

Afghan Feminists are the Country's Promise of Progress

Afghans who studied in the West and returned home tried hard to modernize their country.

by Phyllis Chesler



What more is there to say about America in Afghanistan or about Afghanistan itself?

For more than a month, the print media, the air waves, and the internet have been filled with scenes of terror and horror, with the most shameful speeches, and with political, historical, and military analyses galore.

America and Europe should never have gone there in the first place; or, having gone there, we should have found bin Laden and swiftly left; having failed to find bin Laden in the caves of Tora Bora, we should not have chosen to stay, perhaps for too long; at the very least, we should have planned our departure far more strategically, kept the Bagram Airfield open, fortified the Kabul airport, and not left until the very last American, European, and Afghan ally of America and Europe were safely out; even then, we should have left a small military force behind to monitor and repel the gathering terrorist forces.

Apparently, President Biden disagrees. He thinks that our departure went well, that all the immediate and future casualties are not as important as our getting out, that evacuating in this horrible manner is somehow a victory for pacifism. In short, Biden lied and people died. More will. Biden blamed others for what went wrong—but also claimed that a clear and present defeat was really a triumph.

In the past, I have written that one is not morally obligated to accomplish something that cannot be done, namely, help shame-and-honor tribalism and Islam evolve. Afghanistan has been described as the “grave of empires,” having never been colonized, except of course by Sunni Arab Islam which massacred the Buddhists, Hindus, and pagans who formerly lived there and which continues to persecute the Afghan Hazaras because they are Shiia Muslims.

Many now claim that Western illusions about our capacity to modernize or moderate 7th century fundamentalist Islam are now dying and fast being laid to rest in Afghanistan.

But is this really true?

I think not entirely. Afghan feminist women, and the Afghan men who have also fought for women’s rights have indeed been transformed by western influences—all made possible by military boots on the ground, and before that, beginning in the 1960s, by Afghans who studied in the West, returned home, and tried hard to modernize their country.

“Female refugees do not usually pose the same problems that certain male refugees pose.”

The Afghan man to whom I was married so very long ago, returned to Kabul precisely in order to help elevate his country, bring it into the 20th century. He became the Minister of Film and Theater and, as the son of a wealthy father, he was also able to have a fairly sweet life for about two decades after which he had to flee when the Soviets invaded.

Over the years, he could never acknowledge that his dreams could not be realized, that his country was essentially feudal, tribal, and teeming with men whose history was about becoming warriors, killing, and dying for “the cause,” whether that cause was Jihad or more likely, the slaughter of a rival tribe, or a disobedient female relative, or a male cousin who

had stepped out of line.

After any progress, Afghanistan has had a repeat track record of reverting to the past. Charming as many Afghans seemed to be, I came to understand that corruption and cruelty was in their blood, as well as a penchant for torture, (read the wonderful Memoir written by M.H. Anwar about this), just as it is elsewhere, but Afghan style.

And yet—miracle of miracles! The Afghan women with whom we are now working, [helping to rescue](#), are all feminists, humanists, modernists, and they want what they would describe as Western inspired human rights. All the European and American NGOs that sponsored schools for girls and shelters for battered women; everyone who funded and encouraged Afghan girls and women to become physicians, politicians, teachers, journalists, athletes, entertainers, fashion models (!), as well as beauticians, shop owners, child care workers etc.—this all worked. And these are the feminist women who have been targeted by the Taliban; with whom my international team has been in touch. We have been privileged to help such women.

While some may still not share MY view of what freedoms a woman deserves, they certainly have A view that means they will potentially be productive and assimilated citizens in the West. They are not terrorists. They are not members of the Taliban—quite the opposite. Although some may want to wear hijab, a head covering, these women do not want to wear a burqa or marry a Taliban fighter or remain indoors for the rest of their lives.

Female refugees do not usually pose the same problems that certain male refugees pose. They do not sexually harass or assault men or women. They do not rape infidel women. However, some do continue to keep their daughters “in line” and have insisted on face veiling or at least hijab; on arranged marriages; and on the female obedience to tribal norms.

I wonder whether the politically correct multiculturalists in the West will support such a woman's right NOT to face veil or wear hijab, etc. Will they do so as ardently as they support the right to live under Sharia law in the West?

We shall soon see.

First published in