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Youth Protest Movements in Afghanistan SEEKING VOICE AND AGENCY

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YOUTH

ABOUT THE REPORT

Supported by USIP's Asia Center and based on an extensive literature review and interviews with protestors, journalists, officials, and others in Kabul, this report explores motivations of Afghanistan's youth activists and the effects of three recent protest movements.

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Cover photo: Demonstrators from Afghanistan's Hazara minority attend a protest in Kabul in May 2016. (Photo by Ahmad Masood/Reuters)

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Summary



After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan's new political order provided space for increased political participation, more education, and antiregime personal expression, some of which took the form of protest movements. Especially after the 2014 presidential election, high-profile youth protest movements became a notable element on the political scene, though none has yet proved sustainable.

Mobilization for the protest movements was energized by an increased awareness of citizens' rights and of deficits in government responsibilities. Widespread perceptions of injustice, a rapid deterioration in economic and security conditions after 2014, unemployment, and perceptions of marginalization and exclusion from governmental and donor policymaking were among the key drivers of the protests.

The protest movements were largely spontaneous and typically emerged in response to specific government failures rather than as advocacy efforts for new policies and programs. They were mainly led by educated youth, who felt marginalized in the traditional seniority-based patterns of decision making in Afghanistan. Lacking access to power and resources and working outside traditional political networks, however, the youth leaders feared their grassroots movements were susceptible to being hijacked by established elites, such as jihadi leaders and government officials, who might then use the movements as bargaining chips to advance their own factional interests.

Although the incumbent Ashraf Ghani-led administration, the National Unity Government, has emphasized including youth in the administration, interviewees often described these measures as symbolic and affording little real role or voice to youth in shaping national policies. This perception partly explains why the youth movements were unsustainable. Despite the government appointing more young persons to government positions, the appointments have not resulted in government programs and policies that can address youth grievances or the drivers of youth marginalization. The protest movements also lacked the long-term vision needed for sustainability and impact, which contributed to their demise. Youth protest leaders tended to perceive that the international community, including the United States and United Nations, prioritized security over democracy, and in so doing neglected both youth aspirations and democracy.



Afghan youth play football during a foggy morning in Kabul. With a median age of 19 years, Afghanistan has the lowest median age of any country outside of Sub-Saharan Africa. (Mohammad Ismail/Reuters)

Introduction

Sixty-eight percent of Afghans are under the age of twenty-four. Yet case studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that political, economic, and security conditions—not the youth population in and of itself—are significant determinants of instability.

Since 2015, Afghanistan has experienced an upsurge in protest movements led predominantly by the country's younger generation of social and political activists. These movements and the circumstances in which they emerged are representative of a broader debate in development circles over the role of demographic "youth bulges" in low-income, fragile, and conflict-affected societies. Afghanistan has a very young population: 68 percent are under the age of twenty-four.¹ It is broadly recognized that youth bulges combined with economic stagnation, poverty, and unemployment can burden countries with disproportionately high levels of instability and political violence.² Although a causal link between a youth bulge and an increased potential for social instability (sometimes reaching the level of political violence) is not straightforward, case studies and anecdotal evidence from Afghanistan suggest that political, economic, and security conditions, not the youth population in and of itself, are significant determinants of instability. This report contributes to this discussion by exploring how rising youth expectations in the context of declining political, security, and socioeconomic conditions provided fertile ground for the emergence of mass protest movements.

Many scholars and development agencies that find a link between increasing youth populations and instability point to grievance as a motivating factor in youth

mobilization. Ted Gurr, in his seminal 1970 book *Why Men Rebel*, argues that people have expectations and capabilities they value and that when expectations are viewed as going unmet, people become frustrated.³ Such frustration may, but need not, find expression in acts of violence. Grievance as a driver of youth radicalization has since been identified by many donor agencies. For example, a US Agency for International Development report observes, “If young people—particularly young men—are uprooted, jobless, intolerant, alienated, and with few opportunities for positive engagement, they represent a ready pool of recruits for groups seeking to mobilize violence.”⁴ That said, alternatives such as channeling grievances and frustration into working for nonviolent change is also possible.

Grievances themselves as drivers of change movements can take many different forms. This report looks beyond simple economic deprivation to capture a wide range of perceptions and experiences of social, economic, and political exclusion. For example, more ed-

ucated and economically empowered youth may find the lack of opportunities to participate meaningfully in the political life of their country a source of grievance. These youth may also be more effective in articulating their dissatisfaction and engaging in social mobilization.

This report draws on social movement theory (SMT) and the literature on demographic youth bulges to explore emerging patterns of youth activism in Afghanistan and their implications for the future. Scholars of social movements have been intrigued by the relationship between political and socioeconomic conditions and the rise and evolution of social and political movements.⁵ Applying an SMT perspective, the report adopts a *structures of political opportunity* approach—according to which changes in political environments that foster threats or opportunities for the interests and positions of social and political groups thereby create incentives for and constraints on institutional and extra-institutional collective actions—to investigate how Afghanistan’s youth interpret, perceive, and respond to the opportunities made available to them (or lack thereof). In so doing, the report is concerned with assessing the causes and character of recent youth protest movements in Afghanistan and the responses of the government and international community to those movements.

Figure 1. Three Protest Movements

Three major protest movements that emerged after Afghanistan’s 2014 presidential election were driven by the sociopolitical activism of young Afghans.



Background



The UN and World Bank define youth as persons between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. The 2014 Afghan National Youth Policy (ANYP) defines youth as individuals between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, though it provides guidelines for adolescents between twelve and eighteen. But youth is a more fluid category than a fixed age group would suggest, and defining youth as a social group is highly context specific, varying across cultures, places, and time periods. Though the ANYP distinguishes between minors (*zer-e sin*) and young adults (*bala-ye sin*) linguistically, it defines age in social terms that take into consideration maturity and capability. In some areas of Afghanistan, for example, youth ends when a young man is eligible to participate in the customary decision-making councils of elders.⁶ In Afghanistan, many individuals in their late twenties to mid-thirties describe themselves as youths. They may do so to distinguish themselves from the older generation of elites and traditional leaders—many of whom are widely held responsible for the continued conflict, corruption, and other shortcomings in governance.⁷

THE POST-2001 POLITICAL SPACE

The overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 created space for the emergence of groups committed to social and political activism. The largest and most durable of these movements unfolded after 2014, which was a critical year in Afghanistan's political, economic, and security transition, simultaneously providing a ground for protests directed against both the administration and international donors. The National Unity Government (NUG), which was created in 2014 as a means of tamping down the disarray resulting from a deeply disputed and fraudulent presidential election, was itself nonetheless dominated by rivalries between two centers of power, one located in the Presidential Palace—that is,

the offices of President Ashraf Ghani—and the other in the Office of the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah.⁸ Although the NUG was meant to transcend the political divisions that had arisen during the election period, the distribution of power between and within the two centers did nothing to quell the deep rifts that characterized relations within each political alliance or network that had backed the two leading candidates.⁹

Adamantine disagreements over major policies and the distribution of power between the president and the chief executive weakened the capacity of the NUG to design and implement inclusive policies and provide basic services. Allegations of ethnic favoritism exacerbated the broader social discontents that resulted from dramatic declines in security and economic conditions.¹⁰ As widespread political divisions among the elites turned many influential political groups into allies and supporters of protest movements, the political groups that had benefited from the patronage politics of the early post-2001 period but had been left out of the NUG administration saw opportunities to increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis the NUG through forming alliances with youth opposition movements.

