

Beyond Tokenism: a rights-and-merit-based solution to inclusive governance in Afghanistan

Author: Hamid Formuli

The Crisis of Exclusion and a Rights-Based Path Forward: Afghan and International Responsibilities

Afghanistan today is governed by a group that severely excludes most of its people. Women, non-dominant ethnic and religious groups, and those outside Taliban inner circles are sidelined from power, while services are provided unevenly. Reversing course requires rights-based meritocratic inclusion and meaningful power-sharing, pressuring authorities to end discrimination, supporting dialogue, de-concentration of power, and people-centred solutions, such as elections and a constitutional process.

The research findings based on detailed surveys and in-depth interviews assert that symbolic representation does not align with Afghans' aspirations. Inclusivity in its true interpretation should be grounded on equal citizenry, which recognises individuals as rights-holders, enshrined in a social contract such as a constitution, and is built on meritocracy, resulting in inclusive outcomes, real power, and wealth-sharing, and is implemented through a mechanism that reflects the will of the people.

About the RWI Afghanistan Programme



The research unveils that the Taliban's governance seeks consolidation and monopolisation of power, favouring a narrow demographic consisting of Taliban members and loyalists, all male, and the majority stemming from the Pashtun ethnic group, while marginalising other groups, including women, ideological opponents, and non-Pashtun ethnic and minority groups.

While the research could not establish that greater Pashtun representation led to better services for them, it uncovers variations in both perception and lived experiences of discrimination based on ethnicity, language, region, and religion. Although - conditions are poor for all groups, including Pashtuns consulted, non-Pashtun participants reported more severe impacts.

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Recommendations:

To all stakeholders (involved in the reintegration of Afghanistan into the international community):

- Reject the approach of equating inclusive government with a few tokenistic ethnic appointments at the cabinet level.
- Set clear benchmarks for inclusive government and converge on a single definition of inclusivity.
- Align with the people of Afghanistan's perception of inclusivity, which entails equal citizenry rights and meritocracy, guaranteed in a constitution.
- Assure that transitory measures (e.g. power-sharing) are not end goals but starting points towards real inclusivity; extends beyond elite pacts to include meritorious individuals from all ethno-political backgrounds.

To International stakeholders (UN, Special Envoys for Afghanistan):

- Communicate clearly to the Taliban that its government is not inclusive and why it is important for them to become inclusive of all segments of the Afghan society.
- Facilitate and pressure the Taliban to cede to a comprehensive dialogue with the participation of all segments of Afghan society to discuss all bits and pieces of Afghanistan's future, including the means to achieving inclusivity.

- Support the reinstatement of democratic processes such as referendums and elections, including at the local level.

To de facto Authorities:

- Respect the international obligations of Afghanistan by ensuring that public services are delivered equitably, free from discrimination.
- Cease the ideological and ethnic favouritism and gender-based alienation in the selection of public officials.
- Remove the structural and non-written barriers to participation in government and ensure that competent individuals are recruited, free from discrimination based on their group identity.
- Restore women's full and equal right to participation in public life.

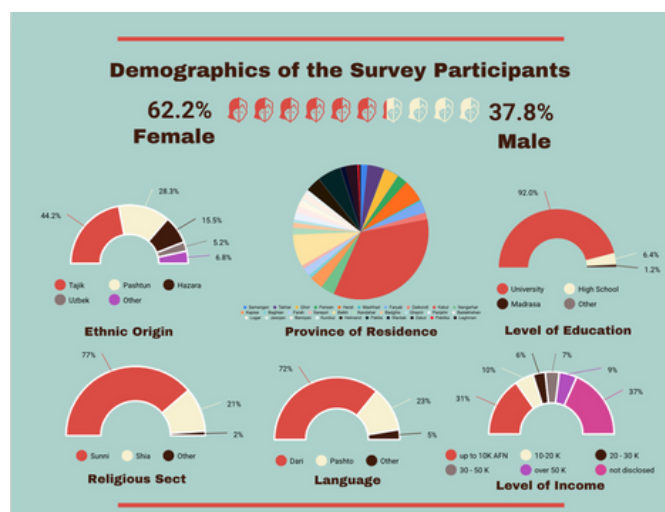
To Afghan Civil and Political Forces:

- End the stigma around the decentralisation discussion and treat horizontal and vertical expansion, and deconcentration of power, as potential solutions for achieving meaningful political inclusion and models for effective and accountable public service delivery.

About the Research:

The analysis reflected in this brief is based on research and insights from surveys of over 250 Afghans across 30 provinces, in-depth interviews with Afghan political, intellectual, and civil society figures, review of Taliban decrees and manifestos impacting inclusion and open-access information.

