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Afghanistan is facing an uncertain transition as the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) reduces its military presence and hands over key security responsibilities to Afghans. In general, security conditions in the country deteriorated in 2013, with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reporting a 14 per cent rise in civilian casualties during 2013 compared to the previous year. In this volatile political context, the status and future security of minorities in Afghanistan remains unclear. Although peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban were proposed this year, these have not progressed and so the status of a future peace settlement – including the place of minorities within it – remains undecided.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom noted in its 2013 annual report that although conditions for religious minorities have markedly improved over the last few years, 'religious freedom conditions continued to be exceedingly poor for dissenting Sunni Muslims, as well as Shi'i Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Bahai's'. Political marginalization also remains an ongoing challenge. In September, President Hamid Karzai was obliged to issue a presidential decree reserving a seat for Sikh and Hindu Afghan nationals in the lower house of parliament, following the refusal of lawmakers to pass the legislation themselves.

Ethnic identity remains a sensitive issue in Afghanistan, as evidenced by a controversy during 2013 over the format of a proposed national identity card where ethnicity would be embedded in the data electronically rather than printed on the card. Some politicians from minority groups resisted the proposal, claiming that it would undermine their identity rights and political representation. Other commentators suggested that it would be a positive move towards a more inclusive environment where ethnicity played a less prominent role in public life.

While talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban are widely seen as a necessary step for future stability, there are concerns about what the impact of any power-sharing agreement would be for minority communities. These fears are founded on the previous oppression of minorities such as Hazara while the Taliban were in power. Even today, while there are as many as 14 recognized ethnic groups in the country and the government is relatively more broad-based, power is not divided equitably. While the marginalization of the Hazara community decreased significantly with the overthrow of the Taliban, for instance, they remain one of the poorest and most marginalized

groups in the country. In April 2013, the US State Department reported that discrimination against the Hazara community continued through the previous year 'along class, race and religious lines in the form of extortion of money through illegal taxation, forced recruitment and forced labour, physical abuse and detention'.

In this environment of increased insecurity and political polarization, with tensions heightened by NATO's imminent withdrawal, hate speech and violence against minorities is commonplace. In August, a prominent warlord declared that the Hazara minority in Afghanistan had assisted foreign forces to prolong the war and that '[they] will have no safe havens in any corner of the country'. There has also been a rise in the number of Sunni extremist websites disseminating anti-Hazara content.

The atmosphere of insecurity has also affected Christians, including the small number of Christian converts who make their way to India. Approximately 40 Afghan Christians reportedly arrived in Delhi during the first half of 2013; the community was believed to number between 200 and 250. In June, an Afghan Christian pastor in Delhi was surrounded and threatened by four Afghan men. There were reports of threats against the community from inside Afghanistan as well. Reports of anti-Christian hate speech involving Afghan lawmakers and some media outlets raised concerns about the future of religious freedom in the country.

While Afghanistan's ongoing insecurity exposes civilians from all groups to the threat of indiscriminate violence, religious minorities remain vulnerable to targeted attacks. For example, in September two men dressed in police uniforms – allegedly Pakistani nationals – attacked a Shi'a mosque in Kabul. A number of worshippers were wounded. This followed an attack in 2011 that killed at least 55 persons – mainly Shi'a – at a religious shrine. The apparent failure of the state to curb incitement and violence against minorities has troubling implications for the future stability of the country as a whole, given their potential to provoke wider sectarian tensions. While conflict resolution efforts are focused on peace negotiations between the government and insurgents, there is also a need to examine the status of minorities within the country and to promote positive measures such as community reconciliation to create the foundation for a sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, uncertainties concerning human rights monitoring and transitional justice do not bode well. The highly respected Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) was largely suspended for 18 months due to numerous unfilled vacancies among its commissioners. After pressure from donors,

President Hamid Karzai filled the posts in June 2013, although without consulting civil society. Several of the five appointees had little human rights experience or had criticized basic human rights concepts. Moreover, the AIHRC's ground-breaking 800-page report on war crimes and crimes against humanity remained unpublished, despite having been completed several years ago.