RIISING SOCIAL DEMANDS IN THE CONTEXT OF DECLINING OPPORTUNITIES

After more than two decades of protracted conflict and economic stagnation, the post-2001 developments ignited hope among young men and women in Afghanistan. A new political order encouraged educated and skilled youth to join the government and private organizations. This helped include youth in the change process, thereby creating a sense of ownership in the country's postconflict development. In particular, the new political order made it possible

Approximately four hundred thousand young people enter Afghanistan’s job market annually, which puts pressure on the government to expand job opportunities or to support legal channels for the emigration of skilled workers.

for women to attend school, participate in politics, and join the growing workforce—activities that had been banned during the period of Taliban rule (1996–2001). A youth activist from the Afghanistan 1400 youth group said that after 2001, Afghanistan was “an open market to different thoughts and ideas.”

Initially, international support and consensus on development in Afghanistan boosted the confidence of both citizens and private investors. Afghanistan witnessed a boom in investment in housing, telecommunications, and services. Between 2002 and 2016, the sectors adding the most to GDP in annual percentage terms included services, agriculture, manufacturing, and industries. Eighty percent of businesses in Afghanistan were small or medium sized. They employed one-third of the workforce.¹¹ But after the political and military transition of 2014, investment dried up, owing to ongoing security concerns, and by 2015 the economy was in free fall. The total annual production value of Afghanistan’s principal industries was estimated at a mere \$109 million, a 40 percent decline from 2013, before the transition.¹² This situation came about in part because the flow of military and development aid to Afghanistan was unpredictable after 2014, even as the security situation deteriorated rapidly.

Loss of economic opportunities thus was identified as a leading driver of the protest movements. Breadwinners’ ability to help their extended families and create hope for the future requires access to reliable sources of employment. However, the country fell short in generating sustainable jobs and lowering unemployment. Approximately four hundred thousand young people enter the job market annually, which puts pressure on the government to expand job opportunities or to support legal channels for the emigration of skilled workers.

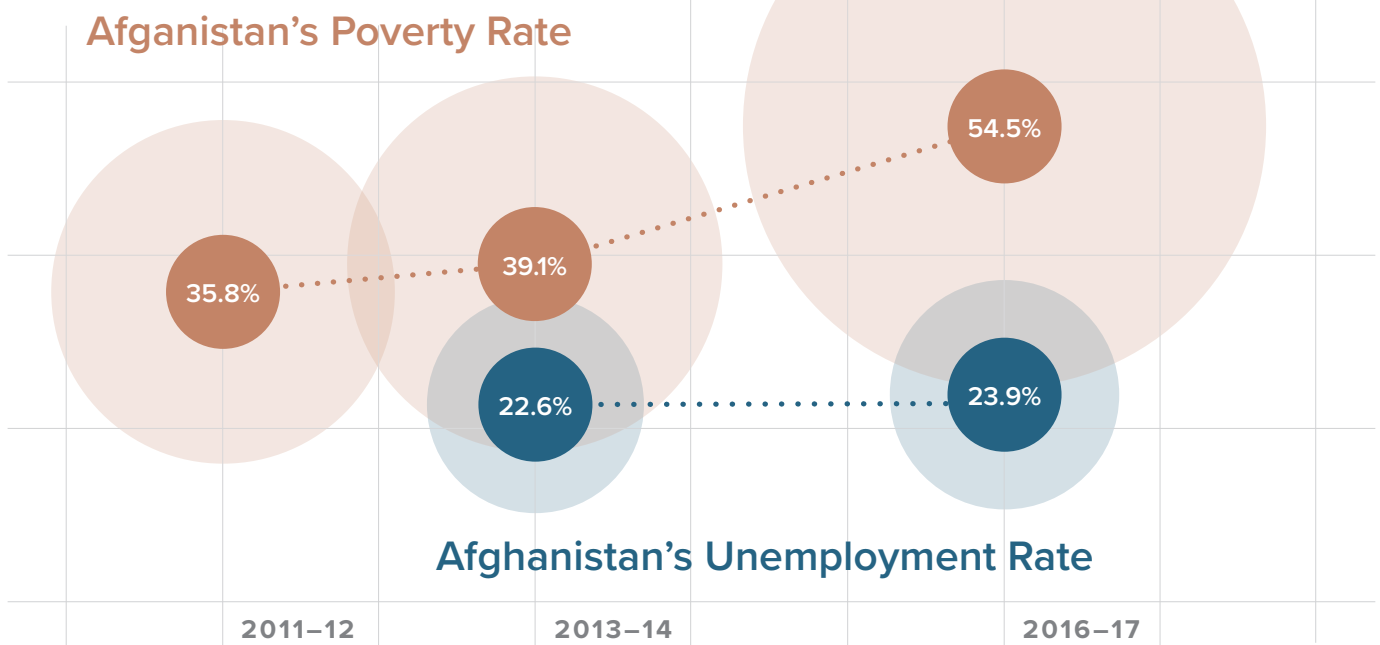
The slowdown in economic growth accompanying the 2014 transition further weakened the job market: in 2013–14, close to two million eligible people were unemployed, about half a million of them young men. The collapse of the service sector in rural areas led to the loss of four out of five jobs. This trend was associated with an increase in the poverty rate from 36 percent in 2011–12 to 39 percent in 2013–14 and 55 percent in 2016–17.¹³ The unemployment rate also increased to 22.6 percent in 2013–14, with a further percentage point increase in 2015–16, according to UN figures. The rising unemployment rate and diminishing job opportunities fed resentment and increased the sense of uncertainty among youth. These effects slowed the return of Afghan refugees and caused a new wave of outmigration, largely of youth.¹⁴

INSECURITY

Insecurity, mainly attributable to the resurgence of the Taliban and other insurgents (though increasing levels of local, non-Taliban violence also played a role), was another factor driving youth mobilization. In 2017, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that in November 2016 the Afghan government controlled only 57 percent of the country’s 407 districts, while the rest of the country was variously under Taliban (and other insurgents’) control or influence. The Afghan government has progressively been losing control of districts. In October 2018 SIGAR reported that the Afghan government controlled only 55.5 percent of the country’s districts. It is estimated nearly 9.2 million Afghans live in areas that are contested between pro- and anti-government groups and forces. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) estimates that more than a hundred thousand people were killed between 2001 and 2017, and countless more were injured. To put the

Figure 2. Afghanistan's Economic Indicators

In the years preceding the Tabassum, Enlightenment, and Uprising for Change protests, Afghanistan's unemployment and poverty rates had both risen.



