

Towards an Afghan Spring?

Grassroots Activism in Afghanistan



edited by Network Afghanistan
& Bildungswerk Berlin der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V.

Websites & contact

**Revolutionary Association of the
Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)**

www.rawa.org
rawa@rawa.org

**Social Association of Afghan
Justice Seekers (SAAJS)**

www.saajs.com
victims.families@gmail.com

**Afghanistan Human Rights and
Democracy Organisation (AHRDO)**

www.ahrdo.org
info@ahrdo.org / [ahrdoafghanistan](http://ahrdoafghanistan.org)

**Hezbe Hambastagi /
Solidarity Party of Afghanistan (SPA)**

www.hambastagi.org
info@hambastagi.org

International Networks:

Network Afghanistan

network-afghanistan@nadir.org

**Sympathizers of the Solidarity Party
of Afghanistan in Europe e.V.**

SympathizersOfSPA@gmail.com
facebook: Hawakhwahane Hambastagi

**Defence Committee
for Malalai Joya**

www.malalaijoya.com/dcmj/
dcmj.afg@gmail.com

**Coordinamento Italiano
Sostegno Donne Afghane (CISDA)**

www.osservatorioafghanistan.com
cisdaonlus@gmail.com

“Western governments, international media outlets and aid organisations like to give the impression that Afghanistan is currently being reconstructed and undergoing a positive change. It helps them justify the NATO occupation. As activists living in Afghanistan and doing political work there, we have come to deliver a very different message of what is actually going on in the country as we speak.”

Mariam Rawi, 17 November 2015

Opening remarks

Even now as we are putting the final touches on this brochure, the federal government is preparing its first mass deportation to Afghanistan. The country has been declared to be “safe enough”. According to the official rationale, at least some urban areas could be declared safe. Which areas those are, however, remains vague. Today, more than ever, it is important to show our solidarity with refugees from Afghanistan. Several initiatives have already begun to organise public protest and resistance. It is imperative that we continue to fight for the refugees’ right to stay and that we call out the misanthropic cynicism that looms behind the decision to declare the current situation in Afghanistan “safe”.

Set against this current state of affairs, this collection of texts bears witness to the catastrophic situation in Afghanistan. The analysis presented here takes a political step further by conveying points of view that, we believe, demand another form of solidarity. The brochure presents the perspectives of local grassroots activists fighting for radical change and freedom in Afghanistan.

They all emphasize how the current state of despair is a direct result of civil and military intervention in Afghanistan by international actors. Professed misogynists, Islamic fundamentalists, war criminals, and warlords have been propped up as part of the country’s political and economic elite, all the while participating in rampant corruption and shaping a system that protects them from prosecution.

These activists not only want to let the world know about the devastating conditions in Afghanistan, they also want people to know about their grassroots struggles. In order to promote these perspectives in Germany, we organised a series of events during the winter months of 2015/2016, entitled “Political Grassroots Movements in Afghanistan in the Year Following the Official Withdrawal of International Troops”, where we invited four representatives from different Afghan grassroots organisations to speak in Berlin. In planning the event series, we wanted to take a stand against the restricted understanding of democratisation as an externally controlled

state-building process. Our goal was instead to suggest perspectives that transcend modes of thinking based on Eurocentric coloniality, which have dominated knowledge about world politics and conflicts for so long. Instead of reinforcing the neoliberal and civil-military development paradigm we chose to focus on alternative pathways, which are grounded in local processes of self-organising and social movements, including groups that specifically identify as feminist, progressive, anti-colonial, anti-fundamentalist and internationalist. This brochure is motivated by these principles and thus primarily provides space for four grassroots organisations to present themselves and their political work. These projects cover a range of activities and different kinds of work: the self-organising done by families of war crime victims, who challenge the amnesty law and want to investigate the past; artistic forms of activism that seek to overcome the taboo of public remembrance (of war); women's organisations, some clandestine and some not, with revolutionary goals; political education measures and the publication of feminist and leftist magazines; acts of solidarity with the struggle for freedom in Iran, Kurdistan, and beyond worldwide; protests against femicide, against occupation, against Islamic fundamentalist acts of terror and against the war criminals who hold government positions.

Most of the texts in this brochure are based on recordings made during the event series. Weeda Ahmad's and Hafiz Rasikh's presentations were translated directly by a simultaneous interpreter from Dari into German or English. The transcriptions of the simultaneous interpretation are reproduced here. Mariam Rawi, Hadi Marifat and Hjalmar Joffre-Eichhorn all presented in English. All the texts have been edited with attention to stylistic concerns in order to provide a coherent documentation of the different event recordings. We did our best to preserve each presenter's

unique language in spite of the different layers of translation. In order to reduce redundancies in the brochure, we also cut portions of the presentations. At the same time, contextual information has been added in places where we thought it might be helpful to readers. The texts were edited in German or English and then translated into the other language respectively. The English versions of the edited texts were then sent to their respective authors and organizations. Unfortunately, due to time constraints as well as logistical and linguistic complications, the publication deadline came and went before all contributors responded. Thus, we would like to explicitly claim responsibility for any possible errors that snuck past us despite our careful editing.

The supplementary piece by Network Afghanistan was compiled from manuscripts of talks given by Mechthild Exo. With her expertise in the field and her longstanding contacts to the participating organisations, she played a very important role in organising the event series and lending her expertise to ensure the accuracy and quality of this brochure.

Both the event series and this brochure are products of diverse forms of support and collaboration. We would like to thank everyone who contributed to making it all happen. We also greatly appreciate those who were there to listen, to ask hard questions and to contribute to our discussions. Rather than try to export packaged answers and solutions from Europe, we believe in humble listening, reciprocal interactions and mutual support. In this spirit, we hope that this brochure provides you with inspiration and food for thought.

November 2016,
Mechthild Exo & Mechthild von Vacano



On the situation in Afghanistan



Afghanistan at a glance

Afghanistan's population is 30 million. It can be divided into at least 15 different ethnic groups. The four largest groups are Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. This diversity can also be found in the country's many linguistic and religious groupings. Dari and Pashtu are the two official state languages, but over 40 languages are spoken throughout Afghanistan. A vast majority of Afghans are Muslims, of which most are Sunnites, while just over 20% are Shiite. There are also smaller populations of Hindus and Sikhs. In terms of its political-administrative structure, the country is divided into 34 provinces, but many regions are ruled de facto by warlords with their own claims to certain territories.

Due to its location, Afghanistan has always held a special geostrategic and economic relevance for great powers interested in expansion. The country is central to the military control of Asia and the Middle East. Afghanistan shares borders with powerful geopolitical states, such as Iran, China and Pakistan, with their well-armed militaries (and nuclear weapons). Moreover, its geographic proximity to India, Russia and the Near East is also significant. It is also an important transit country for pipelines as it borders countries like Turkmenistan that are rich in natural gas and oil, which are then transported to Pakistan and India. In addition, Afghanistan's own wealth in metal ores and minerals was discovered not so long ago. These include iron, copper, niobium, cobalt, gold and rare earth metals.

International friendship or military interests?

Contradictions in German-Afghan relations

by Network Afghanistan

2015 marked the 100th anniversary of German-Afghan friendship with a host of events in honour of that bond. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier went to Kabul where he held a speech that emphasized Germany's role in providing Afghanistan with more financial "development aid" than for any other country worldwide. In October of that year, Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière echoed Steinmeier's comment in light of the growing number of Afghan refugees, cynically stating that Germany could expect Afghans not to flee their country since the German military, German police training forces and development organisations have been working there for the past 14 years, and at no small cost to Germany.

Afghan-German relations date back to the First World War, although even back then the "friendship" was not without clear military and imperial implications. Disguised as a wandering circus troupe, a delegate expedition was sent out by the Supreme Army Command (Oberste Heeresleitung) to Kabul. Their mission was to win over the Afghan government and get them to join the war as an ally against the colonial power Great Britain, which controlled neighbouring India. The idea was to sign a treaty of friendship, which entailed promises of money and weapons for Afghanistan. Despite having signed the agreement, Afghanistan remained neutral.

During the Second World War, the German Wehrmacht attempted once again to launch a campaign to conquer Asia starting with Afghanistan and then heading towards India.

The secret special operations unit called the "Brandenburgers" held talks in Afghanistan with the leaders of various underground groups, including anti-British factions from India. Since 1936 Germany's economic-military cooperation with Afghanistan consisted of Germany sending weapons shipments to Afghanistan and helping build up its air force. After the end of the Second World War trade relations between Afghanistan and West Germany were expanded and several university partnerships started. During this same period Germany also began lending support to police training in Afghanistan.

In more recent history, Germany joined the US-led Afghanistan intervention in December 2001 in direct response to the September 11th attacks and with the goal of overthrowing the Taliban regime and bringing down the Al-Qaeda network. Two months after the intervention began, the German federal government deployed German military units as part of the so-called International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Ever since Germany has been directly involved in the war in Afghanistan. With at times as many as 5,300 troops in Afghanistan and a number of government and economic advisers, Germany continues to support the military intervention there as well as the state-building process and social restructuring. During the first few years, as the intervening countries were dividing up tasks, Germany was given lead responsibility for training Afghan police forces. Within the ISAF mission, Germany's Federal Armed Forces were assigned military supervision over Northern Afghanistan.

