

Political Transformation and Inequality: Afghanistan and South Africa

Written by Alexander Ward

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ALEXANDER WARD, OCT 26 2011

The notion of egalitarianism undoubtedly purveys contemporary debates concerning political transformation and is inherent to its success; however, these processes can overlook a myriad of different agents that are central to the production of inequality. Firstly, political equality in terms of constitutional reform, is not synonymous or correlative with corresponding mitigation of social and economic inequality. Additionally, the relevance of past socio-political legacies is often not fully acknowledged, leading to the sustainment of such exclusionary and disempowering frameworks of governance and social configurations. Thus, the potential of “transition, can only be appreciated if it is conceived alongside its historical antecedents” (Lester et al, 2000:11). In relation to this paper, the processes of political transformation in South Africa and Afghanistan are deeply entrenched in legacies of traditionalism, spatialized inequality and bifurcated citizenship, culminating in the struggle of “translating de jure equality into de facto equality” (McEwan, 2005: 972). The comparative use of both Afghanistan and South Africa allows the identification and assessment of the common themes relevant to the perennial nature of inequality and the difficulties of political transformation in alleviating it. Similarly, owing to the differential contexts in which the processes of transformation in these nations are taking place (i.e. due to the war in Afghanistan), an assessment of the key characteristics of recurrent inequality can be analysed. Lastly, the issues of ensuring an egalitarian society through political change, in both nations, can be discussed through the lens of gender as it, in both cases, represents the intersection of many of the issues confronting political transformation as women “experience multilayered forms of oppression” (Gouws, 2008:23), which subsequently lead to their disenfranchisement.

The first ever non-racial elections in South Africa, held in 1994, marked a paradigm shift away from an exclusionary and inherently inequitable constitutional framework, which typified Apartheid, towards the extension of “basic freedoms [...] to all South African citizens, primarily through a new constitution” (Lester, et al, 2000:261). Thus, with the African National Congress (ANC) elected, their redistributive, socialist agenda enabled constitutional empowerment for those alienated during Apartheid, particularly women, Africans and those of mixed race. Numerous constitutional reforms have effectively led to the “ending of [institutionalized] discrimination” (Lester et al, 2000: 320) and the opportunity for those previously oppressed, including women, to participate in political processes and to achieve de jure citizenship.

However, “when it left apartheid behind, South Africa did not leave behind the structures and processes which generate inequality” (Lester et al, 2000:322) and as a result, it still ranks as one of the most unequal societies on earth (Marais, 2008). This represents the serial production of economic inequality that remains effectively untouched by political transformation. Years after the implementation of egalitarian constitutional and societal reform, South Africa had a Gini coefficient of 0.58 (World Bank, 1997), worse still, this high levels of economic inequality were intrinsically racialized, as 5% of the population, almost all white, owned 88% of all wealth (Nyere, 1996). This racialized poverty highlights the paramount importance of past legacies in the failures of political transformation to equate to equality as the historical drive for “whites to attain unambiguous class dominance” (Lester et al, 2000:4) has enabled the coupling of class and race. Similarly, this inequality is characterised by extensive socio-spatial segregation along racial lines, illustrated by the ruralisation of blacks following the Natives act of 1952, which prohibited the rights of certain ethnic groups to settle in urban areas. Thus, there has evolved a marked “coincidence between the allocation of [...] economic resources and the boundaries marking perceived social [...] difference (Lester

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et al, 2000:3), allowing patterns of deep social exclusion and underdeveloped infrastructural networks to collect in rural areas. Furthermore, the inherently redistributive policies of the ANC's Rapid Development Programme (RDP) failed to materialize due to exogenous pressures (which shall be discussed later), leaving these processes of exclusion unhindered. Moreover, central to the production of patterns of socio-spatialized inequality has been the historical trend of differential education (Lemon, 1999) as until 1994 blacks were "denied not only the rights of citizenship, but also the kind of education that would prepare them to be autonomous agents" (Ramphela, 2001:3). Hence, predominantly rural communities remain out of reach of the process of political transformation, as they are not only economically incapacitated through the vestige of Apartheid but also unable to realize the potential of their recent constitutional empowerment. Inherently spatialized regimes of inequality are also apparent in Afghanistan, as prosperity is increasingly concentrated in the urban areas in the north of the country (Barakat & Wardell, 2002), in contrast with more rural areas, such as Uruzgan Province, wherein contemporary rates of literacy is less than 5% (Australian Gov, 2010). Furthermore, similar to South Africa, Afghanistan suffers from a significant gap in income distribution (Bertelsmann, 2010), owing mainly to lower class unemployment (Mullen, 2010).