Source: Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (various years)

rising levels of conflict in context, UNAMA records indicate that rising violence resulted in a steady increase in civilian deaths and an even sharper increase in civilian injuries. Typically, two-thirds of casualties (deaths and injuries) could be attributable to the Taliban and other anti-government groups.

Afghanistan exemplifies what has been called the “conflict trap,” an association between poverty and insecurity. Afghanistan’s economic growth is threatened by insecurity, and economic stagnation increases the likelihood of insecurity.¹⁵ With the international forces present in the country far below the US “surge” numbers, Afghanistan faces mounting security challenges and their economic consequences: not only individuals but also industries, businesses, and even the security apparatus that rely on international funds must deal with rising insecurity, which has increased the cost of doing business in Afghanistan and prompt-

ed capital flight. According to World Bank estimates, between 2012 and 2017 Afghanistan’s annual GDP growth rate dropped from 14.4 to 2.5 percent.

PERCEIVED INJUSTICE AND GRIEVANCES AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT AND ELITES

Perceived injustice is a common driver across the three protest movements discussed in this report. As a university lecturer interviewed for this report stated, “Injustice has been institutionalized in Afghanistan.” Perceived injustice overlaps with other drivers, such as insecurity. Access to economic contracts and jobs also was not perceived to be distributed on the basis of fair competition and merit but rather contingent on patronage ties and ethnic favoritism. This situation nurtured a sense of unfairness and injustice among young adults who were already facing loss of economic opportunity. As a young civil society activist in Afghanistan stated in 2017:

Educated youths mobilize wherever they are. They better understand their social needs and are somehow self-conscious and they strongly react. However, as they do not have strong public support or are not well connected at the grassroots level, their movements fail all at once. The level of frustration is thus high among youth. This situation exists because neither do they have access to power and wealth nor do they believe in expanded relationships with politicians and those who have access to wealth. This lack of trust and the absence of strong societal support [have] accompanied disillusion about their security.

In Afghanistan, where power is traditionally held by older men with sociopolitical standing and where group solidarity and interests trump individual interests, youth have little agency in conceiving their future and that of their country.¹⁶ A researcher at the Afghan Science Academy noted that Afghanistan's deeply patriarchal society makes it difficult for young Afghans to participate in a significant way in politics, and though women's rights are a particular cause for youth mobilization, the political hierarchy also restricts opportunities for young men. Despite the initial optimism following the fall of the Taliban and the subsequent liberalization of the political space, Afghan youth have remained politically disenfranchised. Most of Afghanistan's current leaders are from the generation that came to power during the jihad against the Soviets and the civil war of the 1990s, a cadre that includes key individuals in the current NUG administration. This situation has deprived young people of needed political opportunity and has reinforced the dynastic nature of Afghan politics.¹⁷ As one interviewee, a journalist, noted, "I think there is a divide between the political elite and the youth, that is where the source of resentment lies, they think that the top players of politics have been manipulative, they monopolize the youth when they need, they keep the resources to themselves and are afraid of youths."

UNCERTAINTY

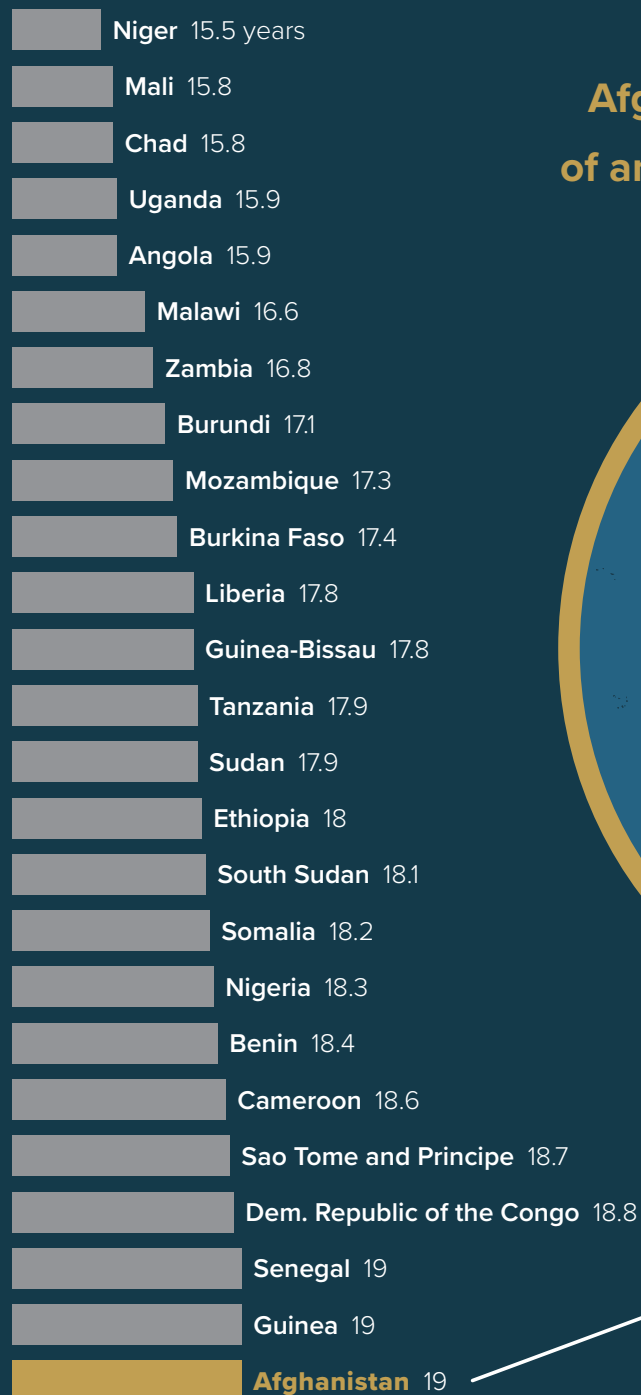
High unemployment, a deteriorating security situation, and the politics of ethnically based identity have raised young people's level of uncertainty. Youth face government unresponsiveness or ambivalence (and in some cases have been the target of ill-advised government security responses) and insurgent attacks. In this situation, discouraged Afghan youth have three options: they may embrace an exit strategy by emigrating out of Afghanistan; through demonstrations and protests, they may try to press the government to reform the security sector and political institutions; and they may join violent groups that offer them a sense of belonging and income, especially in rural Afghanistan.

