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How to give Taliban the finger

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When you look at the whole of human history, it wasn't that long ago that women in the West won rights as autonomous individuals.

Birth control, for instance, wasn't legal in Canada until 1967.

Yet we naively assume that we can give deeply conservative, tribal Afghanistan a democratic, gender-balanced makeover in a few years.

The truth is it could take decades for Afghanistan to build a functioning state and even longer for it to resemble anything like western-style democracy.

For a change, the latest headlines from this impoverished country are not about the deaths of more soldiers but about a setback for women.

No nation that represses half its population can succeed. That's why certain Muslim countries are such intellectual, economic and social backwaters.

Afghanistan was pretty much at the bottom of the heap in that regard when the Taliban ruled in the late 1990s. For years, females couldn't attend school, work or leave their homes without being accompanied by a male relative.

Their invisibility was jarringly underscored by the all-encompassing burkas they were forced to wear when they ventured outside. (Many still do.)

By and large, women still exist solely for the pleasure of men in Afghanistan. They're used for sex, breeding, cooking and cleaning. The idea that a woman might have aspirations of her own is almost unimaginable in such a fundamentalist society.

Quandary

Hence, President Hamid Karzai's quandary. If he wants support in the next election, he has to cozy up to the fundamentalist contingent.

The result -- a draft law that reportedly makes it illegal for Shia women to deny sex to their husbands -- has caused predictable outrage in the West.

The law also apparently bans Shia women from getting jobs, going to school or seeing a doctor without their husbands' permission.

Such behaviour clearly violates international norms of human rights but what's the West supposed to do? Leave? That would only make things worse.

"If we pull out, all those positive changes will be for nothing," says Penny Christensen, a spokesman for Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CWWA).

Ironically, our politicians are being disingenuous by suggesting that the plight of Afghan women is a key reason western soldiers are in Afghanistan.

Before 9/11, the West didn't give a hoot about how badly the Taliban treated women. Certain individuals, primarily journalist Sally Armstrong, and groups like the CWWA spoke up for Afghan women.

If it hadn't been for 9/11, the U.S., and then Canada, would never have intervened.

"We just imposed the war on terrorism over top of what was essentially a civil war," explains Steven Staples, of the Rideau Institute.

Devils

"There are devils on both sides and we made angels out of the Northern Alliance and left the Taliban to be the devils and have been fighting that civil war ever since," he says.

Afghanistan isn't going to be the "Switzerland of central Asia" any time soon, adds Mark Sedra, of the Centre for International Governance Innovation.

Realistically, western soldiers should remain in Afghanistan only long enough to effectively strengthen Afghan security forces, he says.

In the meantime, raise your middle finger to the Taliban by donating to CWWA (www.w4wafghan.ca) which funds Afghan education-related programs.

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