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How Ulema View Afghan Civil Society

Counterpart Afghanistan promotes Afghan civil society through the voice of Ulema.



*Mohd. Azam Tariq in the Studio
Story and photo by Kiomars Qahir*

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Religious scholar and researcher Mohammad Azam Tariq (46,) has served as a member of the religious academy at Kabul University for over 17 years and for the past five years he has been a mullah at the Suhail Rumi congregational Mosque in the city of Kabul, Afghanistan. In March 2009, Mr. Tariq attended the roundtable discussion on “Ulema perceptions of civil society and their role in its development,” in which he had the chance to review Counterpart Afghanistan’s Ulema report and argued persuasively on the importance of Afghan civil society, women’s role in social development, human rights, and democracy in an Afghan context. He was then selected to participate in one of Counterpart Afghanistan’s radio roundtable discussions.

“Ulema have the same responsibility as the other civil society stakeholders to create a positive perception of the civil society and to promote its importance, and benefits among the Afghan society,” Tariq said.

During the radio roundtable discussion, Tariq highlighted the concept, values and role of civil society, different players within civil society, and the concept of democracy from an Islamic point of view. “Democracy in Islam has long deep roots, in which all human rights are respected, everyone is given the right to choose and all are treated equally. For example, Prophet Mohammad didn’t elect his successor, but he leaves to people to choose after his death. In an Islamic society such as Afghanistan values of democracy should be aligned with the Islamic values.”

Tariq believes that as women constitute half of the Afghan population, that they play an important role in Afghan development. Therefore, women should have access to education and should actively participate in all social, economic, cultural, and political activities.

In 2007 Counterpart International began conducting roundtable discussions with Ulema on civil society. In these sessions—attended by a total of 70 male Ulema and 9 female scholars—Ulema have talked about their perception of civil society, the challenges to its development in Afghanistan, and the role that Ulema can play in this process. Counterpart Afghanistan compiled the collected views and put together a report on how Ulema view Afghan civil society.

The Ulema report was shared with a group of 10 Ulema in a follow up workshop in March 2009 in which Tariq was one the participants. Tariq appreciated Counterpart’s initiative to involve Ulema in the process of developing Afghan civil society. “Ulema could play a vital role as the agents of change at the community level if they are involved in such processes.”

Following the follow up workshop with the Ulema in 2009, Counterpart Afghanistan decided to conduct a series of radio roundtable discussions with Ulema in order to create an extensive platform for Ulema to promote the Afghan civil society. Being traditional agents of change at the community level, Ulema can help eliminate skepticism and misperceptions held by the general public regarding civil society.

Counterpart International implements the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (IPACS) under a cooperative agreement with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).