Now the German government has to account for the devastating air strike that was launched during this period by German comand. It blew up two oil tankers in the Kunduz province and claimed the lives of 142 people, most of them civilians, on 4 September 2009.

In November 2001, the Petersberg near Bonn became a symbolic location as the site where the “international community” gathered to set the political course for a post-Taliban Afghanistan. This first Afghanistan Conference determined the basic outline of the new order that was to be implemented. A transition government was established in which the majority of the ministerial positions were filled by Islamic fundamentalist warlords and war criminals from the so-called Northern Alliance. The agreement did not include measures for disarmament, and due to pressure from the Northern Alliance it also failed to prohibit any general amnesty legislation. In the run-up to the summit, women in Kabul attempted to hold demonstrations calling for the representation of women and the inclusion of women’s rights advocates at the conference, but Northern Alliance soldiers disbanded them. Even on an international level, the UN Special Envoys who prepared the summit meeting took no steps to receive the women’s resolution.

These state-centred, military actions are certainly anything but gestures of friendship towards the Afghan people. Still, the history of German-Afghan relations does include positive moments. The friendly relations did not begin in 1915/1916 with the signing of the treaty, but in 1919 when Amanullah Khan seized the emir’s throne (which would later become the king’s throne). In terms of domestic policy, Amanullah implemented widespread social reforms, including equal rights for men and women, and promoted education and cultural projects. During the Weimar Republic, Amanullah Khan travelled to Germany with his wife

several times. On these trips, he made economic agreements and also initiated collaborative projects in education. For example, in 1924 the German Amani High School was founded in Kabul, which to this day prepares Afghan students for later study at a German university. University students from both countries have conducted their studies in the respective foreign country, and German engineers built dams, bridges and streets in Afghanistan. During Amanullah’s ten-year rule from 1919 to 1929, there were 22 German engineers working on 70 different construction projects in Kabul alone. One of the projects was the Darul Aman Palace, which was later supposed to become the seat of parliament. The construction project was designed so that 700 Afghan employees would gain specialized training during its course. The palace, now in ruins, became a symbol of German-Afghan friendship and the reform efforts of King Amanullah. The Afghan people are well aware of this chapter in their history. Today, the war ruins of Darul Aman Palace are used by various grassroots organisations as a site for critical theatre performances, exhibition and rallies.

After four decades of total war and violence, millions of Afghans are still living as refugees. Most of them are in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan or Iran. But some of them have made it to Germany or are still hoping to find stable lives here. Given the special relations and the historical tradition of university exchanges, many Afghan refugees applied for asylum in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s. But in autumn 2016, the German federal government signed an agreement with the Afghan government which deemed Afghanistan a “safe country of origin” and thereby made it possible to carry out mass deportations. This is an ethically unsound agreement of “friendship” between two governments. It has nothing to do with friendship as something that involves caring for people and the conditions they live in.

Today's problems from the past: Four decades of war and conflict

by Mariam Rawi, RAWA

Any adequate understanding of the current situation requires some knowledge of Afghanistan's recent past. Most of today's problems can be traced back to the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the ensuing years of Soviet occupation. The decade had extreme consequences for our country. During these 10 years of resistance against the Soviet occupation, tens of thousands of people were arrested, abducted and killed. Millions were forced to flee the country. Within the same 10 years, Islamist Mujahideen groups were armed and groomed to become powerful players in the fight against the Soviet regime. The USA, as well as Pakistan and Iran, played a decisive role in this armament. During this time, they were building up fundamentalist (Islamist) forces that would come to greatly influence today's power politics.

With the different Mujahideen groups supported by different external players, infighting was common. Even when they captured Kabul in 1992 and seized control of the state, the Mujahideen organisations continued to struggle for power amongst themselves. Groups that were financially and militarily supported by the USA began to attack other organisations right in the middle of Kabul. In the years after, these Jehadis killed tens of thousands of civilians through reckless battles, arbitrary brutality and planned massacres. Massive human rights violations were committed. In Kabul alone, 75,000 people were killed from 1992 to 1996, and hundreds of women and girls were raped. Houses and residential areas were destroyed, public institutions looted, schools and universities burnt down.

Therefore, when the Taliban seized power in 1996 it only meant one fundamentalist (Islamist) regime replaced another, though the new one was slightly worse. While the rights of women had already been restricted and Sharia law introduced, restrictions were tightened even more. Women were completely prohibited from working or even being alone on the street. They were obliged to wear a full-body veil, and men had to grow beards. Considering these historical developments, and especially the CIA's support of the Islamist forces, the USA and their allies lost all credibility as far as trying to justify their military intervention in 2001 as being motivated by humanitarian concerns. We will never accept the false claim that the USA and its allies intervened to protect women's rights or promote democracy. Quite to the contrary, the USA has been pursuing its own agenda from the start.

The very same Mujahideen groups that were in power from 1992 to 1996 later formed the Northern Alliance and were treated as allies by the USA in the military intervention in 2001. By the end of 2001 at the Afghanistan summit in Petersberg near Bonn, the "international community" had handed over to these groups the majority of ministries in the newly constituted government. Even though these Jehadi leaders had never enjoyed popular backing, they were entrusted with political power. They were promoted politically and granted financial support despite the fact that they were already infamous for their corruption amongst the common people. The Afghan people, however, have not and will never forget their brutality and

the massacres they committed against their own people. Instead of being disarmed and tried for their criminal acts, they were granted impunity and power. The Afghan public knew that they were misogynist and expressly anti-democratic.

To gain power, they adopted democratic rhetoric, disguising themselves with it. And today, these loathsome, corrupt people, responsible for severe crimes against humanity, hold all the important positions of power in the country.

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE

In early 1978, before the Soviet invasion, the April Revolution began. According to my knowledge, this revolution was not directed by the Soviet Union, but can be considered a socio-revolutionary process from below in which land was redistributed and women were liberated. What is your political perspective on this period?

When we speak about the time of the occupation by the Soviet Union, we mostly include the one and a half years before the Soviet invasion as well as the three years after the withdrawal of their military. Before this period, we had a strong student movement in Afghanistan inspired by the 1968ers and lasting into the 1970s. Students and intellectuals established various groups and networks back then. They represented different leftist movements who engaged in lively debates with each other, but some were also inclined towards division and strove for power.

27 April 1978, was one of the darkest days in our history. This day marks the beginning of our country's tragic history. Under the banner of the "socialist idea", the new People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government arrested, abducted and killed tens of thousands of people, particularly from the student movement. This coup was decidedly not a grassroots revolution,

even though they called it a revolution. It was merely a regime change within the existing power structures. The new regime then deferred to the Soviet Union. The repression and destruction of the progressive political forces in those days is one of the main reasons why the left in Afghanistan today is so weak.

Just as the USA justified their intervention in the name of anti-terrorism and human and women's rights, back then "socialism" and "workers' rights" were abused as mere slogans to justify the intervention. Just as some key individuals today allegedly stand for women's rights, back then land reform was implemented as a token project. But, as a matter of fact, the biggest prison in Asia was built during this time – the Pul-e Charkhi Prison, where tens of thousands of people have disappeared.

MARIAM RAWI

Early advances in women's liberation

by Network Afghanistan

As Western efforts of political stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan fail, Western discourse compensates by invoking certain "cultural" images all the more. Sometimes the implications are explicit, but often they remain implicit: Afghanistan appears as a backward and overly traditional country, which is why, in this logic, the process of democratization under the West's supervision could not be completed. Characterisations like this one ignore how the West has been enabling corruption and undemocratic conditions or the influence of reactionary (fundamentalist) groups, both of which significantly impact living conditions in Afghanistan. Furthermore, these depictions frame the current situation as a problem rooted specifically in Afghan culture. But two historical examples concerning women's rights help call into question this kind of thinking and show that Afghanistan has had a long history of political activism that has worked to strengthen the rights of women and girls. "Long" here refers to a historical comparison between Afghanistan and certain European countries. These efforts were not driven by outside interests. They came from within the country: top down by King Amanullah Khan and Queen Soraya (our first example) and bottom up from political and cultural movements in the 1960s and 1970s (our second example).

King Amanullah Khan reigned in Afghanistan from 1919 to 1929. He was a proponent of education for girls and doing away with the hijab. Forced marriages, bride price practices, polygamy and marrying off underage girls were all banned. In 1923, Afghanistan received its first constitution in

which men and women were granted equal legal status. Amanullah's wife, Soraya Tarzi Hanim or Queen Soraya, was a self-confident person who spoke out on women's rights. She made public appearances, published a magazine for women, travelled with her husband and was exceptionally influential. At a now famous public event, Amanullah declared that Islam did not compel women to cover their bodies or to wear a certain kind of headscarf. At the end of his speech, Queen Soraya removed her hijab, which prompted other women in the audience to do the same right out in public. These early women's rights reforms provoked a pushback by conservative religious leaders and reactionary regional rulers. They were ultimately strong enough to force King Amanullah to abdicate the throne. The king and queen went into exile, and most of their reforms were retracted.

