

UNTHEMED

Afghanistan, the Taliban and the liberation narrative

Why it is so vital to be telling our own stories

Commentary: In the context of a liberation narrative, an Afghanistani broadcaster and cultural affairs adviser now living in Aotearoa New Zealand, examines the problems with this narrative when applied to the recent controversy around a pregnant New Zealand journalist in Afghanistan and her conflict with the New Zealand government and the MIQ system. Firstly, this narrative relies on the assumption that ‘there isn’t anyone in Afghanistan who can write in English and tell the stories of Afghanistan to the world’. It also relies on the assumption that a foreigner can tell Afghanistan’s story. Secondly, to the extent that it creates an expectation of unconditional gratitude on the part of its ‘beneficiaries’, this narrative denies the value of immigrants in society. The author argues she personally contributes to building social cohesion in New Zealand’s multicultural environment. More generally, New Zealand’s economy and workforce rely on immigrants, as has become increasingly apparent in the face of COVID-19 restrictions. The media’s liberation narrative fails to do justice to the value and importance of this contribution. The author argues that the antidote is a narrative characterised by diversity and solidarity, that builds up and builds on the voices, experiences and wisdom of Māori and Indigenous, minorities and immigrants.

Keywords: Afghanistan, balance, COVID-19, diversity, fairness, immigration, journalism, liberation narrative, Māori, minorities, MIQ, New Zealand, refugees, representation, Taliban, white privilege

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IN FEBRUARY 2022, I raised my voice (Samarqandi, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) to bring attention to the reality of the situation in my homeland, Afghanistan, in response to media coverage (in New Zealand and elsewhere) that exploited and trivialised that situation, and dangerously mischaracterised the Taliban (Bellis, 2022a). I was very careful about what I said and how I said it, and I was nonetheless prepared for the criticism that comes with speaking out publicly about a controversial issue. What surprised me, however, was the nature of that

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Trivialising the Taliban is not the way to force New Zealand to change its Covid quarantine rules

Muzhgan Samarqandi

My heart goes out to Charlotte Bellis but the treatment of women in Afghanistan is not comparable to the situation in New Zealand



Under the Taliban, women in Afghanistan are not allowed to work or study. Photograph: Héctor Retamal/AFP/Getty Images

My name is Muzhgan Samarqandi and I am from Baghlan, Afghanistan, but living in New Zealand with my Kiwi husband and our son. Like [Charlotte Bellis](#), I too was a broadcaster in Afghanistan, back when this was possible for a woman without being a foreigner.

Figure 1: A Muzhgan Samarqandi opinion article featured in *The Guardian* on 1 February 2022.

criticism (*INews Facebook*, 2022), and the prevailing support for a particular narrative, that excludes minority voices like mine, and our perspectives. It points to a lack of diversity and representation in New Zealand media, and a resulting lack of balance and fairness.

For context, my open letter as published by *The Guardian* on 1 February 2022, is included here in full:

My name is Muzhgan Samarqandi and I am from Baghlan, Afghanistan, but living in New Zealand with my Kiwi husband and our son. Like Charlotte Bellis, I too was a broadcaster in Afghanistan, back when this was possible for a woman without being a foreigner.

Charlotte says that she was forced to leave her previous home in Qatar, where she was a journalist with Al Jazeera, after becoming pregnant, since

AFGHANISTAN · Published 2 days ago

Pregnant journalist gets help from Taliban after New Zealand denies request to return due to COVID rules

Charlotte Bellis said 'emergency allocation' request to return to New Zealand was denied

By Bailee Hill | Fox News

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Figure 2: Headline on a report featuring New Zealand journalist Charlotte Bellis in an interview with Fox News presenter Bailee Hill.

it's illegal for unmarried women to become pregnant there.

With New Zealand's borders closed, she returned to Afghanistan, the only other country she had a visa to live in. Charlotte says the Taliban granted her 'safe-haven' and her multiple attempts to obtain emergency MIQ visas to allow her to return to give birth in New Zealand were—until Tuesday—unsuccessful.

As a mother, my heart goes out to Charlotte, and I sincerely hope she and her partner get to New Zealand so she can give birth at home surrounded by her family.

As someone who has travelled for study and work and love, and who does not share the same passport as their significant other, my heart goes out to everyone stranded overseas, and I sincerely hope they can all get home and be reunited with their loved ones.

