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Al Jazeera

Afghans in Kabul protest woman's execution

By Zainab Salbi

07/12/2012

Demonstrators march for gender rights and against shooting carried out in Parwan last week and captured in video clip.

Scores of men and women have taken to the streets of Kabul to protest the recent public slaying of an Afghan woman whose gruesome, execution-style killing was captured on video.

The crowd of demonstrators carried large white sheets on Wednesday that said "International community: Where is the protection and justice for Afghan women?"

They marched from the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs to a traffic circle near a UN compound, and some shouted: "Death to those who did this act!"

"We want the government to take action on behalf of these women ... who are victims of violence and who are being killed," said Zuhra Alamyar, a woman activist who was at the Kabul rally. "We want the government to take serious action and stop them."

The video footage, which surfaced recently, shows the woman being shot multiple times about 10 days ago in Parwan province, north of the Afghan capital.

The gunman was encouraged by people who stood nearby, smiling and cheering.

Police in Parwan said the Taliban were behind the killing, but the group have denied they ordered or carried out the slaying.

Process of reform

The death of the woman, who was said to be in her 20s, set off a storm of condemnation. President Hamid Karzai, the US embassy, the top NATO military commander in Afghanistan and activist groups all denounced the killing.

It was a reminder that girls and women still suffer shocking abuse in Afghanistan, but the protest also indicated that people's views on women's rights there could be slowly changing.

Wazhma Frogh, executive director of the Research Institute for Women, Peace and Security, told Al Jazeera that organisers counted more than 300 people at the rally, of whom at least 85 were men.

Frogh said she travelled to Parwan, where the execution took place, and saw women experiencing a renewed sense of fear.

"But this event was nothing new for us," Frogh said. "When we first saw the reports, we flashed back to the stoning of a couple in Kunduz last year and the stoning of a woman in 1998."

"The truth is though, every day we are under threat. If we stay at home we are under threat. If we go to school we are under threat."

Despite guaranteed rights and progressive new laws, the UN Development Programme still ranks Afghanistan as one of the world's worst countries when it comes to equal rights for women.

Afghan advocates say attitudes have subtly shifted over the years, in part thanks to the dozens of women's groups that have sprung up.

'Face justice'

Still, ending abuse of women is a huge challenge in a patriarchal society where traditional practices include child marriage, giving girls away to settle debts or pay for their relatives' crimes and honour killings in which girls seen as disgracing their families are murdered by relatives.

Women activists worry that gains made in recent years could erode as the international presence in Afghanistan wanes and the government seeks to negotiate a settlement with the Taliban fighters.

During the Taliban regime, women were banned from working and going to school, or even leaving home without a male relative. In public, all women were forced to wear a head-to-toe burqa veil, which covers even the face with a mesh panel.

The video surfaced just before donor nations met over the weekend in Tokyo and pledged \$16bn in aid for Afghanistan.

The donors expressed strong concerns over how the money would be handled and also called on Kabul to improve human rights, especially women's rights.

"We want from the government to follow the killing of the women in Afghanistan and hand over those responsible to face justice," said Afghan activist Sima Samar from the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.