1968 was a year of lively political activism in Afghanistan, as it was in so many other places around the world. There were strikes at universities and schools as well as an outpouring of solidarity for the ongoing struggle of the labour movement. Women were also fighting to gain new liberties in their daily lives. In cities, not only were women not wearing hijab, they were going out in sleeveless tops and stylish miniskirts, attending rock concert festivals and participating in flourishing cultural scenes at the theatre, cinema and in city nightlife. They were playing basketball and tennis. They joined the work force in fields such as education, healthcare and administration. Some even became members of the police force and military. Since the

1960s women and girls have participated in leftist protests in support of both students' and workers' issues and have become increasingly involved in protests against the oppression of women. Already back then March 8th, International Women's Day, was a day of demonstrations lead by various organisations.

In order to keep these new liberties and the influence of leftist groups in check, the ruling elite backed the efforts of an Islamist movement that was also gaining momentum at universities. Select student groups with reactionary and fundamentalist inclinations were thus propped up. Whereas the early 1960s was free from such Islamist organizations, the mid-1960s saw a

surge in publications and agitators from Islamist groups. By 1969 these forces had joined to form a movement focused on quelling activism by leftist, revolutionary groups and those concerned with women's rights. These conservative Islamist students and mullahs took violent and deadly action against leftists and women's rights activists. Female students were victims of acid attacks, in which acid was thrown onto their exposed legs and faces. Their legs were also shot at. One of the active members of the Islamist youth movement responsible for these attacks was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who would later, as the result of the dubious "peace process", be given an "honorary post" in the Afghan government in September 2016.

Protest by the Solidarity Party on the occasion of Farkhunda's lynching Kabul July 2015 Photo SPA



“Liberated”?! On the current women’s rights situation

by Mariam Rawi, RAWA

Today, about 15 years after the NATO intervention, it is obvious that terrorism has not been defeated and women’s rights have not been secured. Women are still subject to discrimination and violence on a daily basis. A few current examples of abuse against women demonstrate how our government continues to pride itself as supporting women’s rights and democracy, but in actuality completely fails to protect women’s rights.

People in the West are made to believe that the international intervention brought Afghan women rights and education. To some extent, this may be true for Kabul and a few other urban areas, where girls today do have better access to schools. But in rural areas girls are often still barred from attending schools (and it is here in the countryside where the vast majority of the population lives, not in cities), or it is simply deemed too dangerous for them to attend school. After all, the Taliban continues to threaten and destroy schools in the areas they control.

Countless incidents of women raped by warlords or members of government continue to go unprosecuted. In one case, a woman was killed for making her rape public. The legal authorities also fail to prosecute cases of gang rape, of which there are many. Although the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law passed legislation in 2009, it exists only on paper. Reality looks quite different. Even if families seek prosecution, they hardly manage to carry through with the whole process and are dismissed. In other instances, women are forced to marry their rapists or else

end up in jail after trying to run away to escape the violence. Additionally, many regions are controlled by the Taliban or warlords. In these areas, the central government and national legislation are non-effective.

In late October 2015, a 19-year-old woman named Rokhshana was stoned to death for running away from home to avoid a forced marriage. The lynching of Farkhunda is another horrible example: In March 2015 an enraged mob attacked and killed the 27-year-old woman openly in the streets of Kabul. In an excessive outburst of violence, Farkhunda was kicked and beaten, thrown off a roof, burnt and run over with a car. Shortly before a vendor selling charms in front of a local mosque had falsely accused her of having burnt pages of the Quran. Within minutes, without any chance to defend herself against these accusations, the young woman was lynched by the mob. Because so many randomly present men willingly participated in this extreme act of violence, Farkhunda, who had been a very pious young woman and a student of religion, became a symbol of the pain shared by women in Afghanistan, but she also became a symbol for their protest.

Women are exposed to all the dangers that already exist for the general civilian population of Afghanistan. In October 2015, a group of seven travellers was kidnapped by ISIS and beheaded in early November, amongst them were two women and a nine-year-old girl. Women and girls have also repeatedly been amongst the civilian casualties of US military air strikes.

In-between extreme poverty and blatant corruption: Evaluating NATO's intervention

by Hafiz Rasikh, SPA

In 2001 the USA and its allies occupied Afghanistan in the name of equality, freedom and human rights. But after 15 years of occupation we must say that the situation in Afghanistan has in many respects deteriorated instead of improved. Today at least 25 of the 34 provinces are in some state of war. Terror attacks continue to increase both in terms of the scope of the damage and their frequency. On a political level we are once more confronted with a fundamentalist (Islamist) regime. Even though this was not the intended outcome of the intervention, NATO forces nonetheless relied on these fundamentalist groups in order to pursue strategic interests.

Meanwhile, right under the noses of international troops, Afghanistan has become one of the biggest drug producers worldwide. 90% of global heroin production comes from the poppy fields of Afghan farmers. But not all of the opium is meant for export. In Afghanistan alone about 3 million people are drug addicts – and that amongst a total population of only about 30 million. Despite 104 billion US dollars of development aid flowing into the country, the people's economic situation does not seem to have improved. Indeed, it has clearly become worse. More than 8 million people are unemployed, many of them young people. The average per capita income is less than one US dollar per day. Poverty combined with a deep sense of hopelessness prompt people to leave the country. This is the reason for the refugee movement.

All that development aid never really reaches the people because it moves directly from the international donors to the fundamentalists and

NGO mafias. The money disappears into their pockets. By faking projects worth several million, these funds are being privatised. For instance, the official number of policemen on payroll is raised on paper only to increase the income of commanders and warlords. Other funds have been allocated to construct hundreds of schools, but these schools are also only built on paper. Aid funds worth more than 100 million US dollars flowed into an infrastructure project to improve the country's water supply, but with this money the contractors were not even able to secure Kabul's water supply. Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, the former secretary of the interior and later defence secretary, raked in 80 million Afghanis (1.2 million

Hafiz Rasikh November 2015 Photo Mandala



Euros) from German funds to buy goat droppings used as fertilizer for 100 square meters of the ministry's lawn. As defence secretary, Bismillah purchased arms for which he declared more than 4,000 US dollars per weapon. But in reality he had second-hand weapons bought in Pakistan for 500 US dollars apiece. When these weapons arrived in Kunduz, they proved inoperable.

The excessive greed of the elites could not have materialized without the Americans and the other NATO states noticing, but the foreign powers were willing to take these risks in order to

establish themselves locally. By now, the majority of Afghans have realised that the NATO states ultimately pursue their own interests and by no means stand for progress – not in the past and not today. This is why NATO forces are confronted with different forms of resistance and protest. On a day-to-day basis, people are faced with US-led airstrikes that target civilians, schools and family gatherings. All the while the Taliban and ISIS have been expanding their range of influence. Yet critical voices who raise these issues receive very little attention from the international media.

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE

How do you perceive the role of international non-governmental organisations in Afghanistan?

The international aid machinery follows the political priorities of its main donor countries. The Afghan population has been suffering severely for decades, especially widows and orphans. But before 11 September 2001, practically no NGO cared to pay attention. Only in the aftermath of 9/11 did international NGOs start flocking to the country and with them came all the financial aid, putting Afghanistan second on the list of the world's most corrupt countries.

But I want to highlight several other problematic aspects: These NGOs pay their Afghan employees disproportionally high salaries and by that contribute to a widening gap between rich and poor. They also rarely control the implementation of funded projects on site, especially outside of Kabul, because the security regulations for

governmental organisations and NGOs mostly prohibit their foreign staff from leaving their guarded compounds. Thus, in reality many projects only exist on paper. These NGOs also draw a completely false picture for the international community. They impart the wrong impression that a process of development is under way, that women's rights are guaranteed and that money and jobs are available. With these NGOs, Afghan civil society is being represented by only those figures who agree to the foreign policy interests of the international states. Many of the Afghan NGO directors graduated from US universities and are now supposed to serve as role models and as proof that democratic forces have successfully been established in the country.

MARIAM RAWI

Peace without justice?

State-sanctioned impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity since 1978

by Weeda Ahmad, SAAJS

After the Taliban rule, a civil rights movement began demanding justice for all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed over the last few decades. This movement relates more broadly to the international framework of transitional justice, which advocates for a collective process of redressing legacies of human rights abuses. Here, the Afghan civil rights movement draws upon the experience of other countries, like Chile, Guatemala, Ruanda and South Africa, which have faced similar challenges in coming to terms with severe human right abuses by previous dictatorial regimes. Despite the fact that none of these transitional justice processes can be deemed a complete success, they still made significant advances. Some led to the recognition and compensation of the victims' suffering. They also drew attention to the prosecution of perpetrators and promoted reconciliation.

Weeda Ahmad November 2015 Photo Mandala



In 2002 the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) was founded as a government agency to monitor the observance of human rights and to protect them. As one of its first steps the AIHRC began to survey Afghans about their expectations on how to implement transitional justice. This survey resulted in the "Action Plan for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation" which was subsequently approved by the government and parliament. The AIHRC then appointed a group of Afghan and international human rights activists to map human rights violations across the country. The mapping was completed in 2009 and results were expected to be published in 2011.

But ultimately any serious effort for transitional justice was impeded by the fact that today the very same people are in power who ought to be held accountable for such crimes in the past. Our government and parliament consisted almost entirely of these criminals; nearly every member of government had participated in crimes against humanity within the last 40 years. Instead of promoting transitional justice, the parliament passed an amnesty law. According to this law anyone who surrenders his weapons to the government is granted amnesty and thus will not be prosecuted for any crime ever committed in the past. The amnesty law has been in force since 2008, even though it stands in conflict with other international laws that the Afghan state also adheres to as per treaty agreements.