The consistent failure of political reform to address issues of economic inequality can also partly be blamed upon the role of exogenous, international actors. In particular, the "savage [and monolithic] neoliberal qualities of global capitalism" (Angotti, 2006: 966) have led the reproduction and entrenchment of such socio-spatialized forms of poverty, as the inherently hegemonic forms of capitalist accumulation associated with such policies (Harvey, 2007) have led to the major beneficiaries of associated economic development being the neoliberal elite (Navarro, 2007). In the case of South African transformation, since the adoption of the inherently neoliberal GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) in lieu of the socialist RDP, "the gap between the rich and the poor has increased dramatically" (Gouws, 2008:25). This IMF-informed economic model constituted of a host of neoliberal macro-economic policies, such as market liberalisation and fiscal austerity measures that led directly to the ANC largely abandoning the redistributive nature of RDP (Williams, 2002) and in so doing, contributing to an intensification of economic inequalities. Additionally, the loss of 350,000 jobs in the first three years after its implementation (Lester et al, 2000:256) contributed massively to further inequality. Put into context however, the ANC's adoption of GEAR represented neoliberalism as a global economic model that "cannot be challenged" (Pillay, 1996:34) and highlighted the importance of exogenous institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF in shaping domestic economic policy. Furthermore, the unpopularity of socialist governance in a post-soviet era undoubtedly contributed to South Africa and Afghanistan's forced integration into neoliberalism (Frank, 1997), representing a situation whereby it was impossible, considering the need to establish foreign economic ties and incoming FDI flows, to deviate from the Washington Consensus and global capitalist orthodoxy. The inequality accentuated by the adoption of neoliberalism in both nations highlights the process of political transformation's lack of control over exogenous forces in the configuration of economic practices and the ensuring of equality.

In terms of the processes of political transformation themselves, their successes and failures in both Afghanistan and South Africa can be assessed through the lens of gender. In South Africa, the establishment of a democratic state in 1994 "reshaped the terms under which women engaged in politics" (Hassim, 2008:81), building upon the existing Women's National Coalition. However, these notions of female participation, empowerment and de jure citizenship have been "mediated by existing power relations" (McEwan, 2005:997), hinging upon established traditionalist conceptions of gender roles. Furthermore, a "patchwork quilt of patriarchies" (Bozzoli, 1995: 126), whereby specifically black women have been doubly excluded via African discrimination and colonialist discourses of anti-feminism, heightening exacerbating inequality. The importance of traditionalism in creating an impasse for gender equality must also be emphasised, as traditional forms of governance "are significant in reproducing existing relations of exclusion" (McEwan, 2005:977), culminating in the situation whereby particularly rural women have become "effectively disenfranchised" (Ramphela, 2001: 5). In these traditional rural areas, the reach of constitutional, de jure citizenship have become eclipsed by traditional customary law that serves to "protect the positions of men [...] to the detriment of women" (Gouws, 2008:23). Worse still, according to Ramphela (2001), the adoption of traditionalist forms of governance into the ANC's constitutional framework has led to a bid to "reconcile two irreconcilable modes of political management" (Marais, 2008:303) propagating disempowerment on a mass scale. As a result, the South African women's movement has become "fragmented and demobilized" (Gouws, 2008:26). Similarly, in Afghanistan, traditionalism has led to political processes of transformation falling woefully short of ensuring gender equality. Here, "citizenship and identity have generally been seen as the prerogative of men"

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(Afshar, 2007:237) as women tend to be regarded under the “concept of property” (Barakat & Wardell, 2002:918).