LOSS OF HOPE AND A POPULATION EXODUS

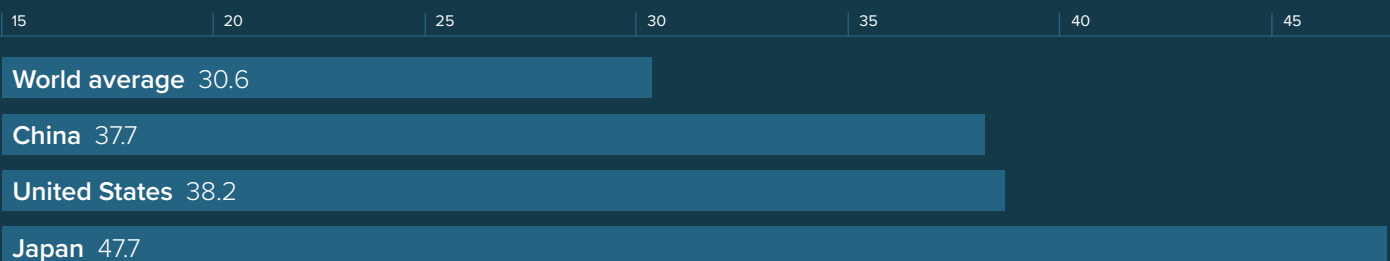
Beyond the protest movements, the drivers of social and political activism enumerated above—insecurity, declining economic opportunity, a feeling of political disenfranchisement—have fueled a serious exodus of skilled workers from the country. Though in the early 2000s young people were hopeful about their future, over time public optimism has declined. Many young people have left Afghanistan, including a large number of young professionals. A notable example is the estimated 14,500 Afghans who worked with US companies in Afghanistan and have either emigrated to the United States under the Special Immigration Visa for Afghans program or are in the process of doing so.¹⁸ This is a significant loss for a country that has invested very little in human capital. In 2015, Afghans were the second-largest population of refugees entering Europe, after refugees from Syria. Turkey is another major destination for Afghan migrants and refugees. As a result, there has been a massive outflow of human capital from Afghanistan.

These several factors form the background conditions to the youth protest movements of 2015–17 studied in this report.

Figure 3. Afghanistan's Youth Bulge



Afghanistan has the lowest median age of any country outside Sub-Saharan Africa.



Methodology



This report seeks to answer the following questions:

- What factors motivated Afghan youth to mobilize, and for or against which practices or policies did they mobilize?
- What forms did Afghan youth mobilization take?
- How did Afghanistan's government and its international partners react to youth movements?

In pursuit of answers to these questions, this report examines three protest movements that occurred in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2017: the Roshnayi (Enlightenment) movement, the Rashtakhiz-e Taghir (Uprising for Change) movement, and the Tabassum movement. We chose to focus on these movements for two principal reasons: first, although the universe of protests movements in Afghanistan overall is small, these three were the largest that had occurred in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban and the introduction of democratic politics; and second, although each movement began with strong ethnic underpinnings, all represented important efforts at cross-ethnic mobilization by bringing together activists from various groups demanding reforms and changes in national government strategies and policies.¹⁹

We first conducted a thorough literature review, followed by in-depth semistructured interviews with informants based in Afghanistan. For the literature review, we examined primary source documents created by the Afghan government and international donor and policy agencies. This reading afforded insights into the context and sociopolitical milieu within which the protest movements emerged. The interview participants included local and national experts, government employees, consultants, politicians, journalists, and civil society activists; the information provided by informants

helped us identify and map the causes of and trends in protest mobilization. Respondents were a mix of male and female. Overall, thirty-seven interviews were conducted with participants in Kabul. Though interviews were initially scheduled to be conducted in the first half of 2017, mounting insecurity on the ground in Kabul led to deferral of the interviews until the last quarter of 2017.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Youth in fragile, postconflict, or transforming societies such as Afghanistan face the conjoined issues of lack of agency and marginalization from important political and social processes affecting their lives. Moreover, the institutions that define social relations, such as the shuras (consultation councils) and jirgas (traditional assemblies of leaders), often are not accessible to youth.²⁰ For young people unable to effect change, this means that lack of security, the lack of a political voice, and reduced status continue to be structural barriers to the attainment of socially valued goals, such as the ability to contribute to the political life of a country. Marginalization can thus be construed not only in terms of inequality in power relations in a society but also as the result of the “persistence of processes creating inequality as understood within a hierarchical model” of social formation. In other words, marginalization “is a product of the institutions, systems and cultures in which the needs of youth are unmet or inadequately met.”²¹

Despite a growing body of evidence underscoring the importance of youth as active agents in peacebuilding and development, youth “voices and experiences,” as Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy point out, “are still far from integrated or understood in critical security or other scholarly deliberations about peace praxis.”²² To address this lacuna, Berents and McE-

Afghan youth activists overwhelmingly follow a conventional approach—demanding institutional avenues for political participation, better adherence to the rule of law, and a more effective government role in the provision of basic services such as security.

voy-Levy propose a theory of “everyday peacebuilding” that operationalizes concepts of the local as important to knowledge production and emancipation.²³ This is particularly relevant for Afghan youth, for whom everyday life is a constant negotiation with, and sometimes transgression of, expected norms. Such negotiations can manifest in the creative practices of resilience, including spontaneous grassroots protest movements.

Social Movement Theory

This study draws on social movement theory (SMT) to explore and explain emerging patterns of youth activism in Afghanistan. SMT is valuable in this case because it identifies relationships between and among political context, socioeconomic conditions, and the rise and evolution of social and political movements.²⁴ SMT studies typically combine several theoretical strands that were developed to explain the emergence, organizational capacity, and structure of social movements. Thus, the concept of social movement itself has been able to evolve with the real-world phenomena it has sought to explain over the past few decades.

