The Role of Religion in Afghan Women's Organizations

A Lecture by Ashraf Zahedi

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The overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 heralded a new beginning for Afghan women. Encouraged by the ideal of gender equality and financed by international donors, women’s organizations were formed throughout Afghanistan. These organizations draw on Islam as a strategy for mobilization of Afghan women and for legal and cultural protection of their activities. Afghan women’s organizations, however, are not homogenous in their ideology and degree of religiosity; they range from Islamists to secular feminists. These organizations have been facing a balancing act of reconciling gendered Afghan laws with gender-balanced international laws. The departure of the US led international forces from Afghanistan in 2014 and the prospect of losing their sources of funding pose a serious challenge to them. What will happen to these organizations in post 2014 remains to be seen. It depends on a number of socio-political factors as well as the dynamics of action and reaction between Afghan political leaders and traditional forces.

Ashraf Zahedi, Ph.D. is a sociologist and Visiting Scholar at the Center for Middle East Studies, the University of California, Santa Barbara. Dr. Zahedi has taught at Boston University, Suffolk University, and Santa Clara University. She has conducted research at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Stanford University, and the Beatrice Bain Research Group at UC Berkeley. Her research interests include political ideology, social policy, socio-economic disparities, social movements, gender and development, and transnational feminism. She has published many articles in academic journals including Iranian Studies, Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies, International Feminist Journal of Politics, and Women’s Studies International Forum. Dr. Zahedi’s research focus is on the United States, Iran, and Afghanistan. She is, with Jennifer Heath, the co-editor of “Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women,” University of California Press, 2011. Dr. Zahedi next co-edited volume, Children of Afghanistan: The Path to Peace, will appear with the University of Texas Press in Fall 2013.

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