But as an Afghanistani woman, who has only recently emigrated from Afghanistan to New Zealand, I have to speak up. I almost did so when Charlotte interviewed Abdul Qahar Balkhi, the Taliban spokesperson with the Kiwi accent in a story for Al Jazeera [in 2021]. Although her story raised allegations of Taliban killings and violence following their takeover, I felt she went easy on him. For example, at the end of the interview, she asked what he had to say to those who called the Taliban 'terrorists'. He said people didn't really believe they were terrorists, but this was just a word the US used for anyone who didn't fall in line with their agenda. There were no further questions.

This was a man who in 2012, as a member of the Taliban's 'com-

munications wing’, claimed responsibility on behalf of the Taliban for an attack on innocent civilians. A man who has admitted the group committed crimes against humanity. It made me so upset to see him get away with answers like that. But then my energy was taken up just coping with the reality of what was happening to my friends and family in Afghanistan.

But now, when I read Charlotte’s letter and see the media and social media responses, I see the situation in my country being trivialised, and it makes me angry.

Charlotte refers to herself asking the Taliban in a press conference what they would do for women and girls, and says she is now asking the same question of the New Zealand government.

I understand there are problems with MIQ. And I understand the value in provoking change with controversy. But what I don’t understand is how someone who has lived and worked in Afghanistan, and seen the impact of the Taliban’s regime on women and girls, can seriously compare that situation to New Zealand.

Afghanistani women who resist or protest the regime are being arrested, tortured, raped and killed. Young girls are being married off to Talibs. Education and employment are no longer available to them. A 19-year-old girl I know from my village, who was in her first year of law last year is now, instead, a housewife to a Talib. There are so many stories like this.

Charlotte says the Taliban have given her a safe haven when she is not welcome in her own country. This is obviously a good headline and good way to make a point. But it is an unhelpful representation of the situation. One commentary on Instagram, reposted by Charlotte, suggested her story represents the truly Muslim acts of the Taliban, which the Western media



Figure 3: ‘Journalist: Taliban helped me, my country won’t’. How Fox News tagged a Baile Hill (left) interview with Charlotte Bellis.

have not shown. This makes me angry.

If a person in power extends privileges to someone who doesn't threaten their power, it doesn't mean they are not oppressive or extremist or dangerous.

The Taliban distort Islam and manipulate Muslims for their political gain. They violate the rights of women and girls, and it is offensive to compare them to the New Zealand government in this regard.

New Zealand is no paradise, I have experienced my fair share of racism here, and I am sure the MIQ situation can be improved. But relying on the protection of a regime that is violently oppressive, and then using that to try to shame the New Zealand government into action, is not the way to achieve that improvement. It exploits and trivialises the situation in Afghanistan, at a time when the rights of Afghanistani women and girls desperately need to be taken seriously.

My first observation is that my letter was received by media with scepticism and published with caution. The same cannot be said of Bellis's letter, which was widely published and well received, without any questioning of her claims about the Taliban or her travel options. Evidently, a media platform and publication are more easily and widely accessible to journalists like her. For example, the first editor who contacted me about my letter asked if it was legitimate, if I had really written it, and if my story was real. She needed some convincing about my story and my lived experience with the Taliban.

My second observation is that my letter was published with a preference for a narrative other than my own. Some of the headlines used, in which I had zero input, sensationalised the issues at hand and undermined my efforts to draw attention to my homeland. One example is 'Afghanistani mother responds to pregnant Kiwi journalist's plea' (Samarqandi, 2022a). My letter was not about Bellis's plea to get home, but specifically her mischaracterisation of the situation in Afghanistan.¹ Also, when I requested use of the term 'Afghanistani' to refer to myself and to all people of different ethnicities from Afghanistan (rather than 'Afghan' which refers to a particular ethnicity), one media outlet said it had never heard this term before and, without asking for permission or further clarification, proceeded to use 'Afghan'.

The degree of editorial discretion exercised, to the exclusion of my identity and preferences, gave me the impression that my narrative was nothing more than an interesting annotation or footnote, being used to add colour and intrigue to a story that sells, with little commitment to addressing the real issues in question. As another example, some of the outlets that published my letter illustrated it exclusively with pictures of Bellis (Samarqandi, 2022a).

My third observation is that a lot of the criticism I faced, for raising my voice, reflected a perception that I am lucky to be here and should 'shut up and be grateful or go home'. While the wording of such criticism was more aggressive than

anything I have experienced before (and far more aggressive than my paraphrasing above), it is a perception with which I am, by now, very familiar. A lot of people (some hostile, some well-meaning) often tell me how lucky I am to be here, how great it is here, how happy I must feel to be here, and how awful it must have been in Afghanistan.

