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# These Young Afghans Are Acting Against Corruption

## Theatre Groups Perform in Towns, Villages, Sparking Community Action Against Graft

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Corruption is one of the biggest obstacles to achieving U.S. national security goals outlined in the South Asia strategy announced in August. Corruption cripples the Afghan government’s ability to maintain popular support and fuels the Taliban insurgency. Repeated surveys of

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Afghans find bribe-taking by officials among the public's greatest complaints, and the Taliban win popular support by vowing to end such graft.

Local-level graft—including bribes demanded by officials, nepotism in local hiring and unequal distribution of services—is particularly corrosive to popular support.

Weak police and judicial systems, which suffer from corruption themselves, have been unable to constrain bribery and graft. But a nationwide collection of youth groups is using street theatre performances to build public participation in opposing local corruption.

Street theatre is not the first weapon that comes to mind to use against entrenched systems of theft and graft. But scores of young Afghan activists across the country used it in the past year in hundreds of performances countrywide, encouraging tens of thousands of compatriots to stand up against corruption. The effort produced real, local changes.

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A crowd in Afghanistan's second-largest city, Kandahar, laughs during a performance by a local youth group that dramatized corruption by Afghan officials. (Photo: Bond Street Theater)

The activists—including many university students—worked with [Bond Street Theatre](#), a non-profit organization that promotes conflict resolution, human rights and education. Theatre groups in eight Afghan provinces—a quarter of the country—held nearly 200 public performances watched by an estimated 81,000 people.

In Afghanistan, “even though corruption is a huge problem, it can be hard, even dangerous, for people to act against it,” noted Barmak Pazhwak, who oversees the USIP grant that funded the effort. “The war, the authority of local warlords or power brokers, a lack of news sources and illiteracy all can stifle the public discussion of any urgent issue that is necessary in a democracy. But street theatre, presented in local, vernacular languages, is a way to slip past those obstacles and promote citizens’ involvement,” Pazhwak said.

“That’s why USIP funded this project.” Pazhwak noted that the performances, and the training that activists received to prepare them, also build the critical thinking that any democracy requires in its citizenry, but that the Afghan educational system often fails to teach.

## Corruption fuels Afghanistan’s war

Much of Afghanistan’s government is laced with patronage networks in which office-holders win appointments through bribes and influence, rather than merit, undermining the government’s efficiency and credibility. The Taliban exploit public [frustration](#) and [anger](#) to win support and discredit the government. Corruption’s reach has been epitomized by the 2010 collapse of Kabul Bank, the country’s largest, after it gave “loans” to members of the country’s elite, who bought luxuries and villas abroad and never repaid the funds. Efforts to prosecute those responsible for the loss of nearly \$1 billion, and to recover the lost funds, have been halting and slow. Transparency International surveys consistently rank Afghanistan one of the [world’s most corrupt countries](#).

Against such an endemic problem, Amrullah Ahmadjan, seems like a small asset. Amrullah, a gentle man with an air of serious purpose, comes from Herat, Afghanistan’s third-largest city near its border with Iran. Like other Afghans, he has suffered petty corruption throughout his life, most commonly requests for bribery. He became the leader of the street theatre youth group in Herat province, producing

performances about everyday corruption. Amrullah tailored the performances and workshops to focus on high school students because, he said, “they are our future.” With the growth of television in urban Afghanistan, he said, TV dramas have had a powerful impact on Afghan youth. “I knew that, if done right, the theatre performances could tap into this trend,” Amrullah said in an interview. “It could build opposition to corruption in Herat, much more than lengthy books and articles could ever do. The performances would remain on the students’ minds for years to come.”

Amrullah’s work is one example of what the street theatre project achieved across eight of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. The project, which was funded by USIP, worked with Afghan youth from Herat, Kunduz, Kandahar, Balkh, Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar, and Bamyán provinces, which are spread nationwide. During 2016 and 2017, Bond Street Theatre worked with the youth to write and perform plays on problems facing their communities—and most of the plays dealt with corruption.

The youth groups performed their plays in the open spaces of towns and villages, often in the courtyards of schools or local government buildings. The audiences were typically several hundred local residents.