Commemoration on the Polygon Field near the Pul e Charki Prison organised by SAAJS December 2013 Photo SAAJS

Around this same period of time the AIHRC received the findings from the human rights mapping project in a document reportedly consisting of 800 pages. But the publication of the report was blocked for political reasons, despite strong pressure from victims' families who loudly demanded its release. Since then all efforts to map human rights violations have been frozen. The report has been shelved. State authorities do not mention it anymore and are not taking any action towards transitional justice. The "Plan of Action for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation" was never implemented and has been officially terminated by now because the timeframe for all the projects it included has expired.

Instead of meeting the popular demand for transitional justice, the government consolidated a system of impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Based on the amnesty law, negotiations and a reconciliation process with the Taliban and other armed Islamist anti-government organisations were initiated in 2010. The Taliban and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's group were to be

involved in government power. No transitional justice measures of any kind were included in the negotiation process. The Afghan government's idea was instead to promote "peace". The logic was that if we could manage to come to peace with the Taliban, the nation's over-all situation would improve and the country would prosper. To bring about these changes, they initiated the Afghanistan High Peace Council (HPC), but we regard this creation as another strategic ploy. Once again, all of the council members are perpetrators themselves, responsible for human rights violations and war crimes within the last 40 years, while on a rhetorical level, of course, they employ the proper terminology and underline their dedication to the good of the people. Yet these are nothing but empty promises, mere catchwords, without any impact whatsoever.

By contrast, anyone who still dares to speak of the crimes committed in the past is accused of threatening the peace process. Still, in the face of such adversity, victims' families and the majority of the Afghan people stick to the message that we will neither forget nor forgive these crimes.

A new beginning?

Afghanistan after the withdrawal of international troops

by Hadi Marifat, AHRDO

In late 2014, the security transition from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Afghanistan National Security Forces was completed, and the ISAF was replaced by Resolute Support. International troops were further reduced to “only” 13,000 international soldiers (from about 60,000 in 2014). At least four US military bases were planned to remain indefinitely (Kabul, Kandahar, Bagram and Jalalabad). Nevertheless, these measures were supposed to mark a crucial step towards independence. Since then Afghanistan has been undergoing transition processes concerning security, politics and the economy.

The security transition

“If your enemy is a fox, treat him as if he were a lion.”

Afghan proverb

I regard this as the most challenging transition. But before I turn to the problems, let me start with one positive aspect. Even though they are under extraordinary pressure, Afghan security forces are doing the best they can to protect the citizens of Afghanistan. Their power, however, is limited, and despite their efforts, civilian casualties grow in number each day. A recent UN report shows that 2015 was the bloodiest year for Afghanistan since the UN began keeping records in 2009 with 11,002 casualties (3,545 fatalities and 7,457 injured). When the international troops left and transferred the responsibility of security to the Afghan forces, they did so prematurely without

a coherent or structured plan. Prior to the withdrawal, over 150,000 international troops were stationed in Afghanistan at the peak of foreign intervention in 2011/12 with at least 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT). The sudden withdrawal and reduction of international forces created serious security gaps in many provinces. The insurgents benefited from this power vacuum and even managed to gain territorial control. In many regions conflicts intensified. In 2015, for example, the Taliban managed to temporarily seize one of the major and strategically important cities in the north-eastern province of Kunduz where German troops had been stationed. Up to that point it had been considered a relatively stable region. In other regions the Islamic State gained power, particularly in the eastern province of Nangarhar bordering Pakistan.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I am certainly not arguing for a protraction of international troops in the country, but the international community should have maintained other forms of partnership and commitment. Instead, international attention shifted to Syria and Iraq without any of the problems in Afghanistan being solved. After 14 years of intervention, they suddenly decided: “This is not our war, this is your war.” Since international troops are no longer conducting combat operations, they have turned to drones as their weapons of choice. As a result, drone attacks have increased in many parts of Afghanistan, in the east above all. These drone attacks cause civilian casualties.

The political transition

“The shit of two people will not be eaten even by a dog.”

Afghan proverb

In 2014, for the first time in the country’s history, there was a peaceful transfer of power from one “democratic” regime to another. Although the presidential election was accompanied by relatively few instances of violence, the election process was overshadowed by widespread accusations of fraud between the political camps of the two final candidates, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. Once again a power-sharing agreement was negotiated and signed under the watch of the international community, particularly US Secretary of State John Kerry. The agreement declared Ghani president and Abdullah chief executive of the country, an extra-constitutional position. Despite all that, the elections and the peaceful transfer of power was a comparably positive experience that gave hope to many Afghans.

By now much of that hope has been dashed away because the “national unity government” is still far from unity. Instead, it is torn by a constant fight for power between the opposing camps around Ghani and Abdullah. For example, incapable of agreeing on a candidate, the government has failed to nominate a defence minister – a position remarkably important for a country at war. Other key positions, including governor posts for some of the 34 provinces, have also not yet been filled. Moreover, the national unity government has impeded long overdue reforms to the election

“Two weeks ago my close friend, a journalist, was killed in a targeted attack in the eastern part of Afghanistan.”

NIK MOHAMMED

“Two years ago one of my childhood friends and a member of our organisation finally made it to Australia after being detained in a refugee camp for two years. Today he works as a construction worker.”

HADI MARIFAT

“Three years ago a member of our organisation AHRDO lost her husband in a Taliban attack in Kabul.”

HJALMAR JOFFRE-EICHHORN

“Last year one of the founding members of our organisation left Afghanistan because he didn’t see any future for his new-born daughter.”

NIK MOHAMMED

“Last year one of my good friends and a women’s rights activist was killed in a targeted killing in South Afghanistan.”

HADI MARIFAT

“Six years ago one of the founding members of AHRDO and the main actor in our play that toured all over Afghanistan was granted asylum in Europe after he was almost beaten to death in Afghanistan. Today he works in a restaurant.”

HJALMAR JOFFRE-EICHHORN

system. Since 2004 we have had three presidential and two parliamentary elections, all of which were called into question based on their faulty credibility. In the 2014 elections, fraud accusations brought everything to a low point, and yet the current government still fails to take any major steps to reform election law or the current election institutions to enable more transparent elections in the future. I highlight this because in 2014 the people of Afghanistan showed a real interest in the elections. People went to great lengths to cast their votes, travelling to the polling stations from remote villages either by donkey or by foot. In some instances, people that went to vote had their fingers cut off by the Taliban. Despite all the threats and dangers, the people participated in the election with the belief in the promise that their vote would make a difference. But it did not.

Hadi Marifat February 2016 Photo Mandala



The economic transition

"If you don't have food on the table, there is no need to brush your teeth three times a day."

Afghan proverb

Economically, the country sees its future as an energy hub, capitalizing on Afghanistan's strategic location in Central Asia, bordering countries such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, all rich in largely untapped oil and natural gas resources. The TAPI Pipeline that will transport natural gas from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan and India is one of the current large-scale construction projects. It has been championed as a win-win solution for all countries involved. In Afghanistan, some people hope that development projects like this will eventually provide much needed employment opportunities. But for now these are just distant visions of a possible future.

In the present, however, people are faced with a significant lack of employment opportunities, a problem that intensified with the withdrawal of the international troops. Many Afghans had actually found work in different sectors associated with the international military presence in Afghanistan. The international humanitarian NGOs were another important source of (sometimes even well-paid) jobs. But by now, the majority of international NGOs have left Afghanistan, too. The circus has left town and moved on to other places like Syria, Iraq and Libya, which are now considered more important than Afghanistan.

The decrease in development aid is also an important issue to consider in relation to economic development. Let me give you an example: 100% of the Afghan development budget is dependent on international aid. Almost 30-40% of the regular (state) budget is dependent on international aid.

All of sudden, you have a dramatic reduction of development aid, which immediately impacts the economic sector as people realise that there are no development projects taking place. The realisation frustrates them, and they start losing hope in the country's economy. There seems to be no viable economic prospects for the people, and they become desperate. If they can somehow afford it, then they decide to leave the country.

Another problem is the illegal side of Afghanistan's economy, controlled mostly by militia groups. The Taliban alone earns about 450 million US dollars per year from drug production and trafficking, which means that the drug business itself generates and sustains the conflict in the country. Besides the drug trade, a huge portion of the Afghan economy is controlled by mafia-like organisations. There does not seem to be any political effort to end this system of illegal business dealings and corruption.

What does all of that mean for the living conditions of ordinary Afghan citizens? People are afraid. They are disillusioned. They are angry. They are afraid because of the lack of economic prospects for the future and the lack of security in the country. They are disillusioned with the whole idea of democracy and democratisation, as they have witnessed it in Afghanistan over the last 15 years. They were told that their vote was important and that democracy could make a real difference in this country, but that ended up not being the case. And, of course, people are angry. They are angry about the strong and persisting culture of impunity in the country, about the absence of justice. Afghans are angry because freedom of expression is deteriorating in our country, even as our state representatives sell it as a success story on the international stage. Our right to freedom of expression is constantly threatened and literally under attack. Just back in January 2016 the popular television station Tolo TV

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE

The German government wants to deport refugees to Afghanistan, declaring it a “safe country of origin”. But, in your opinion, is Afghanistan “safe” enough to send back refugees?