The research deciphers what “inclusive governance” means to Afghans in practical terms. It also examines the state of inclusion in political participation and service delivery, emphasising the right to equal participation in public life.



The study also responds to why inclusivity matters and what the consequences of exclusion are.

While surveys leaned toward literate Afghans with internet access, the consistent messages received voice a common, clear statement: Afghans want substantial inclusion, not symbolic representation.

Core findings

I. How Afghans Perceive “Inclusive Government/Governance”

Overwhelming Rejection of Tokenism:

Over 80% of respondents view political inclusivity as crucial for legitimacy, and 94% said that the de facto authorities (DFA) are not inclusive. There is a broad consensus against equating inclusivity to the symbolic addition of a few individuals from different ethnic or religious groups by way of invitation.

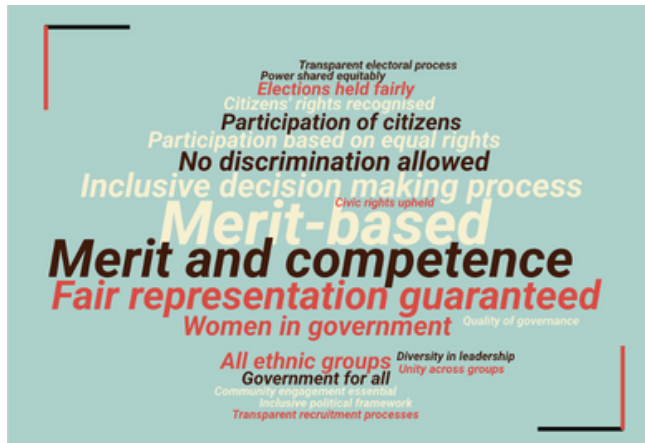


Meritocracy + Rights Guarantees:

Strong preference for merit- and competence-based inclusion. However, findings assert that merit in the absence of non-discrimination guarantees is insufficient.

Afghans want the government to mirror the population such that the best from all ethno-lingual and religious groups are allowed and enabled to participate.

Responses to the question “define inclusivity in your own words” highlight two key concepts visualised in the word cloud below: merit and equal rights.



Demand for substantialization - institutionalisation of inclusivity:

Institutions that deliver inclusive processes, laws, policies, and outcomes are what is sought after, vs. short-lived solutions like figurehead participation.

How to reach the desired Inclusivity?

“Elections” was the most cited answer across responses. Hope in democratic processes for the restoration of legitimacy and inclusivity lives on. Elections, however, should expand to include local government.

Transitional Measures:

Consultees warned against temporary fixes, like minimum inclusion thresholds, but acknowledged the need for starting points. Most notably, a genuine, comprehensive, and inclusive dialogue on Afghanistan's future – a key area of convergence, which the

international community can help facilitate. Such dialogue could lead to concessions, such as an interim government based on proportional democracy, as a transitional step toward a final solution of citizen rights-based governance, should extend beyond elites, and be designed to have a fluid character.

Deconcentration of power and authority

A subtly recurring theme, particularly among non-Pashtun respondents, suggests that the distribution of power and resources, and increased local autonomy, could enhance inclusion and accommodation of diversity. Involving people in electing/dismissing local officials, or allowing adherence to local ways of life somewhat different from perceived national/dominant culture, for example, on female education, employment, clothing, or role in society.

Other Stakeholders' Conception of Inclusivity:

- Taliban: Official narratives downplay the need for inclusivity or claim it already is, pointing to a few ethnic figures in non-influential positions.
- External Stakeholders: Call for inclusivity is the only area where neighbours converge with the broader international community. To these stakeholders, inclusivity has two elements: first, ethnopolitical inclusion (seen as good enough for the region), and second, a touch of representation (favoured by the West).



Two key points emerge: The inclusion of non-Taliban Afghans and a dialogue-based process to achieve that. Ordinary and expert Afghans converge on rejection of tokenistic representation, and support for meritocratic and democratic solutions.

II. Systematic Exclusion in Policy

Decrees:

The Taliban's approach to managing diversity at the policy level is largely rhetorical. Repeated supreme-leader decrees banning cronyism and ethnocentrism bear little fruit; with practice, including his, exhibiting these exact traits. The cabinet remains overwhelmingly Pashtun-Taliban. Shias and women are excluded by law.

Ideological Manuscript:

Chief Justice Haqqani's book enshrines Hanafi supremacy, rejects pluralism, and establishes two classes of citizens: a superclass of clergy with the right to rule and the masses with the duty to listen and obey, being denied any

political role. It denigrates women based on what it justifies as an inherent inferiority in intellectual and physical capacity linked to their sex, making them unfit for leadership.