Performances portrayed nepotism, harassment and bribery, and suggested ways to hold local institutions accountable. The performances were open-ended so that audience members could ask questions, discuss their roles in

combatting corruption, and even help act out the conclusion of the play.

## Corruption's Foe: Public Information

The performances didn't just highlight the problems of corruption; they sowed solutions. In Balkh, a northern province contested increasingly by the Taliban, Haji Muhammad Nasir noticed that the contractor building a major road through his village was using poor-quality materials. He told a youth leader in the province that he initially thought the problem was insoluble: "just the way it is." But through a street theatre performance, he learned about an Access to Information Law approved by the Afghan parliament in 2014. Through this law, Haji Nasir and the community were able to review the road contract and require the contractor to use higher-quality materials. Haji Nasir said, "I believe this was all done through the help of our youth leaders."

The youth groups spread their lessons on confronting corruption beyond the crowds that watched their shows. In the eastern province of Nangarhar, a high school student named Sahil, recounted a performance to his father, who had to constantly bribe municipality employees to keep his shop open. Sahil and his father spoke to one of the youth leaders, who explained where he could submit a formal complaint. When a municipal employee next sought a bribe, Sahil's father made clear that he knew how to file a complaint. "This made the municipality worker afraid," Sahil said, "and he did

not come to father for a bribe again.”

The youth peace leaders have cited other cases of citizens raising their voices against corruption.

Sayed Abdullah Masroor, a member of Balkh province’s governing council, said after one performance: “I am sure the corrupt [audience members] were finding themselves in those actors who were playing corrupt directors. Once they understand they are part of the corruption, they will not promote this culture.”

## Community support

From the beginning, the youth groups consulted with community and religious leaders to explain their intentions. Failing to develop community buy-in in this way can prevent such initiatives from succeeding, or even starting. Mawlawi Sayed Kamal, a cleric from Laghman, a mountainous farming province not far from the capital, Kabul, said that after one theatre performance, “A religious leader stood in support of the youth and gave a speech on how corruption is evil according to Islam.” He promised to amplify the youths’ message “in community gatherings and in the mosque,” Kamal said.

Winning the elders’ support paid off more than the youth could have imagined. When a Taliban group took the youth leaders hostage as they traveled to hold a workshop in a

village, local elders intervened. They convinced the Taliban commander that the youth leaders were working to solve community issues within the context of Islam, and the Taliban released the young activists.

## Conflict Resolution

The project gave training to the youth groups on citizens' legal rights, issues of justice, and conflict management techniques. That training, plus public credibility achieved through the youth's theatre performances enabled them to advance changes in their communities.

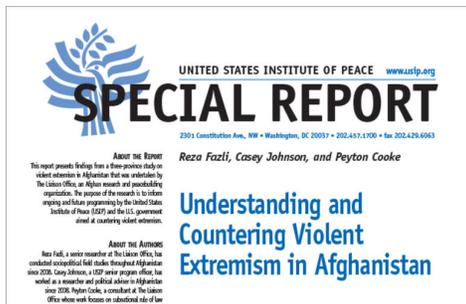
One example: In parts of Afghanistan, conflicts between local families often are settled by forcing one family to hand over a daughter for marriage into another. Girls or women forcibly exchanged in this way suffer frequent abuse and a life as effective slave labor. Youth in the conservative southern province of Kandahar were able to persuade families in one such dispute that the girls' rights must be respected under law. So a monetary payment was made instead to settle the dispute peacefully. "By raising awareness in communities, the life of a girl has been saved and the conflict between two families has been resolved, said one of the elders involved, Haji Abdul Latif. "This is a big impact of youth activities on the communities as people became aware and understood the value of righteousness."

## Overcoming challenges

Throughout the provinces, the groups are working to make small, but real, changes.

“I can see the impact of just one performance in my school,” Said Muhammad Tahir Ayoubi, a principal in Kandahar province. Students were no longer afraid to raise their voices when they witnessed corruption in their lives, he said. “Such kinds of programs will have a huge impact not only on the district and provincial level, but [also] on the national level.”

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