suicide bombers.

In addition to these grave security threats, there was widespread disappointment by the underperformance of the Independent Election Commission. Voters complained about technical and organizational problems, including late opening of polling centers, absence of electoral staff and materials, and technical difficulties with the use of biometrics machines, which were intended to prevent fraud.

Thousands of complaints have been registered with the Election Complaint Commission and related monitoring institutions, which reflect the inability of these bodies to fulfill their obligations. It is vital that these challenges are addressed prior to the upcoming presidential elections.

Women's Meaningful Participation in Peacebuilding

As you know, Afghanistan has suffered for most of its recent history from war. Conflict has killed thousands of Afghans, destroyed villages and infrastructure, and forced many to flee their homes. Peacebuilding is therefore an urgent priority.

Positive developments, such as recent political agreements with the Taliban, have given many Afghans hope. However, these negotiations have also raised serious concerns regarding the meaningful participation of women and youth in any ensuing peace process.

Article 22 of the Constitution of Afghanistan guarantees equality of women and men before the law. Women have seen major advances in recent years, including in basic access to education, health, and work, and have significantly contributed to the development of post-Taliban Afghanistan.

However, despite the important role that women have played in bringing about social change in the country, gender inequality and numerous barriers to their meaningful participation persist. Afghan women suffer from violence, insecurity and lack of access to justice.

Given the history of the Taliban in Afghanistan, building sustainable peace while preventing the re-establishment of extremist rule depends on the meaningful inclusion of women.

To ensure sustainable peace, those affected by the conflict must be an important part of the peace process—in both negotiations and in envisioning solutions. It is therefore vital that the government engages civil society and ordinary Afghans from all walks of life so that they have a say in the future of their country and feel ownership over the decisions that will determine it.

The government must ensure that any continuing obstacles to the participation of women in all spheres of public and political life are eliminated, and that their inclusion is a non-negotiable priority. Women must have formal, substantive and specific roles at every level of the peace process. In addition, youth, the generation that will bear the consequences of the current peace process, must also be consulted, have direct access to the negotiating table, and be included in any peace agreements. The Government of Afghanistan must also ensure transparency and keep citizens informed of any developments in the peace process.

Adherence to the Constitution

The establishment of the Constitution in 2004 marked a significant break from Afghanistan's decades of war and lawlessness. Despite the years of conflict following the adoption of the Constitution, Afghanistan has made modest progress with regards to rule of law, democratic governance and human rights, particularly women's rights.

However, this progress has been placed in serious jeopardy by repeated suggestions that the Constitution be amended to accommodate the demands of the Taliban. Such suggestions raise concerns over preserving democratic governance, protection of human rights, and separation of powers as enshrined in the Afghan Constitution.

Afghanistan's Constitution only allows amendments to fundamental rights if the objective is to improve them. On election day, the Taliban attempted to intimidate people into staying home and deemed the democratic process a sham. It is therefore clear that the intent to make amendments would not improve the Constitution but instead result in bartering away rights and freedoms for which we have fought for 17 years. Making changes to the Constitution in order to negotiate peace is a red line we must not cross.

I therefore urge the Security Council to ensure that all peace negotiations or talks adhere to the framework of the current Constitution. Any compromise to citizen's rights and liberties would erase the hard-won gains of nearly two decades. The cost will not only be borne by the international community, but by ordinary Afghans, from whom the hope they felt in the recent elections for a democratic Afghanistan will be cruelly snatched.

Thank you, Mr. President.