A CONVERSATION WITH FAWZIA KOOFI

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and

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Fawzia Koofi is a Member of Parliament in Afghanistan, and the Vice President of the National Assembly. She is known for her support of women’s rights in Afghanistan. Koofi has announced her intention to run as a presidential candidate in the 2014 Afghanistan elections. In February 2013, Fawzia Koofi was hosted by the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination in the United States. The following interview with Fawzia Koofi was conducted by Ankit Panda, LISD Research Specialist, on February 13, 2013.

Ankit Panda (AP): Fawzia, thank you for speaking with me today. I’d like to begin this conversation by getting right into it—this is truly a time of change in Afghanistan. Last night, you heard President Obama’s State of the Union speech where he emphasized the United States’ continued intention to bring down its troop presence in the country. Going forward from here, how do you think the relationship between the ongoing military transition and the political transition that you’ve been a very vocal proponent of will evolve? How do you think that Afghans along with their partners in the international community, and the United States, can effectively manage that process in the coming years?

Fawzia Koofi (FK): On the partners, I think it is always promising for Afghan people to see, from different leaders around the world, who may have their own domestic priorities, that they still focus on Afghanistan. I know that many people in Afghanistan will have a different view of the troop withdrawal by this time next year, but still the fact that President Obama mentioned Afghanistan in his speech, you know, was an indication that Afghanistan still was a major part of US foreign policy. For the people of Afghanistan, this is a source of hope, and an assurance that once again the world will not abandon Afghanistan, from now to 2014, and mainly post-2014.

I think the important thing we need to ensure is that the current situation in Afghanistan remains; that we don’t change it for the worse, but for the better. We must make sure, as you rightly mentioned, that political transition occurs before the military transition, that we have an election, and that there is a strong government, that is able to take responsibility, and is able to meet people’s basic needs. The government must also give an assurance to its people that the military transition will not affect Afghanistan in a way that we must
go back to starting from scratch. That is the main point. We have to make sure that the people of Afghanistan understand, and we need to give them that assurance through messages, and also concrete steps. Elections are one of these steps that will assure the people of Afghanistan that things won’t fall apart.

**AP**: Absolutely. I think the question of Afghanistan potentially backsliding is on everyone’s mind here in the United States. What are your thoughts on the ongoing Qatar process as an effort to build trust between the Taliban, the Afghan government, and the United States?

**FK**: It is important for Taliban to meet the conditions before they have access to Qatar and the resources there. One of the conditions, I guess, is that they have to announce that they have no connection or affiliation with al-Qaida, that they will respect human rights and the Afghan constitution, and that they are ready to talk and negotiate; instead of violently pursuing their interests, they should address them through civil means. These are, I think, conditions that the Taliban should accept before they have access to resources, but in the meantime, I think that it is important to have a unified message from the international community on the process, and also that we have women, and women’s issues, included in that process—not only in terms of their physical representation at the negotiation table, but women’s concerns and voices, especially from the Taliban side.

**AP**: Certainly, and as you’ve said in the past, women’s rights are the only **non-negotiable** part of the conversation with the Taliban, along with respect for the constitution, and denouncing any connections to al-Qaida.

**FK**: Exactly. That should be it. I think that’s the baseline for a trust-building process.

**AP**: How would you, as a Member of Parliament and the Vice President of the Afghan National Assembly, determine that point at which trust exists between the Afghan government and the Taliban? What event or gesture would be a satisfactory indicator of enough trust and goodwill?

**FK**: If we don’t come to that conclusion, or if we don’t, you know, achieve these first steps for people to trust the Taliban, and to see that they have really changed, that they will adapt themselves to the ways of the 21st century, that Taliban recognize that they cannot do to Afghanistan what they did in 1996—if we do not have these primary steps put in place, we will not have a successful peace process. We have in our recent history, when the Soviets left Afghanistan, fewer people involved in the political process, less civil society, fewer women’s groups, and that’s why we had the internal fighting, and the civil war. As a result of this, we had the Taliban’s rise to power.

I think that it’s important for our friends and allies, and for the government of Afghanistan, to keep this in mind, that the women of Afghanistan today will not just look at the situation and sit quietly by because they have access to world leaders, and to all the latest technologies. They will deliver their message, and they will find supporters around the world. I believe that there are wonderful people all across the world that will stand in solidarity with Afghan women, and they will not just watch the situation and keep quiet.
Therefore, women have become important key players on the political scene of Afghanistan, and to ignore them would be to close your eyes to the realities of Afghanistan.

AP: Absolutely. Let’s talk a bit about the future economic development of Afghanistan. You’ve repeatedly been saying that the image of Afghanistan as a state torn by war and strife is not the whole picture at all—that there’s a lot more to the country.

FK: That’s true.

AP: You have a beautiful culture, several languages—you’ve mentioned how Afghanistan is a melting pot of ethnicities. You’ve also discussed the social transformation of Afghanistan—how women’s rights are no longer something thought about by the radical, cosmopolitan, global elite, but as something that is organically sprouting at the grassroots level. Could you expand on that?