One common denominator of social movements is the network structure of mobilized nonstate groups that share a joint identity around a common issue and seek some type of fundamental social change through publicly voiced claims. Social movements characteristically engage in public protests to make their particular messages heard. Greg Martin distinguishes two types of phenomena studied by social movement analysts: conventional movements, whose activities aim at the integration of previously excluded groups into the “normal” political process, which makes such movements state or polity centric; and movements that strive to be autonomous of the political system and are more concerned with identity politics and postmaterialism.²⁵ Most movement scholars con-

cern themselves with protest movements belonging to the first camp and view them as manifestations of “politics from below.” In other words, conventional protest movements involve classic civil society engagement aimed at increasing political participation with the goal of bringing about some sort of positive change and improvement in democratic political systems or of fueling a transformation from an authoritarian to a democratic political order. Research for this study demonstrates that protest movements in Afghanistan fall within this category. Though some of the protest movements examined here show postmaterialist tendencies in focusing on ethnic identity-based interests, Afghan youth activists overwhelmingly follow a conventional approach, demanding institutional avenues for political participation, better adherence to the rule of law, and a more effective government role in the provision of basic services such as security.

One principal way in which scholars of social movements have explained the coalescence, evolution, and decline of protest movements is through the concept of *political opportunity structures*. Originally formulated by Peter Eisinger and subsequently developed by Charles Tilly and others, the concept has as its basic premise that “exogenous factors enhance or inhibit prospects for mobilization.”²⁶ For Sidney Tarrow, the political opportunity structure references the “consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment or of change in that environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting expectations for success or failure.”²⁷ In other words, changes in political environments create threats to or opportunities for the interests and positions of social and political groups, and thus create incentives for and constraints on institutional and extra-institutional collective actions.

Three Protest Movements

The confluence of rising youth expectations and declining socioeconomic opportunities in the context of a shortfall in government capacity to meaningfully address these deficits has helped shape most of the Afghan youth protest movements since 2015. The several protest movements that emerged beginning in the year following the 2014 Afghan presidential election added a new dynamic to Afghan politics. These movements were driven by a sociopolitical activism among young Afghans, which is unusual for the Afghan political landscape. Motivated primarily by the government's failure to protect the country's citizens, as well as by grievances over real or perceived discrimination by the state, the protest movements have heavily criticized the ruling administration. Among the largest and longest-lived movements were Junbesh-e Tabassum (Tabassum movement) in 2015, Junbesh-e Roshanayi-e (Enlightenment movement)²⁸ in 2016–17, and Junbesh-e Rashtakhiz-e Taghir (Uprising for Change) in 2017.²⁹ The actions undertaken by the three movements indicate how youth and civil society groups responded to the rapid deterioration in security conditions and alleged inequalities in the distribution of foreign aid and national resources at the subnational levels.

THE TABASSUM MOVEMENT (JUNBESH-E TABASUM), 2015

The protest rally that launched what became known as the Tabassum movement was organized in protest of the killing of seven civilian Hazaras by a group of insurgents in the province of Zabul in November 2015. The kidnapping and subsequent beheading of the civilian travelers were part of a series of kidnappings of mostly Hazaras by insurgent groups along the highways in several provinces in 2015. Among the victims of the November incident was a

nine-year-old girl, Shukria Tabassum (whose name became the eponymous source of the Tabassum movement) and her parents. After the bodies of the victims were found in Zabul, young activists transferred their coffins to Kabul, where they organized a protest outside the Presidential Palace on November 11, 2015. The rally of several thousand protesters included activists from all major ethnic groups of the country and thus became an important forum for expressing collective national frustration over deteriorating security conditions across the country.³⁰

THE ENLIGHTENMENT MOVEMENT (JUNBESH-E ROSHNAYI-E), 2016–17

According to Afghanistan Analysts Network reporting, the Enlightenment movement, which was formed to protest the government's decision to reroute an important power line from Turkmenistan (bypassing large swaths of Hazara-dominated territories), emerged as the most powerful in terms of challenging the Afghan government.³¹ Initially known as TUT-AP (after the participating countries of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan), the transmission line, which was funded by the Asian Development Bank, would import electricity from the Central Asian republics to Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to Afghanistan's Power Sector Master Plan, which was drawn up in 2013 by Fichtner, a German consulting firm, the line would have passed through the province of Bamyan in the central highlands of Hazarajat before reaching Kabul and other provinces in the south and east of the country.³² In January 2016, tensions emerged within the NUG after the Ministry of Power and Energy and Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat, the state-owned electricity company, decided to change the route from Bamyan to

Salang Pass on the basis that the route through the Salang Pass was more cost-effective.³³

According to International Crisis Group reporting, the Roshnayi protestors “alleged that the new route was yet another ‘deliberate attempt’ by Pashtun leaders ‘to systematically discriminate against Hazaras’ by depriving them of the benefits of an economic development project.”³⁴ This view was corroborated by several interviewees. The Roshnayi protest movement held several large gatherings, including a demonstration in Kabul on May 16, 2016, and a demonstration on July 23 that was attacked by suicide bombers, leading to the deaths of more than eighty people. The movement, angered by the government’s failure to meet its demands, announced a new round of “indefinite protest” that was to commence on September 27, 2016. On September 26 the coordinating body of the Enlightenment movement announced it would enter into negotiations with the government under UN supervision, reiterating that it would continue with its civil resistance if the negotiations failed to yield results.³⁵

UPRISING FOR CHANGE (JUNBESH-E RASHTAKHIZ-E TAGHIR), 2017

Uprising for Change formed in response to a series of militant attacks in Kabul in June and July 2017. The movement was triggered by the May 31, 2017, truck bombing in Kabul’s Zandari Square, one of the deadliest attacks of its kind in Kabul, with 150 people killed. The movement held its first major rally on June 2, 2017. Chanting “Khasta az marg ba soy-e arg” (“tired of deaths and forward to the Arg” [the Presidential Palace]), the demonstrators marched toward the Presidential Palace. As they approached the palace, the rally was stopped by security forces, including the presidential guards, known as the President’s Protective Service. In the ensuing confrontation, the security forces opened fire on the demonstrators, killing at least six protestors, including Salem Ezedyar, son of Muhammad Alam Ezedyar, a prominent Jamiat-e Islami politician from the province of Panjshir who had served as vice president of the Meshrano Jirga (the upper house of Parliament).

MAIN MASS RALLIES ORGANIZED BY THE ENLIGHTENMENT MOVEMENT IN 2016

January 9 The first protest was organized in Bamyan to protest reports of a government decision to reroute the TUTAP line. On January 11, the Afghan government announced a technical commission to reassess the pros and cons of the route.

May 16 The movement’s first mass rally in Kabul, which came just over two weeks after the cabinet approved the Salang route on April 30, attracted several thousand people. The government responded by closing off all roads leading to the Presidential Palace by erecting walls made of storage containers.