In almost all of the 34 provinces some form of war is going on. I therefore cannot understand how anyone could label it as “safe”. There might be tiny areas, especially around the capital Kabul, which could be considered relatively safe, since no direct attacks have taken place there. However, people need to move around, they need to buy groceries or go to the hospital. But roads are not safe at all. Travel within the country is even more restricted. To give you a personal example, I have not been to my hometown for 6 years.

HADI MARIFAT

was attacked in Kabul by a suicide bomber. Seven journalists were killed in one day and dozens injured. Outspoken artists like Kubra Khademi¹ have had to leave the country because the threats against their activist work and their lives became

¹ In one of her public art performances, Kubra Khademi walked the streets of Kabul wearing steel armour that emphasised the shape of women's breasts and buttocks to protest against sexual harassment.

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE

To what extent is the movement in Afghanistan influenced by movements in other countries, particularly by those representing different versions of the Arab spring? What political lessons do you draw from the experiences of these movements?

Social media have a high impact on people in Afghanistan, especially the new, younger generation with their access to Twitter, Facebook and other kinds of social media. Around 3 million Facebook and Twitter users are registered in Afghanistan. The so-called Arab spring was certainly an important inspiration, but by now it has also become a historic example to learn from. Based on the political experiences in countries like Egypt or Syria, the Afghan youth is quite cautious, not only about organising an Afghan spring, but they also consider the aftermath of such an uprising: If they managed to bring the government down, what would the militias do? What if they did seize the moment and take over power? This new generation has lived through the Taliban regime in their teen years and, by comparison, the current government might still be preferable after all.

HADI MARIFAT

too severe. People are also angry and worried about gains in women's rights backsliding. There have been some achievements in women's rights over the last 15 years, but recent developments point to a reversal of this process. Violence against women is on the rise again.

Despite all these negative prospects, I want to conclude with a glimpse of hope. I see a new generation of young Afghan men and women that are no longer willing to accept all the injustice, suffering and impoverishment. They are striving to master their own lives and shape the future. In 2015 this generation joined mass demonstrations in many cities throughout the country, including Kabul. At one of these demonstrations, somewhere around 800,000 to 1 million young Afghans took to the streets of Kabul. Incited by the decapitation carried out by ISIS of a family of seven who belonged to the Shiite Hazara minority, the mourning crowd grew overnight into a mass demonstration made up of many different ethnic groups. They all marched to the presidential palace on 11 November 2015, condemning ISIS, the Taliban and the government alike. This new generation is questioning the current political, social and economic situation and is willing to bring about change. This is what still gives us hope. And meanwhile some people have even started to talk about an Afghan Spring.



Grassroots movements in Afghanistan

RAWA

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

by Mariam Rawi

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was founded in 1977 by Meena, a young female law student at the University of Kabul. Our organisation is the first and only women's rights organisation in the history of Afghanistan that is decidedly political. We are convinced that women's rights can only be fully realised in an independent, democratic and secular Afghanistan. Only in such a country will people enjoy equal rights as minorities, as members of different ethnic, tribal or religious groups. Thus, RAWA has always stood up against fundamentalist (Islamist) forces as well as against occupation. RAWA was one of the first to speak out publicly against the Soviet occupation and did so again against the subsequent fundamentalist regime and the Taliban, too, which perpetuated the same fundamentalist regime. In 2001 we explicitly warned the "international community" against collaborating with the Northern Alliance and immediately voiced our protest when the interim government was formed.

Documenting war crimes and crimes against humanity is one important aspect of our work. RAWA was quick to begin collecting documentation on the crimes of Mujahideen organisations between 1992 and 1996. It continued to do so during Taliban rule. At that time, taking pictures or producing video footage was in general prohibited, and international journalists were scarcely present, which is why we made our material internationally available. Members of our documentation committee risked a lot to obtain the footage. They often used the protection of

the burqa to document cruel forms of punishment and similar atrocities committed by the Taliban regime. The video footage of the public execution of a woman named Zarmeena, for instance, was taped at imminent risk.

In 2012 we published a book on the crimes committed by Mujahideen organisations in the government (1992–1996).¹ This book documents the crimes of the organisations that later formed the Northern Alliance – and which were made allies in the US-led war of intervention. To this day we collect reports and documents and interview the victims of local warlords and international military

¹ The book is entitled *Afghanistan: Some Documents of the Bloody and Traitorous Jehadi Years*. Jihad is an alternative term for Mujahideen organisations.

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE

Does your documentation of war crimes also include those committed by German troops in Afghanistan?

In September 2009, 142 people were killed by an airstrike launched by the German Bundeswehr near Kunduz – most of them were civilians. We tried to contact the victims' families and to mobilise them. In doing so, we were able to compile a list of the names of the victims.

MARIAM RAWI

forces as well as victims of suicide attacks. Many of these reports contain detailed information on the involvement of current members of government and warlords. If it were not for our work, many of these details and disconcerting relationships would never have been revealed. We intend to use the documentation of these crimes as evidence for later prosecutions.

To put it pointedly, our activities address the foundations of society. We focus on organising political education and providing social assistance for women and children in need. In recent years, however, financial difficulties have forced us to halt most of these social projects. Before that we were able to run orphanages, tailor shops and other cooperatives that provide women a sanctuary and simultaneously an income. We organised education for girls and women and ran schools even under the most difficult conditions of corruption, war and exile. For us, education is one of the most important vehicles to reach women and to empower them to stand up for their rights. Under the Taliban regime women and girls were locked up in their homes and excluded from education. But we ran secret schools and even built up fully functional schools in the refugee camps of Pakistan where students were taught in all subjects across all grade levels. Many of our contacts and relations developed through our literacy courses. We use these classes not only to teach women how to read and write, but we also provide them a space for political discussions where they can learn more about their rights. At these meetings we also discuss family structures,



Poster in memory of the assassinated RAWA founder Meena
Photo Mandala

gender relations and government policies. Exchanges like these can be the key to radical social change. Education is at the core of RAWA's work.

From the very start we began publishing the magazine *Payam-e Zan* (Women's Message). It is printed in Dari and Pashtu. Since RAWA has been persecuted and forced to operate underground for the most part, publicising and distributing the magazine has always been a dangerous endeavour. Nonetheless we have managed to sustain publication for almost 40 years now. Across the country and in the refugee camps of neighbouring Pakistan, our newspaper continues to be distributed and widely discussed. We now also publish *Payam-e Zan* online. We began using

the internet more broadly as early as the 1990s. In order to speak to an international audience, we have an English website that provides a variety of materials, such as political analysis, information about RAWA's work, current news clippings, poems and lots of pictures as well as videos. You can also find original music available for download. Many of our texts are also available in Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, German and even Japanese. RAWA has been active on Facebook and Twitter since 2009.

Due to safety concerns we are neither able to run an office nor are we able to make public appearances. However, as individuals we still participate in demonstrations organised, for instance, by the Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers or the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan.

We are convinced that only an uprising based on the unity of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan will lead to stability, peace, independence and democracy. As other movements in the world, we welcome international support from human rights and anti-war activists. We also welcome the support of progressive groups worldwide that love liberty and democracy. We speak to you directly because you do not tolerate and actively oppose the wrongful politics of your governments. It is crucial to develop ideas about how your political activism might be able to strengthen our struggle in Afghanistan. We act according to the basic idea that democracy and women's rights cannot be delivered "as a gift" from other outside states and military forces. It is our own responsibility to change the situation in our country. But your support is important in that process.

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE

What are the conditions under which you conduct your political work? To what extent are you and your organisations affected by repression exerted by the state or even non-governmental forces?

Currently, anyone in Afghanistan who criticises the regime has to expect the worst. For RAWA activists the situation is intensified because RAWA has been very outspoken in the struggle against the NATO occupation and the integration of criminals into the government. Because of that, we are forced to operate underground and to camouflage ourselves, for instance, by wearing the veil. Furthermore, RAWA has become something like a brand: Whoever speaks out loudly against the government is denounced as a RAWA member.

MARIAM RAWI

The SAAJS is officially registered as an organisation, but in many of our activities we are confronted with problems, especially when obtaining permits for rallies or direct actions. For instance, local warlords try to prevent our activities in their provinces with all kinds of tricks. And, of course, we are constantly being intimidated. The High Peace Council has further called for a boycott against all organisations that still demand a reckoning for the crimes committed by past regimes as well as for those committed by current power holders.

WEEDA AHMAD

SAAJS

Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers

by Weeda Ahmad

The Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers was founded in 2007 in order to make the voices of victims' families heard who suffered from war crimes and crimes against humanity. At that time, we directly responded to the government's refusal to examine mass graves recently discovered in Baharakstan, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul. Instead of investigating the sites and engaging in a process of transitional justice, the discovery was supposed to be kept secret from the public. But some of the victims' families were not willing to accept the cover up and held a rally in front of the office of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Carrying pictures of the victims on our posters and banners, we raised our voices against these crimes and demanded justice for the victims. We also articulated several demands to the Afghan government back then. All of them are still valid and continue to be core issues in our political work: We demand the examination of the mass graves, a documentation of the crimes of the past, the establishment of a culture of remembrance and the realisation of further measures of transitional justice, including the prosecution of perpetrators. With regard to these demands, we continue to strive for a reckoning for the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during all the different phases of Afghanistan's recent history, which for us encompasses the last four decades.

