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## **U.S. force can't end oppression**

By Malou Innocent

Some Americans fear the drawdown of U.S. forces in Afghanistan will reverse hard-won progress for Afghan women. The belief that we can solidify that progress by prolonging the mission, which turns 10 years old today, confuses the desirable with the feasible.

Advocates for redressing gender inequality in Afghanistan tend to focus too narrowly on changing a single aspect of social life. Consider Afghanistan's constitution, arguably one of the most progressive in the region. It calls for education of women, medical care for women without caretakers, and a minimum number of women in parliament. But these discernible measures of progress mask the challenge of grafting liberal values onto an illiberal society, neglecting the complex societal forces that keep Afghan women subjugated.

Afghanistan no longer suffers from the systematic oppression that typified Taliban rule. But conservative Afghan traditionalists, whom Americans often confuse with the Taliban, still wield considerable influence. Informal institutions - traditions, customs, and norms - still govern property rights, marriage and divorce, inheritance, and custody. Misogynistic warlords and fundamentalists, who pack the parliament, courts, and ministries, also help ensure that laws are applied so as to favor men, despite women's constitutionally guaranteed rights.

A focus on formal gender equality tends to overlook not only cultural discrimination against women, but also the conservative backlash against attempts to change that discrimination.

One glaring example is the persistent controversy over shelters for battered women. Last year, the Afghan television host Nasto Naderi falsely claimed that such shelters were supporting prostitution, and rumors that they were dens of immorality spread. The Council of Ministers soon drafted a law giving the government the power to regulate shelter admissions and to force those admitted to undergo the indignity of a virginity test.

Fortunately, President Hamid Karzai's cabinet approved a new draft of the law last month that removed its most heinous provisions. But despite the legal victory, the dustup showed why women's rights have yet to fully take root. Family issues are often resolved through arbitration by local leaders and councils. Running away from an abusive husband is considered a transgression against family honor, and captured women and girls often face retribution from their families - including, in extreme cases, honor killings.

Even the concept of democratic elections remains controversial among Afghans. A report published in May by the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit found that while many Afghans like the idea of selecting their representatives, many associate the term *democracy* with Western domination. Although the U.S.-led coalition has largely resurrected the country's pre-Taliban political institutions, the report concludes that negative sentiments about democracy emerge from "the stated distaste among respondents for 'Western culture' and the potential threat it poses to 'Afghan culture,' traditional norms or values, and an Islamic identity."

Focusing on noble ends also overlooks a serious question about the mission's rationale. The primary constitutional function of the U.S. government is to defend against threats to its national interests. Is changing the social status of Afghan women a legitimate component of America's self-defense?

Weeks after the 9/11 attacks, in a Time magazine editorial titled "New Hope for Afghanistan's Women," Hillary Clinton argued that "a society that values all its members, including women," is less likely to harbor terrorists. The argument that the fight against terror is tightly coupled with the one for human rights was also made by former President George W. Bush, who claimed, "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands."

Extensive study, however, has shown that America's security does not depend on the imposition of its institutions by force. Such policies, and their unforeseen consequences, often diminish America's safety. Moreover, as George Mason University's Christopher Coyne has argued, the historical record indicates "that attempts to spread liberal democracy via military occupation will fail more often than they will work."

What really matters is the long-term sustainability of Afghanistan's institutions. That comes when people embrace social and political changes that come about gradually and suit their way of life. The elevation of Afghan women may be morally defensible, but it won't be seen as legitimate if it depends on institutions that appear to be at odds with local traditions.

Foreign-led efforts are not likely to be the most effective means of rectifying gender-based oppression in Afghanistan. Americans would be wise to keep that in mind.