July 23 The movement’s second mass rally in Kabul was attacked by suicide bombers in Deh Mazang Square. According to UN investigations, approximately eight-five protestors died in the attack.³⁶

The leaders of Uprising for Change have criticized the Afghan government for incompetency and failing to fulfill its responsibilities. In addition, the movement, which was predominantly Tajik, accused the NUG of excluding movement members from government based on identity politics. According to the Afghanistan Analysts Network, the movement has characterized the division of power within the administration and the government's policies as being ethnically based. The movement's resolution stated that "the great Tajik community is not represented in the government leadership and decision-making"

and repudiated those who claimed to be representing them in the NUG as "demagogic and vote-selling people."³⁷ But sentiments of marginalization are not unique to the Tajik community alone; others face systematic and institutional discrimination as well. As one interviewee commented,

The Hazaras one way or another are faced with organized discrimination.... The Pashtuns dominate government's key organizations and they produced a narrative that somehow is discriminatory. For instance, a Hazara cannot be a defense minister. This policy that forbids a Hazara from becoming a defense minister is strategy.³⁸

MAIN MASS RALLIES ORGANIZED BY UPRISING FOR CHANGE:

June 3 The funeral of Salem Ezedyar was attacked by a suicide bomber that killed seven others. After the violent response by the security forces, protestors set up and occupied a series of tents in Kabul, then followed up with similar sit-ins in the provinces of Baghlan and Takhar. Although visited by a smaller number of protestors, the tents attracted significant media attention and caused major disruptions in Kabul's traffic flow as they were erected on major roundabouts on key arteries feeding traffic into and out of Kabul. In the early hours of June 20, 2017, security forces forcibly removed the last tent from Sherpur Square. In the ensuing altercation between a few dozen protestors and the security forces, a twenty-three-year-old protester was killed, apparently by the security forces.

July 23 Several days after the forced removal of the tents, the protestors returned to the streets demanding the removal or resignation of top security officials.

Characteristics of the Protest Movements



As suggested by the above enumeration of key moments in the life of the three youth protest movements, their activities took the form of public demonstrations with a focus on the overlapping issues of injustice, insecurity, and unemployment. Youth mobilized in major urban centers that were relatively secure or where economic activities were concentrated, including Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Bamyan, Herat, and Jalalabad.

SPONTANEOUS BUT DISORGANIZED

The protest movements often grew organically but were disorganized. They were typically spontaneous, reactive, and lacking in clearly visible leadership (that is, a command structure). While youth leaders worked tirelessly advocating for greater dialogue with the government, no single individual or group of individuals became the face of the movements. In this sense, the movements were not dominated by any charismatic leader or persona. This lack of organizational structure prevented the movements from presenting a united front (despite having overlapping goals and objectives) in dealing with the government. These characteristics invited some criticism from both observers and individuals within the movements. Speaking of the Uprising for Change movement, for example, a journalist lamented that it was chaotic, “more like a riot than a protest.” Lack of effective organization was a major factor contributing to the movements petering out.

ETHNIC COMPOSITION

The organizers of the movements attempted to transcend the ethnic fault lines of Afghan politics by crafting national and inclusive political platforms and rhetoric. Several interviewees suggested that movements were pan-ethnic in the sense that youths from various other ethnicities participated in large numbers, even if the movements were dominated or initiated by specific ethnic groups. In demanding a more effective government response to growing insecurity, Uprising for Change sought to appeal to popular and national concerns for more effective security policies. Similarly, by championing the cause of balanced national development, the Enlightenment movement sought to turn the development of the Hazarajat region into a national developmental concern, which the Afghan government is constitutionally obligated to address. However, in practice, the rank-and-file of the two movements were dominated by a younger generation of Tajik and Hazara activists, respectively. Thus, ethnic divisions remained a key stumbling block to the movements achieving efficacy. According to one civil society activist, “Ethnic identity politics in Afghanistan is [a] direct effect of the ‘political structure of power,’ which has been based on the myth of majority and minority.”

AGENCY SOUGHT AND REBUFFED

In fragile societies or those in transformation, agency to effect change has been identified in the broader development literature as critical to a sense of inclusion in the social and political life of a nation. Research and interviews conducted for this report suggest that



Demonstrators from Afghanistan's Hazara minority attend a protest in Kabul in May 2016. (Photo by Ahmad Masood/Reuters)

Afghan youth sought, and temporarily found, agency through different avenues connected to the protest movements, including the use of social media and appointments to government or advisory positions. Some of these paths may, in the intermediate term, prove more effective than others. For example, President Ghani has highlighted increases in the number of young persons appointed to various levels of government. He has claimed that the NUG has advocated for a “generational change” in politics and government by creating avenues for recruitment of young officials. He has also claimed that as a result of these appointments, state agencies had become “six years younger.”³⁹ Many participants interviewed for this study, however, perceived these appointments as symbolic only.

The use of social media platforms (such as Facebook) to promulgate information did emerge as a

persistent trend, with many Afghan youths regarding themselves as “brokers” in the contentious politics of the post-2014 era.⁴⁰ Young Afghans today understand that they have the ability, and are incentivized, to write history as they see it, posting their opinions online in the hope of influencing national and international audiences. Thus, an increasingly skillful use of social media to organize, influence, engage, and oppose may be a durable outcome of the youth movements essaying change.

The newfound agency of the movements’ participants, however, was to diminish over time in the more day-to-day realm of politics. The protests expressed grievances with Afghanistan’s elites and traditional leaders, widely viewed by the protestors to be responsible for the country’s ongoing troubles. Although the protests initially enjoyed the freedom and space to protest

As one journalist explained, because elites control more resources and access to decision making, they were able to influence the movements rather than the other way around.

without elite interference, at a certain point most of the movements became vulnerable to broader mainstream politics, whether it was the patronage politics of jihadi leaders or government politics.

Interviewees noted that the traditional leaders and elites seemed to be afraid of the potential of the movements; youths challenged elite authority because they felt underrepresented. The boycott of elites and their organizations by youth was, according to a newspaper editor interviewed for this report, cause for concern among the established political cadres. Initially this concern led some political parties and factions to support the movements and their causes. Political parties—including both factions of Hezb-e Wahdat Islami and Hezb-e Ensejam-e Milli, and their leaders Karim Khalili, Mohammad Mohaqeq, Sarwar Danesh, and Sadeq Modabber—expressed support for the Enlightenment movement. Hezb-e Ensejam-e Milli, a minor party, regularly attended meetings called by the movement's High People's Council. Over time, however, this show of support turned out to be cynical opportunism; established party leaders sought to use the protests as vehicles to further their own interests and agenda.