Across the country, we engage in educational projects and promote the foundation of local groups for victims' families. As part of our work we document the accounts given by victims' families of the crimes they experienced. We file the relevant documents and try to make sure these crimes will not be forgotten. To that end we also collect evidence for future prosecution. As members of the Transitional Justice Coordination Group (TJCG), an alliance of 26 Afghan and international organisations, we helped put on the first countrywide gathering of victims' families in 2010. At this "Victims' Jirga", representatives from all regions and languages, genders and ethnic origins came together. Everyone present shared personal accounts of the violence they and their families suffered. The diverse perspectives were mutually respected, and the suffering related to the various historic phases was acknowledged. In this communal process victims' families could collectively define what justice and peace means to them.

Poster by SAAJS with portraits and names of victims of war
Photo Mandala



We organise commemoration ceremonies, visible places of remembrance, exhibitions and demonstrations. In honour of International Human Rights Day on 10 December, we hold demonstrations and other events. By now we have archived more than 3,000 pictures of murdered or missing individuals, which we exhibit as memorial galleries in different places. For instance, we showed one set of pictures at the ruins of the Darul Aman Palace, which was destroyed during the struggle for power in 1992. In Kabul and Herat, we hung up pictures of victims along the streets. We also carry the pictures of victims on signs during direct actions. Displaying them allows us to gain closer contact with other victims' families and to extend our base. These new contacts might not have pictures of their own relatives, but some collect pictures of other families' murdered relatives to add to our collection.

We designated the mass grave on the Polygon Field on the outskirts of Kabul as an important memorial site. The notorious Pul-e Charkhi Prison

was not far away. After the April coup in 1978, the socialist government of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) imprisoned tens of thousands of people there for political dissidence. Most of those arrested were executed on the spot without trial and buried with bulldozers in mass graves. In 2013, the Dutch public prosecutor published a list with up to 5,000 names of inmates murdered between 1978 and 1979.¹ Even though the list included only a small number of the victims from this period, it gave countless families confirmation of what had happened to their loved ones. For the first time after 35 years they finally had some closure.

¹ The list comes from investigation files covering violent disappearances and crimes against humanity directed against the chief of the Interrogation Department of the Afghan Intelligence agency at that time. Even though the former department chief died shortly before he could be arrested and prosecuted, the Dutch public prosecutor still published the list.

Wreath laying ceremony at a massacre site in Kabul's Afshar district December 2013 Photo SAAJS





Poster to commemorate the Yakolang massacre displayed in Kabul January 2014 Photo SAAJS

We frequently organise large commemorations. In Yakawlang in the province of Bamyan, we assembled 2,500 people. Family members of the victims and their relatives as well as other interested parties came together to commemorate a massacre committed during the Taliban rule in which around 300 people were murdered on a single day by the Taliban. At a similar event in the province of Kunar, we held a memorial for a massacre known as the “Kerala massacre”. During the rule of the Soviet-dependant regime, 1,260 people in the village of Kerala were slaughtered on a single day, amongst them women, children and elderly people. Again, we publicly exhibited a long list of victims’ names. The commander responsible for this massacre, Sadeq Alamyar, had by then already left the country to apply for political asylum in the Netherlands, where he has since been arrested and charged with war crimes.²

² The Dutch judiciary has no statute of limitations for war crimes. In this case, the prosecutor’s office followed an individual complaint from a victim’s family member from Kerala. In Afghanistan, the amnesty law would prohibit any such lawsuit.

We demand the criminal prosecution of all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed over the past four decades. Past and present criminals have to be brought to justice. We therefore advocate for the repeal of the 2008 amnesty law. We reject any “peace process” with the Taliban. Such a process could only be negotiated against the will of the Afghan people because there can be no peace without justice, human rights and dignity. Together with other victims’ organisations and the TJCG alliance, we call for the victims’ perspectives and demands to be included in any peace negotiations. But we also need other social groups, especially women’s organisations, to participate in this process, too. Any “peace agreement” with the Taliban would only add more criminals to those already sitting in government. Under such conditions, true peace can never prevail in Afghanistan.

The removal of all those war criminals and human rights violators from high-ranking government posts is another one of our key demands. That is the reason why at our demonstrations we chant: “Democracy without justice is meaningless!”

Hezbe Hambastagi

Solidarity Party of Afghanistan (SPA)

by Hafiz Rasikh

Responding to the state of our country we, a group of progressive and pro-democracy intellectuals, decided in 2004 to found the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan. By now we have more than 30,000 members and are active in all provinces of the country. Our political aims are based on democracy and include secularism, equal rights for men and women as well as equal rights for all ethnic and religious groups. We want a free and independent Afghanistan where people live together in unity. It is our firm belief that true change can only be accomplished by a regime change. We want the prosecution of all war criminals and demand the decampment of all international troops: the US military, NATO troops and all others. We oppose all forms of fundamentalism and narrow-mindedness. Beyond Afghanistan, we stand in solidarity with liberation movements worldwide. We recognise it as our duty to support the struggle of all those fighting for democracy and freedom.

Even though we participate in provincial elections, we boycotted the last presidential elections. For as long as warlords, criminals and other anti-democratic forces dominate the government

and parliament, we see no chance of achieving true democratic change through parliamentary measures. We rely on grassroots organisation instead. Besides mobilising people for rallies and demonstrations, we run awareness campaigns and education programs. In our opinion, only an informed society will be able to overcome the deep scars left by decades of war. Only an informed society can surmount the reactionary forms of thinking and culture sustained by such experiences. Across the country we organise meetings for our members and others who are interested. We host film screenings and other media presentations in order to make critical information available. It is our goal to provide people with alternative perspectives and to impact social awareness at large. One aspect of our educational work is to help build a public culture of remembrance and to commemorate those dark and violent days of our past. Two of those days are in April, each symbolizing a different, but similarly violent/oppressive political era: In 1978 on 27 April, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, which was politically dependent on the Soviet Union, seized power in a coup. On 28 April, the Mujahideen assumed power in 1992.

SPA rally protesting the peace deal with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar
September 2016 Photo SPA



We also hold yearly demonstrations on 7 October to mark the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan by the USA in 2001. We publicly denounce the USA as having pursued neo-colonial interests in Afghanistan for decades through direct and indirect forms of intervention. To this day, we demand the full withdrawal of all international troops from Afghanistan. In 2001, the USA and their allies occupied our country in the



SPA members demonstrate on the Day of international Solidarity with Kobane 1 November 2014 in Herat Photo SPA

name of democracy, women's rights and a war on terror. But if we assess the last 15 years of their presence in Afghanistan, it is not difficult to see which of their slogans have actually been fulfilled. Basically, nothing has changed at all. The violent crimes of ISIS have also led us to protest.

The struggle for true women's rights is another key concern of our movement. On 8 March, we hold events in honour of International Women's Day and speak out on current incidents like the lynching of Farkhunda. As this crime was committed in the middle of Kabul, our party decided to not only demonstrate, but also to erect a memorial. Men and women worked together shoulder by shoulder building it. We also took to the streets in autumn 2015 to decry the stoning of Rukhshana. One of our banners read, "Again and again. One day Farkhunda, the next day Rukhshana, ... not a day without a crime." On other occasions we have protested crimes against women committed by members of the Taliban.

The overall security situation makes it very difficult to hold rallies and demonstrations in many parts of the country. Our party and several of its individual members have been repeatedly intimidated, and our party was threatened to be banned. But we have also received a lot of encouragement and support in the 10 years of our existence, especially from the younger generation. Young people increasingly refuse to accept the current situation and are ready to stand up for true change in their country. This makes us hopeful. But slogans alone cannot bring about change – we also have to show that change is possible on a practical level.

In order to create a broader movement, we are reaching out to build national and international networks with political groups and initiatives who share similar beliefs. In this spirit we demonstrate on 1 November together with movements in other parts of the world to show our international(ist) solidarity with the Kurdish resistance in Kobane against ISIS. If perpetrators and criminals support

each other on an international level, we as democratic and progressive groups also have to unite globally in order to oppose them.

As the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan, we also depend on the international support of (real) democratic forces because we are not part of a state system or apparatus. For this same reason, we rely on our voice being heard in Germany, too. We hope that democratic forces here apply pressure to their government to stop collaborating with the criminal elites of Afghanistan. For, again, we are absolutely convinced that no true change can be achieved for Afghanistan without

a regime change. We also rely on the support of Afghans living in Europe. Here, our support structure is officially registered as Sympathisers of the Solidarity Party Afghanistan, a non-profit organisation based in Hannover but that operates across Europe. The members of this group act according to the assumption that there is no hope for Afghanistan's future without the Solidarity Party. They distribute our political analysis from Afghanistan throughout Europe and occasionally organise their own rallies in response to the current situation in Afghanistan. In addition to numerous other languages, our website now has a (small) section with texts translated into German.