FK: It is, definitely. If you look at democracy and civil movements in Afghanistan, they existed in the past as well. We had local councils that worked through our consultative processes for, I think, decades—at least as far as I know, for many, many years. Before we had official elected bodies, we had these local councils. The only difference right now is that people have greater expectations, and their awareness of the opportunities in the world has increased, as well as their access to financial resources.

As leaders, I think we have a responsibility to be aware of this. Just before coming here, I had an interview in the local media, and I said: if the leaders of Afghanistan don’t adjust themselves to the demands of their people, which are really progressing—and the people are very quickly progressing—they have to step aside. Because as leaders, we cannot stop the people’s progress. So I think that there are many opportunities right now, and we cannot reverse them, we cannot take them back. As leaders, and allies of Afghanistan, we must provide the opportunity for people to move forward.

One of the potentials that exists in Afghanistan is the vast economic opportunity. The beauty of the country could be a potential place for tourism development. Afghanistan is also very rich in natural resources. I think that many parts of Afghanistan are simply untouched lands—both in terms of natural resources and human capital. It’s an untouched nation, and there are so many opportunities to lead this nation and use these resources in a positive way. But there are risks as well. If we don’t use them properly, things could become worse. My offer to the world is that let’s use it properly, and don’t look at Afghanistan and think of the Talibs and war, and treat this as the sole focus of policy. It’s true that security remains a problem, but we have to think about partnering in the name of the economic empowerment of Afghan people, and the social structure more generally. We must particularly think of women in this pursuit. These are the potentials for working with the Afghan people in partnership. These are the potentials that can be used to make the nation self-sufficient.

AP: Absolutely. Let’s move on to the importance of security in Afghanistan, along with development, social services, and education—I know you’re a very strong proponent of education, especially for girls—so if you were to be elected president, how would you govern a country with limited resources that has a high need for both security and very
strong need for services like education and healthcare? How would you allocate resources, perhaps differently from President Karzai?

**FK:** This is true. Right now 60% of our budget goes to the military and to security. It’s a very militarized society. I know that there is a huge need for military assistance because we are in a period of transition—the international force will leave Afghanistan, and we need a domestic security force that is capable of preventing regional terrorism. On the other hand, I know that security and development are interlinked issues; we cannot look at one alone. I think we have to look at employment opportunities for people to marginalize the Taliban and their ideology. That’s how we can do it. We need to offer people jobs, offer people social services—basic things. For instance, in the communities, we need to offer people electricity and drinking water. These are very basic things that every human being deserves to have. This automatically creates jobs for people. Look, for instance, at the fruit in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has some of the tastiest fruit in the world because it is grown very much naturally, without any chemicals. It’s just garden fruit, basically. We can only harvest it during a very small period of time in the year because when the season is gone, we don’t have the capacity and the packing systems to preserve it. There is also a lack of other infrastructure, including electricity and marketing, for instance. Everything is interlinked. If we have all of this, then people do not, for example, have to go to neighboring countries for job opportunities nor do they become brainwashed and become suicide bombers in Afghanistan. We have to distinguish those people with good hearts and less opportunity from the Taliban, who actually have an ideology of war and violence.

This we can accomplish through fostering economic opportunity and education. An educated man will allow his sister and daughter to go to school. Right now, the perspective is changing towards education to a great extent. Thirty years ago, personally, my mother wouldn’t allow my brothers to go to school, and sometimes, a representative of the school would come to each house, and take each school-aged boy to school for admission, my mother, and many other women, would hide their sons so they wouldn’t be admitted. But now, in those same villages, many women want to send their girls to school and I think this is a positive development in the situation right now. This is why I think that Afghanistan is in transformation. Many people believe in the importance of education. Many Afghans even send their girls and boys abroad for education. Many young girls, who wouldn’t be willing to study in different countries just ten years ago, now come to me and ask about scholarship opportunities, and about access to education. This is something that we will have to focus on. We have to envision our priorities.

One of the main things that Afghanistan could do is use its natural resources for economic growth, and job creation. If we have professional engineers, if we have professional agriculturalists, then we can modernize. These are the things that we need to work on as priorities. I think the current administration—at least in my experience—has invested too little in this.

**AP:** One of Afghanistan’s greatest resources is also seen in the fact that the median age of the country is 17.5 years—it’s a very young country.

**FK:** We are very young. Yes, that’s true. We are a very young nation. More than 55% of Afghans are youth, but if we don’t use their capacity…. Can you imagine, if an Afghan
young boy or girl graduates from university, with a highly qualified degree, and then he or she doesn’t have a job—this is when you are at risk of joining the Taliban or other insurgents, just to feed yourself or your family. Therefore, we have to meet the demand for education and internships. We have to observe the educated members of Afghan society. This is key for the future of the country.

**AP:** Certainly. Fawzia, as a final question, I wanted to ask you: what is your message for the women of Afghanistan?

**FK:** For the women of Afghanistan, my message is that they are agents of change in their society. If we provide them with opportunities, if we educate them, if we give them the required support, they will be the most constructive elements of their societies. I think that it’s time to demonstrate their willingness and their abilities in the future politics of their country, by getting out of their houses during the election, and casting their votes. They must make sure that their vote counts, and does make a difference.

**AP:** Fawzia, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. All the best for your future in Afghanistan.

**FK:** Thank you. Thank you so much.