There was a consensus among interviewees that elites ultimately sold out the movements. After initially joining the Enlightenment protest movement—and

championing the cause of justice and policy reform in the matter of electricity provision for Hazaras in the province of Bamyān—these elites boycotted subsequent protests. Instead, they entered into secret negotiations with the government and emerged having signed agreements that benefited their own positions. As one journalist explained, because elites control more resources and access to decision making, they were able to influence the movements rather than the other way around.

Though the protest movements examined in this report represented some of the most sustained grassroots challenges to the policies of the Afghan government and the interests of Afghan elites, they faced major challenges to sustainability, lacking both a strategy for pursuing long-term objectives and access to funding and power. While these movements challenged the government's performance, they were unsuccessful in achieving many of their goals. Both the security situation and economic conditions have continued to worsen, and the government response has not changed drastically in respect to youth demands. An awareness of agency, as expressed in the use of online platforms, needs to be translated into practical agency to effect lasting change.

Responses to the Protest Movements

The “soft repression” of youth, as one informant, a university lecturer, put it, by the Afghan government has also undermined youth engagement and participation in politics. The response of the international community similarly did not meet the hopes and expectations of the youth activists, as it focused on security and support for the Ghani administration rather than on the principles of democracy and inclusion, according to informants.

RESPONSE OF THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT

The government has by and large refrained from systematic repression of the youth protest movements. The government has offered to negotiate with the organizers of the movements and has sent its representatives to participate in public debates with the organizers on television networks. However, youth activists have accused the government of using negotiations as a mechanism to delay direct engagement with the policy demands of the protestors—hence, “soft repression.”

During the Uprising for Change protests, President Ghani organized a large number of meetings with various groups, including political parties and civil society organizations, during which the president discussed the negative impact of the ongoing sit-ins on public order, the income of the private sector, and the lives of private citizens. According to his official website, President Ghani met with around three thousand individuals and promised to “set the limits of freedom,” explaining that “our national interests and Islamic values are our limits.” During his Eid al-Fitr prayer address on July 6, 2016, Ghani said, “The supreme interests of our country are the common ground on which all forces loyal to the country, whether they are

inside the government or in the opposition, stand in one front. Opposition does not mean pulling up the system by the roots.” He also warned that “whoever attempts to live without the system or to dig a well for the system, they themselves will fall into the well.”⁴¹

The Afghan government argues that these demonstrations have harmed public order and the economy through the closure of roads, shops, banks, business centers, and government institutions. According to an April 2017 report issued by the Ministry of Economy in cooperation with the security services, as many as 187,713 state employees had not been able to get to work during the demonstration of July 23, 2016. In the report, three solutions were recommended to reduce financial losses:

The route of a demonstration and place of gathering or sit-in have to be outside the centre of [large] cities to maintain public order and keep the roads open; the route of a demonstration and place of gathering shall be away from business centres; and the organisers of protests shall guarantee the security [*masuniyat*] of the protest, the maintenance of public order and public property, traffic discipline and social and economic interests.⁴²

After the bombing that targeted protests on July 23, 2016, the National Security Council decided to replace the current Law on Gatherings, Demonstrations and Strikes (hereafter the Assembly Law). According to Second Vice President Sarwar Danesh, who heads the Law Committee of the cabinet, “The Assembly Law must balance maintaining the right of citizens to protest with the public order.”⁴³ Many of the proposed changes severely curtail freedom of assembly: restrictions have been added to the right to

protest, more responsibilities have been assigned to the organizers of protests, and more authorities have been given to police (who now have fewer responsibilities). The most substantive change is the addition of provisions that introduce restrictions on the permitted time, subject, manner, and place of demonstrations, strikes, and gatherings, as well as limitations on the right of participation. Some of these restrictions may violate Afghanistan's constitution.

Various factors prompted the amendment of the Assembly Law: fear of demonstrations getting out of hand and threatening a vulnerable government, the wish to limit negative repercussions of prolonged protests on the economic and civil life of a city, and the need to protect demonstrators in mass protests from possible terrorist attack. The drafting of the new Assembly Law was accelerated during large-scale demonstrations and sit-ins organized by the Uprising for Change movement in Kabul in June 2017.⁴⁴ During this period, protesters demanded the resignations of President Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, National Security Adviser Hanif Atmar, and the security ministers for what protesters said was their continued failure to protect lives of Afghan citizens in Kabul and other provinces.

RESPONSE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Many of the interviewees believed the international community, and particularly the US administration and UNAMA, discouraged the youth protest movements. Some believed the international community prioritized the security of the country over democracy and adherence to democratic norms and principles. "The international community panics every time there is a protest," said an Afghan journalist. According to this journalist, the privileging of security over democracy may help explain why the international community "encouraged the protest leaders to abandon their democratic practices" by asking protest leaders to "give more space to the Afghan government." Another interviewee, a university lecturer, pointed out that the international community saw the protests through the eyes of the Afghan government. This interviewee stressed: "The protesters did not want to topple the government, they wanted the government leaders to undertake reform."

While the three protest movements were active, the international community supported the Afghan government and, as some of the interviewees for this study observed, indirectly signaled to the youth protestors to end their demonstrations. Interviewees noted that the international community was reluctant to support protest movements: it was not concerned about the grievances or demands of the activists or why the protests had emerged. This was evidenced by the international community's silence on the government's heavy-handed response to protest movements. One interviewee was forceful in his critique: "The international community shamefully kept silent over gunfire by security forces at peaceful protestors in the capital Kabul. The international community supports the Afghan government versus people."

Afghan youths, who were initially buoyed by the international intervention of 2001 that led to the overthrow of the Taliban, felt betrayed by the international community. The returns since the international intervention have slowly diminished, with unfulfilled promises of reform, security, and development; youth feel increasingly excluded from the democratic processes of government and governing. This observation dovetails with the declining opportunities narrative. Additionally, while international donor aid had a positive role in generating jobs (the flow of aid to Afghanistan helped create jobs for young people and funded civil society organizations that included youth in their ranks), there was a shortcoming in the process: there was no investment in establishing or encouraging political parties or civil society participation in the democratic process.⁴⁵ Afghan youth who welcomed the presence of the international community after 2001 felt betrayed by the US silence. As a member of parliament said,

I am convinced that the international community is not committed to what they promised. After the suicide attack on the peaceful protest in Deh Mazang Square, the international community kept silent on the deadly event. The international community saw the Enlightenment movement through the lens of the Afghan government. If the international community wants to restore security and peace, it ought to respect human rights, civil rights and freedom of speech.