SPA demonstration in front of the ruins of the Darul Aman Palace in Kabul commemorating the two historic takovers on 27 and 28 April 2015 Photo SPA



In early 2009 a group of seven Afghan grassroots activists and myself, a German-Bolivian practitioner of the Theatre of the Oppressed, founded the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation. We started by admitting our own cluelessness and perplexity as to how to solve the country's multiple problems. In the context of Afghanistan and beyond, I consider this act of admitting to be one of the most revolutionary: "We don't know what to do. We don't know how to solve these problems." This is by no means an admission of stupidity or a lack of capability, but a recognition of an extremely difficult and complex situation. We wanted to create a space where we could start a conversation about the country's future – from the perspective of ordinary Afghan people.

Having experimented for two years with different theatre methods, we knew that theatre and other art forms were powerful media to work with. By founding AHRDO we wanted to take our work to an institutional level. However, we explicitly decided against the institutional format of an ordinary NGO, as it would imply in the Afghan context a strictly hierarchical structure, often within an ethnically homogenous organisation. To counter this trend, AHRDO was set up by a diverse group of people, representing four major ethnic groups. We worked to include men and women equally as well as members of different age groups, and both Shia and Sunni Muslims were represented. We also tried to create a structure that supports collective and collaborative decision making.

From the outset we wanted to engage primarily with two groups of people: women and victims of war crimes. This choice was based on the lived experiences of our members, for example, of being married against their will at the age of 12 or of losing 6 brothers over the last 30 years due to war. Everyone in the organisation had a stake in these issues, and we wanted to avoid operating as some kind of "charity", as charity organisations often try to "help" a community with something the community itself does not want or see as a priority. In terms of our methodology, we do not focus on political theatre, but rather on theatre as politics, as a concrete political intervention in the realities of the country, particularly with regard to issues of transitional justice and women's rights. We mainly work with three different approaches: Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre and, more conventionally, Agitprop stage plays.

The concept of Theatre of the Oppressed comes from Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s and historically draws from the experience of living under a military dictatorship. It originates from Augusto Boal's (1931–2009) idea to use theatre as a tangible response to political repression and as means for creating a just and democratic society based on the experiences of the oppressed. His approach resonated with grassroots movements around the world, and today Theatre of the Oppressed initiatives exist in over 70 countries. In Afghanistan we have been applying and adjusting Boal's method since 2007. It includes six distinct techniques. Each combines both a political and an artistic ambition. Politically, they seek to instigate the transformation of the cultural, social, political,



Hjalmar Joffre Eichhorn and Nik Mohammed demonstrating a theatre exercise February 2016 Photo Mandala

economic and environmental forms of oppression that exist in a particular society. Emphasising the perspective of those affected, the Theatre of the Oppressed stresses the necessity of this transformation process with the experience of oppression as the starting point. By creating spaces for everyone to discover the actor within herself/himself, the approach further seeks to democratise theatre as an art form. This artistic self-exploration is meant to facilitate a general process of self-empowerment. Through our theatre workshops and plays we explore ways of overcoming oppression and transforming society. By rehearsing change, we work towards political transformation in real life. In this sense, the Theatre of the Oppressed serves as a “rehearsal for the future”.

One of its best-known techniques, and the one AHRDO most frequently uses, is Forum Theatre: Lay actors stage a short scene based on their own real life experiences. They choose any exemplary situation in which they have previously felt oppressed by another person (or institution) and perform it to an audience as an unresolved problem. The actors repeat the scene and invite

the audience to intervene by replacing one of the characters on stage, usually one of the oppressed roles. By playing this role, audience members are encouraged to try to change the dynamics of the situation and to experiment with possible (re-) solutions. Sometimes these interventions work, sometimes they do not. Afterwards we engage in a reflective dialogue with the audience and talk about their understanding of the particular power dynamics and their evaluation of the intervention(s). The goal of this method is to create a space for experimentation, where people can try out ideas for change and explore their agency. It fosters a process of collective learning about how we can act to promote social justice, human rights and dignity.

AHRDO has been conducting Forum Theatre workshops with victims of war, especially widows, as a way to work towards transitional justice. We want to create a movement that pressures the Afghan government and local authorities to publicly recognise the suffering of victims and to work towards justice. By now AHRDO has conducted hundreds of workshops in 6 provinces with tens of thousands of people in the audiences.

In the field of women's rights we have worked with a variant called Legislative Theatre. This technique builds on Forum Theatre, but the dialogue at the end is directed towards creating new laws and improving current legislation. It is based on the idea that ordinary people, the oppressed, can become lawmakers. Over our two-year Legislative Theatre initiative on women's rights, we worked with almost 10,000 men and women from all walks of life, a majority of whom were illiterate and faced extreme poverty. Through Legislative Theatre workshops we posed the question what laws are required to protect and promote women's rights in Afghanistan.

The audiences' input resulted in a legal report containing 24 suggestions for new legislation to protect and promote women's rights in Afghanistan. The report was presented to the Afghan parliament in 2012 and today serves the women's commission as a reference for new legislation proposals. The report created quite a bit of media interest. In 2014, Tolo TV, one of the

most popular television channels in Afghanistan, referred to our report in a one-and-a-half hour live panel discussion on how to change the culture of patriarchy in the country.

Playback Theatre is another form of participatory theatre that we have incorporated into our work. This method invites audience members to share stories from their own lives. While listening to the story being told, a group of (mostly lay) actors starts to improvise and play it back to the audience as a form of acknowledging the storyteller's experience. AHRDO has been using this method since 2009, mainly in dealing with the issue of transitional justice. We invited widows and victims of human rights crimes to share their experiences of loss and pain. Beyond playback enactment, AHRDO has been documenting all the stories shared on these occasions and has by now collected about 2,000 personal accounts. This is our contribution to a larger movement towards transitional justice in Afghanistan.

Memory Box exhibition at the bni e Sina University in Kabul January 2013 Photo AHRDO



By way of conclusion, I would like to share two examples of other art forms that we have found productive: Since 2010 we have toured Afghanistan with our documentary play *Infinite Incompleteness*. The play tells the stories of ten Afghan women and men who lost members of their families as a result of the conflicts in Afghanistan over the past three decades. It is a conventional play in the sense that it does not actively engage the audience, but the script incorporates stories shared in a series of Playback Theatre workshops. In November 2011 AHRDO was invited to perform *Infinite Incompleteness* in Washington D.C. and New York City.

As part of our Memory Box initiative we invited survivors of war and human rights crimes to create personalised wooden boxes to commemorate the loss of their loved ones. These boxes are then filled with the victim's personal affects and accounts of the survivors' experiences. By now, AHRDO has been entrusted with over 100 of these boxes as an archive of pain and suffering. We have displayed these very personal Memory Boxes at exhibitions for the public.

Even if we appreciate the amazing qualities and valuable contributions of theatre and the arts, we still consider them insufficient. Giving a successful performance, standing together, crying and

acknowledging pain and injustice are all important, but they are not enough. AHRDO therefore engages in various forms of direct action. We join other groups in organising demonstrations; we hold public vigils at mass graves and facilitate women's and widows' councils. In collaboration with other groups, we engage with local and national authorities to promote a public culture of remembrance. This includes dreadful and often frustrating negotiations, but through this kind of collaborative advocacy work in 2015 we achieved something that seemed impossible before: Symbolically honouring the victims, the main road leading to the infamous Pul-e Charkhi Prison in Kabul was renamed from Pul-e Charkhi Road to War Victims Road.

One current project is the production of a new conventional play that addresses the pressing issue of drone warfare, which has killed hundreds of innocent victims in recent years. This play provocatively compares and contrasts the logic of drone warfare with suicide bombings by staging the intimate thoughts of a US drone pilot against those of an Afghan suicide bomber. Currently, we are mobilizing our international networks to bring this play, entitled *Axis of Evil*, to European and US audiences, to those geographically distant places that send their deadly drones to Afghanistan.



**International solidarity
& networking**

Conference report

“Towards an Afghan Spring?”

by Network Afghanistan

The Arab Spring inspired activists in Afghanistan. On their banners you could find slogans such as “Youth of Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya... Thank you for showing us the way out!” or “We will sparkle the glimmer of hope for an Afghan Spring.” Efforts to defend self-organisation in Kobani/Rojava found active support in Afghanistan and continues to give direction to those seeking freedom.

There was a great deal of dissatisfaction with the distribution of power within the state and society established after the civil-military intervention in 2001. Grassroots resistance took on different forms, such as “victims’ organisations” and women’s groups, which spoke out against the system of impunity in the country. These movements are angry about how fundamentalists and war criminals have been becoming allies of the intervening foreign countries and gaining positions amongst the ranks of a new political elite. They also protest against the USA now setting up permanent military bases in Afghanistan.

In Germany we hardly ever hear about the political analysis, modes of action, or visions that these grassroots organizations generate. Their limited

representation is linked to the colonial nature of the civil-military interventions, which promote certain modes of knowledge while excluding others. Contributing to this skewed depiction is the fact that the media withholds aspects of the situation. No one is reporting on the many people in Afghanistan who see the liberal peace builders and those acting as advisers in the process of democratization as part of the same colonial politics of occupation that the military forces themselves obviously uphold. We hear nothing about the radically different understandings of peace and democracy that guide grassroots protests. The day-long conference aimed to change this by giving the audience an opportunity to meet activists from different grassroots organizations and get to know one another. Due to visa complications and the problems they created in planning the event, unfortunately only three representatives of the four presented in our brochure were able to attend the conference: Mariam Rawi presented the work of RAWA; Weeda Ahmad spoke about SAAAJ’s work; and Hafiz Rasikh represented the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan.