Furthermore, since the war on terror began, gender roles have been accentuated (Afshar, 2007: 238), especially seeing as the insecurity brought about by war has led to a return to warlordism in some parts of the country (Their & Chopra, 2002). This localisation of governance reproduces “particularly entrenched forms of patriarchy” (Moghadam, 2002:19) that serve to deny women the rights to education, employment and political participation. This tribalism is deeply rooted in traditional and usually theocratic political regimes of the Taliban (Abusharaf, 2006) that are symptomatic of wider “discriminatory traditions” (Abusharaf, 2006:714), whereby women were often confined to the private and exempt from any form of political participation. Additionally, during the 1980s, with the highly resented spread of Western development ideals, women’s rights were discarded due to their perception of being Western (Haynes, 2008). However, the processes of transformation in Afghanistan have led to the establishment of such female empowerment groups as RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, which has led to “(re)negotiations of gender norms” that provide “leadership and empowerment opportunities for women” (Fluri, 2008:50). That said, RAWA’s power and “influence at the national level is significantly marginal” (Fluri, 2008:50) due to the deep embeddedness of socio-political relations in traditionalist conceptions of women that have served to comprehensively undermine any form of female equality or empowerment brought about by the processes of political transformation.

Indeed, the failure of many processes of political transformation lies in the prevalence of local governance, as holistic, equality inducing transformation necessitates the establishment of national institutions that can coordinate adequately to bring about such social change. Demonstrative of such an impediment to equality, in Afghanistan, “local access to power has not typically been through formal structures” (Their & Chopra, 2002:894), with power located in the domain of a “small local elite” (Their & Chopra, 897), serving to sustain inherently unequal power relations, manifest within traditional social hierarchies. Again, this is particularly excluding as in the village Shura (council), elite elders and the male heads of household are usually exclusively involved, disempowering women and those not of elite status. Thus, the challenge for successful political reform in the alleviation of inequality is to avoid this regional autonomy. However, this seems doubtful, not only due to the insecurity and return to traditionalism brought about by the ongoing conflict, but through the state’s weakness itself and its shortcomings vis-à-vis its capacity to confront past legacies and establishing a transparent, accountable state framework (de Hoop Scheffer, 2009). Moreover, Afghanistan held the accolade for the 2nd most corrupt country in 1999 (Transparency International, 2009), which is unlikely to change due to weak accountability measures and subsequent impunity for those partaking in such corruption. This, in conjuncture with the fact that the Bonn Agreement itself has “left undefined many crucial elements in the process of establishing political institutions” (Their & Chopra, 2002: 894) has led to an ineffective central state, “which has been unable to implement modernizing programs and goals in the face of Afghanistan’s tribal feudalism” (Moghadam, 2002:19), producing somewhat of an impasse in terms of the actual potential for effective political transformation to culminate in any form of subsequent ensuring of inequality and civil rights (Bertelsmann, 2010) as the prevalence of traditionalist, local legacies of governance have undermined state effectiveness.

Whilst comparatively useful examples, South Africa and Afghanistan represent two countries in at two very different stages of political transformation. On one hand, Afghanistan represents a state in the throws of war, whilst South Africa is relatively peaceful, representing very different contexts for political transformation, which may hinder a comparative assessment.

Nevertheless, the failure of political transformation to produce de facto citizenship and the alleviation of inequality to any meaningful extent in both states has been demonstrative of the complex and interrelated nature of economic and political change, as well as providing an insight into the inescapable socio-spatial configurations produced by historical political regimes. In both cases, economic inequalities continue to be perpetually reproduced as both states have become “inescapably embedded within a globalized [...] capitalist system” (Lester et al, 2000:322) under the rubric of neoliberalism, which in turn becomes interwoven within past legacies of inequality, manifesting themselves within landscapes of racialized poverty. Furthermore, in terms of the failure in both states for political equality to be extended to all, especially women, the embeddedness of traditionalism in current socio-political relations has come to represent a profound obstruction to the radical political transformation necessitated to ensure equality. Thus, as

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Nagle (1994:47) prophesized in 1994 "inequalities remain and it will take more than political reform to redress them" in both Afghanistan and South Africa.

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Written by: Alex Ward
Written at: Trevelyan College, Durham University
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