III. Patterns of Exclusion in Politics & Public Services

Narrow Demographic in Power: An analysis of the cabinet composition (ministers and deputies) exhibits few major traits:

• **Talibanisation**

72.3% of senior posts occupied by members of the Taliban movement (vs 4.4 %). Cabinet posts were distributed as prizes of war, similar to individuals' roles within comparable commissions during the insurgency.

• **Clergy superiority**

69.7% of the cabinet have religious backgrounds (only 8% with modern education), even in highly technical posts (only 5 individuals with portfolio-relevant education).

• **Ethnic and gender imbalances**

Zero female representation across the cabinet. 76% of the cabinet stems from the Pashtun ethnic group (mostly Southerners). Exact same trends prevail at the director's level. UN estimates 70-85% Pashtun occupancy of the government senior posts, and case studies of ministries of Foreign Affairs and Commerce, and survey data, corroborate this.

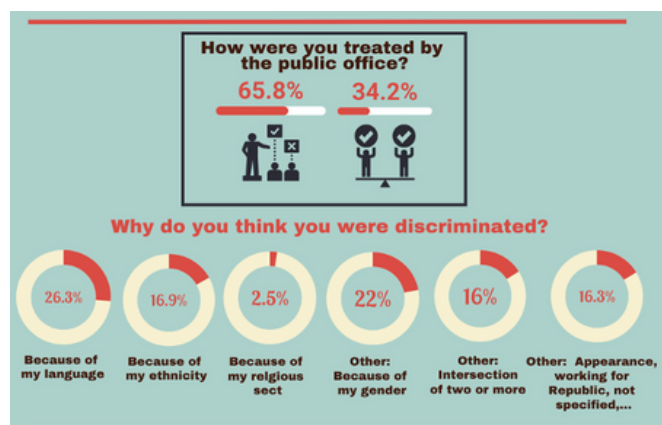
Cabinet Ministers and Deputy Ministers									
Gender		Affiliation		Education		Ethnic Composition		In Office	
Male	100%	Talib	72.3%	Religious Studies	69.7 %	Pashtun	76%	Post-2021	98%
Female	0%	Non-Talib	4.4%	Modern Studies	8 %	Tajik	7%	Pre-2021	2%
		No Data	23.2%	No Education	1.8 %	Hazara	4%		
				No Data	20.5 %	Uzbek	4%		
						Others (Baluch, Pashai)	3% (1%, 2%)		
						No Data	6%		
Total	100%		100%		100%		100%		100%

• Discrimination and Service Inequality

Language barriers and identity-based discrimination impact access to services and trigger variations in the treatment of citizens.

Loss of patrons: 83% reported a decline in brokers (patrons), negatively impacting access to services in a clientelistic society like Afghanistan.

Perceived discrimination: Between 70% to 86% acknowledged that Taliban offices are prone to ethno-religious favouritism and discriminate deliberately. Similar percentages rated services as unfair in delivery and worsened in quality in comparison to the Republic.



Lived discrimination: Two-thirds of respondents who visited a public office within the last 6 months reported discriminatory treatment; grounds visualised below.

Variations in perception and experience of discrimination:

While over 50% respondents from ethnic groups reported discriminatory treatment, higher prevalence was noticed among non-Pashtun respondents (On average 20-30% higher among Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks), and a higher perception of service partiality. Regionally, as well, in non-Pashtun populated provinces, responses show slightly higher instances of service denial, insecurity, and discrimination. Over half reported facing difficulty or denial due to the inability to speak the language of public officials. Higher prevalence among Dari speakers (59% vs 22% among Pashto speakers), highlighting intersectionality. Women's responses also show slightly higher negative experiences. Despite the visible variations, a conclusive pattern could not be established due to data limitations.

IV. Why Exclusion is a Threat to Peace and Stability?

“Exclusion based on ethnicity, ideology, gender or religion is perilous, undermining civic rights and human dignity, alienating citizens from the State and harming unity and stability.”

This quote from an interviewee captures the multi-dimensional impacts of exclusion.

The DFA's exclusionary policies and practices are in utter violation of the right to equal public participation as enshrined in core human rights treaties. The Taliban is the main duty bearer due to territorial control.

More concerning is the longer-term consequences of marginalisation, as several studies have established a causal link between exclusion and civil wars. Experts interviewed argued that exclusion risks repeating the root causes of civil war in Afghanistan, such as discrimination and disenfranchisement, especially in the absence of peaceful means to voice grievances. The overwhelming majority of respondents (75%) foresee social unrest and renewed waves of conflict if exclusion persists.

The study concludes that the status quo is at odds with a rights-based approach and reiterates that without inclusive governance, neither Afghanistan's rights obligations will be met, nor will stability or social cohesion be maintained.