As organisers of the conference we wanted to provide people with direct access to the political perspectives of these grassroots activists from Afghanistan. We also wanted to inspire critical discussions and provide a forum to talk about struggles both there and here, about the different situations and conditions we face, and about our activities, experiences, challenges, goals and visions. We wanted to foster interaction and discussions that would lead to building relationships that would extend beyond the conference. In

Photo Mandala





Weeda Ahmad screening a video clip presenting the work of SAAJS November 2015 Photo Mandala

terms of political activism in Germany, the two major questions that guided our efforts were: How can we connect with debates and struggles in Afghanistan that have anti-colonial, leftist and feminist goals and that are working for justice and autonomy? And how can we engage in exchanges and collaborations in ways that simultaneously decolonise our modes of thought, knowledge and action?

To these ends, the conference included an intensive workshop phase bookended by opening and closing plenary sessions. With the goal of developing shared perspectives, the thematically grouped workshops were organised and moderated by political groups who had experience working in the relevant areas. The Kurdish-International Women's Council Berlin Dest Dan facilitated a workshop on "Feminism and Women's Organisations in the Face of Occupation, Islamism and War" with Mariam Rawi from RAWA. In the workshop on "Anti-Islamist Social Movements", Hafiz Rasikh from the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan spoke with Mohammad Abu Hajar, an activist with the Local Coordination Committees of Syria, about their experiences in trying to establish a broad anti-fundamentalist movement opposed

to the occupation, militarism, Islamism and the presence of war criminals in government positions. The Guatemala Committee Berlin moderated the talk with Weeda Ahmad from SAAJS about her experience working in the field of transitional justice as part of a struggle against impunity and for peace based on the principle of justice. With over 100 participants the conference brought together a broad spectrum of people interested in the issue. For many of them, this was the first time they had heard anything about these grassroots struggles in Afghanistan. Most analysis of the war in Afghanistan only considers a limited set of actors: the intervening states and their armies, the Taliban and the Afghan government. This is all the more reason why it was important for those present at the conference to have the chance to hear the testimonies of grassroots activists from Afghanistan directly and to be able to discuss these alternative views with activists from Europe and other parts of the world in Berlin. By the end of the conference, various participants highlighted how important prospects for future exchanges and support were. The presenters' closing statements delivered a powerful sense of just how significant such forms of international solidarity are.

Presenters' closing statements

It is exceedingly important to us to have a forum like this because we want people around the world to know what is actually happening in Afghanistan. The real facts remain mostly unreported by international media. Their reporting is guided by the interests of the international forces whose presence in Afghanistan would be severely scrutinised if the actual facts came out. Only once people like you here in Germany really know what is going on, can you pressure your government to stop collaborating with our criminal elites and to support a truly democratic peace process for Afghanistan.

HAFIZ RASIKH

We appreciate this opportunity to meet with anti-war and feminist movements here in Germany because we feel that we share a progressive and democratic perspective. But a connection between the movements here and in Afghanistan is still missing. As RAWA, we have experienced international support by groups and individual volunteers invested in political struggles in Afghanistan. Those international supporters are willing to arrange meetings and conferences or provide other forums for sharing our views and spreading our reports on Afghanistan. Through your own networks, friends and family you can do the same – you can spread the facts about the real situation in Afghanistan and spread the word that our resistance is alive. With your support, we will be able to achieve our goals much faster.

MARIAM RAWI

There are several ways for you to support our movement: First, you can help us in bringing Afghan war criminals to court who are currently living in Germany, like we saw recently with the two war criminals prosecuted in the Netherlands and Great Britain. Second, we want you to pressure your government to withdraw any remaining troops, including intelligence services. We want them out. We want Germany to stop interfering in Afghanistan completely, whatever the purpose might be, whether it is military, strategic or economic. Third, we call on you to take a stand against any members of our political elite who come to Germany by holding them publicly accountable for their crimes. In Italy, for example, RAWA and their local supporters managed to prevent an Afghan state official from entering the country because he was a criminal.

WEEDA AHMAD

Photo Mandala



Networking between grassroots activists in Afghanistan and Europe

by Network Afghanistan

Networking in this sense refers to the political practices of international solidarity, which are grounded in political struggles being fought within their respective contexts but still relate to one another. It has to do with ways of providing support that have developed out of very practical concerns through direct contact and mutual knowledge of the other groups political critiques, goals, demands, requirements and potential. It also promotes practices of reciprocity that reflect and take into account different conditions, privileges and marginalisations.

Beyond sharing the views of Afghan activists, the event series held in winter 2015/2016 also served as an important opportunity to build up networks and connect grassroots approaches from Afghanistan and Germany. The conference on 7 November 2015 in particular provided a framework for the participants to get acquainted and to explore shared views and potential commonalities in their political work. To further support networking, we organised additional political meetings over the course of the Afghan activists' stay in Berlin: A meeting with a representative from the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, another with the critical lawyers association Republikanischer Anwältinnen- und Anwälteverein, another with the NO WAR – Berlin Initiative, and others with initiatives by Afghan, Iranian and Kurdish activists living in Europe, including a meeting with the Kurdish-International Women's Council Berlin Dest Dan.

By now various networking initiatives have gotten underway that were probably inspired by a range of encounters and political impulses. For

example, the Sympathizers of the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan in Europe and the group Street Roots have since invited women's rights activist Malalai Joya from Afghanistan to give a talk in Berlin. They also invited the SPA spokesperson Selay Ghaffar to present. This first event grew out of collaborations with International Women's Space Berlin and the Afghan Communication and Cultural Centre Berlin.

Representatives from the Coordinamento Italiano di Sostegno Donne Afghane (CISDA – Italian Coordination in Support of Afghan Women) attended a workshop put on by the Bildungswerk in Berlin in May 2016. As a feminist women's organisation CISDA has lent support to RAWA and other women's rights organisations since 1999, including more recently SAAJS and SPA. In addition to political and financial support, CISDA regularly invites members of organisations to Europe and organises trips to Afghanistan for activist delegates from Italy. The 2016 CISDA annual conference brought together European initiatives whose leftist and feminist principles served as the basis for building relationships with RAWA and other grassroots organisations in Afghanistan. Within Italy activists have been developing concrete ideas about how to implement international networking to counter military infrastructures, the global presence of US military bases and drone warfare. There was also strong interest in cooperating internationally to advance efforts to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity, since many war criminals from Afghanistan have gained asylum in Europe and others come here for travel.

Political grassroots movements in Afghanistan in the year following the official withdrawal of international troops

Concept & Organisation: Network Afghanistan

Hosted by: Bildungswerk Berlin der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V.

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7 November 2015 at Haus der Demokratie und Menschenrechte

“Towards and Afghan Spring?” – One day of exchange with grassroots activists from Afghanistan

Conference with Mariam Rawi (RAWA), Weeda Ahmad (SAAJS) & Hafiz Rasikh (Hezbe-Hambastagi).

In cooperation with Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung & the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung's Solidarity Fund.

17 November 2015 at Bildungswerk Berlin der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung

Afghanistan: Self-organising in militarised spaces

Event with Mariam Rawi (RAWA), Weeda Ahmad (SAAJS) & Hafiz Rasikh (Hezbe-Hambastagi).

16 February 2016 at Werkstatt der Kulturen

Axis of evil. Democracy and the Theatre of the Oppressed in Afghanistan

Event with Hadi Marifat, Nik Mohammed, both AHRDO staff members, & Hjalmar Joffe-Eichhorn, German-Bolivian theatre director and author, collaborating with AHRDO since its inception.

In cooperation with medico international.

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Bildungswerk Berlin der
Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V.
Sebastianstr. 21, 10179 Berlin
Phone 49 30 308 779 480
Fax 49 39 308 779 487
global@bildungswerk-boell.de
www.bildungswerk-boell.de

Editorial team:
Mechthild Exo, Mechthild von Vacano
Language Editing (English):
Japhet Johnstone
Translation (English):
Japhet Johnstone, Sophia Schmitz
Photos (activism in Afghanistan):
AHRDO, Hambastagi,
SAAJS, Mechthild Exo
Photos (events in Berlin):
Imelda Mandala
Layout: Mechthild von Vacano
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Orders of the German print version:
global@bildungswerk-boell.de



In Germany we hardly ever hear about “bottom up” political movements in Afghanistan that struggle for radical, liberal social and political change. But these movements and struggles are very much alive. In the light of the country’s desperate situation they seem as crucial as ever. In the winter of 2015/2016 we invited representatives from four such grassroots organisations to Berlin to share their accounts and political analysis of the current situation in Afghanistan and to present their political activist work. This brochure now makes these important perspectives accessible to a broader audience and concludes with an outlook on international solidarity and networking.

Political views & approaches of grassroots organisations in Afghanistan

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)
feminist women’s organisation, active since 1977

Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers (SAAJS)
association for the families of victims of crimes against humanity and war crimes

Solidarity Party of Afghanistan/Hezbe-Hambastagi (SPA)
progressive, democratic party, striving to establish a grassroots movement opposing occupation, fundamentalism and the presence of war criminals in government positions

Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation (AHRDO)
artistic human rights organisation conducting Theatre of the Oppressed workshops and projects in Afghanistan