Conclusion and Recommendations



The three protest movements examined in this report illustrate the response of a range of youth and civil society groups to the post-2014 deterioration in political, economic, and security conditions. The three movements highlight the emergence of a new generation of youth and civil society activists after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. The new generation of activists was inspired by new ideas about (and promises of) social, political, and economic change. These groups employed new methods of social and political organizations by embracing social movement tactics such as grassroots mobilization and collective decision-making processes. It is remarkable to note that unlike most dominant political groups and networks, these movements represented a shift away from person-centered political leadership. None of the three movements came to be associated with charismatic political figures. For example, the Enlightenment movement was led by what became known as the High People's Council, a broad and loosely structured body that brought together members of parliament, representatives of political parties, and student and youth activists. Consequently, these movements point to the opening of new social and political spaces.

The foremost aim of the movements was to press the government to provide public security and justice, both essential functions of the state. But the government had neither the capacity nor the will to address shortcomings, as evidenced by its interactions with participants in the movements. Though the movements and demonstrations engaged in modern forms of mobilization to attract a broader membership, ultimately they were unsuccessful and ineffective in achieving their goals, in part because they lacked access to funding and political power, in part because they faced soft repression at home and disinterest from the international

community. Moreover, the movements were unable to develop a long-term vision for governance (or for youth's role in it). In particular, the movements were unable to articulate sustainable solutions to the problems of security, justice, and unemployment, their chief grievances. As Susanne Schmeidl and Srinjoy Bose write, "In a country where power is traditionally held among elder men with socio-political standing . . . youth have little agency in conceiving their future and that of their country."⁴⁶ This makes youth activists and organizations susceptible to the influence of entrenched elites, politicians, and strongmen. The conversation never truly found a sympathetic ear among the ruling elite and institutions. As one interviewee lamented, "I am deeply concerned about the future. We must have a more open political arena. The government cannot bring stability by suppressing civil movements."

Though President Ghani has highlighted increases in the number of young officials appointed by the NUG to various levels of the government, many interviewees perceived these appointments as largely symbolic. Youth members of the government administration were viewed (and are used) as implementers of the administration's vision. They were co-opted, and have had no power or real role in government or the broader conversation on the democratic process. According to some interviewees, it is imperative that youth have a voice at the cabinet level. The director of an independent research organization said:

We had a youth ministry in the past which was degraded to a deputy ministry [under the Ministry of Culture and Information]. Whether this ministry was effective or not requires a separate assessment; having a structure at the level of a ministry can be effective [in allowing] a role for youth at the cabinet level.

Finally, the dominant view that emerged from interviews was that the Afghan government and President Ghani are responsive to donors but not to citizens. This perspective is perhaps best summarized by the following sentiment, expressed by several interviewees: “President Ghani has time for the warlords and strongmen, but he does not have time to listen to youths.” One interviewee suggested that since Ghani listens to donors, he is more likely to listen to young people if donors tell him to.

There are several ways in which the national government and international donors can strengthen factors that support youth engagement and activism, thereby helping the government and state institutions better address the aspirations and demands of youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT

Recommendations for steps the NUG can take emphasize recognition of youth activists’ concerns and greater integration of young people into the political life of the country.

First, the NUG should recognize youth aspirations and demands expressed through peaceful civic demonstrations, including peaceful protests.

Second, as most youth demands focus on economic opportunity, justice, and security, the NUG should improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of security and development strategies by integrating youth in socioeconomic, political, and security programming. This can be achieved by mainstreaming youth inclusion and empowerment in major national programs. The government should also work toward improving the security situation and reducing the unemployment rate through a more measurable and practical approach than is currently used.

Third, relatedly, the NUG should initiate political reforms with a view toward establishing institutional avenues for youth to participate in political processes, including by reforming the relevant legislation on

political parties and elections to encourage programmatic and policy-based political parties and ensuring that government policies, including those concerning recruitment for positions in government agencies, provide equitable opportunities for all segments of the youth population.

Fourth, the NUG should improve transparency and accountability in planning and implementing major development and infrastructure projects by creating mechanisms to address claims of exclusion and marginalization from national budgetary and foreign aid allocations.

Fifth, to address the increasing gap between an ever-larger supply of university graduates and declining socioeconomic opportunities, the NUG should strive to reform the secondary and higher education sector with a view to improving employability among high school and university graduates in national and regional markets.

Sixth, to address minorities’ concern that the government is dismissive of their grievances, the NUG should pursue reform measures that balance national development goals with the principles of equity and social justice. To this end, the government could engage in confidence-building measures with minority groups, introduce policy reforms that engender greater inclusion in government, and allocate budget and foreign aid at the subnational levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL DONOR COMMUNITY

Recommendations for the international community focus on strengthening relations between the government and groups that feel marginalized by current government policies and actions, and on mitigating the root causes of the protests.

First, the international donor community should encourage the NUG (and subsequent administrations) to improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of security and development strategies by integrating



Afghan riot police clash with demonstrators during a protest in Kabul in June 2017. (Photo by Mohammad Ismail/Reuters)

youth into decision making. This can be achieved by encouraging and supporting government policies and programs that specifically address the myriad overlapping challenges Afghan youth face.

Second, funding should be provided to support programs with long-term horizons to create employment in a fair and sustainable manner.

Third, the international donor community should encourage state and nonstate actors and especially external spoilers to address the factors driving insurgency and conflict (such as cross-border support for the Taliban), which should improve the security situation.

Fourth, the NUG should be encouraged to initiate political reforms that create institutionalized avenues for youth political participation through empowering political parties.

Fifth, the international donor community should ensure that aid allocation strategies do not exacerbate existing sociopolitical cleavages in the country and should adopt (or make public existing) mechanisms to address grievances resulting from the allocation of aid programs.

Achievement of any part of this long-term vision for the NUG and the international donor community would buoy the youth segment of the polity and give voice to unrepresented groups.

Notes

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Since the establishment of the National Unity Government in 2014, a combination of rising youth expectations, declining socioeconomic and political opportunities, and increasing insecurity has fueled a number of mass protest movements in Kabul. Drawing on social movement theory, documentary sources in the development literature, and in-country interviews, this report explores emerging patterns of youth activism in Afghanistan in an effort to identify causes of and trends in protest mobilization among young people, studying three in detail. These movements faced “soft repression” from the Afghan government and lack of support from the international community, and have since largely disbanded. Nonetheless, the movements were efficacious in their use of social media to publicize their messages, recruit participants, and exposed deficits in the government’s engagement with youth and minority issues.

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