I left Afghanistan in 2019, to pursue a future with the man I love. I did not leave, nor come to New Zealand, to escape the situation in Afghanistan. Some people have had to do so, from Afghanistan and other parts of the world. But that does not mean their journey is reduced to escapism, their identity defined by victimhood, or their experience characterised exclusively by trauma. For me, the greatest trauma has been the racism I have experienced in New Zealand. So, while I am grateful for the welcome and opportunities I have received from many people, I reject the narrative perpetuated by the media, which Rafia Zakaria calls the ‘liberation trajectory’, that suggests ‘it’s so great here and so bad over there’ (Malik, 2021). I also reject the notion that my gratitude should preclude my critical engagement on important issues, especially those concerning my homeland.

My heart lies in Afghanistan. I miss the solemn and expressive landscape and language. I miss the culture of hospitality and festivity. I miss the poetry with which we communicate, the music and colour with which we celebrate,

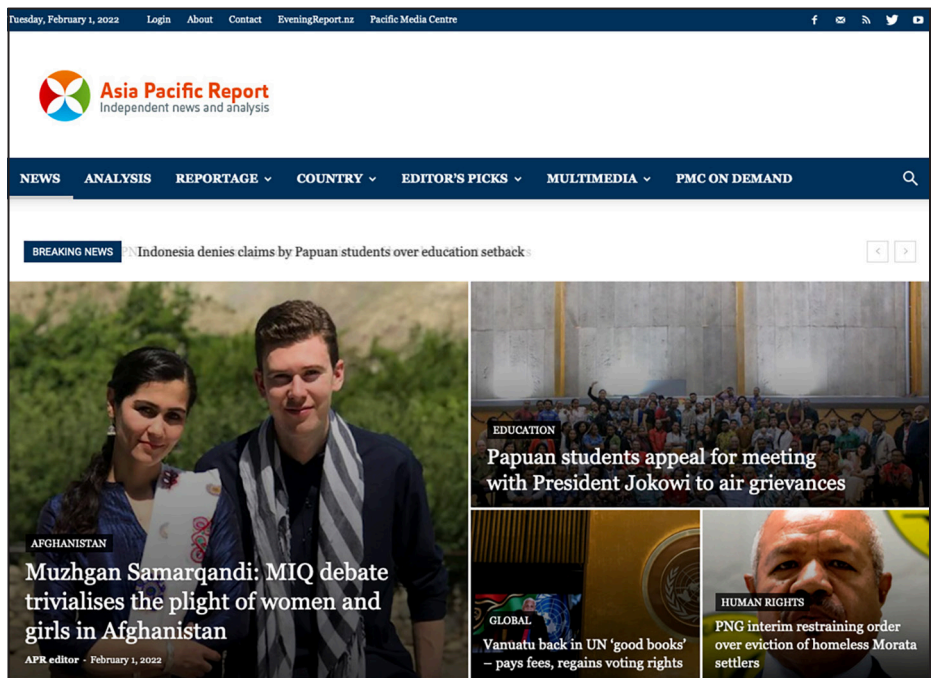


Figure 4: Muzhgan Samarqandi in *Asia Pacific Report* on 1 February 2022 about how the New Zealand MIQ debate ‘trivialises the plight of women and girls in Afghanistan’ since the Taliban seized back power on 15 August 2021.

and the generosity with which we create community. Of course, I also miss the food. I have seen and been subject to many horrible things growing up in Afghanistan, but my prevailing experience is of the beauty of life centred around family and community, which has instilled a faith in humanity and in the future of my country. I long to return, and to plant the feet of my son in the soil of his motherland, so he can grow tall and strong and confident in his cultural identity, and learn to breathe freely and taste the world with his mother tongue. Until I return, I carry and am carried by the spirit of my homeland.

My Afghanistani identity and lived experience, and my investment in the future of Afghanistan, should give me the right to comment on its current affairs, if not the credibility to do so with authority. However, in the context of a liberation narrative, my speaking up renders me an ungrateful beneficiary, who has been saved from damnation in Afghanistan and is now daring to criticise one of the ‘emblems’ of this Western liberation movement: a brave white woman voluntarily subjecting herself to the dangers of such a hellhole, to report our story to the world (Malik, 2021).

There are obvious problems with this narrative. Firstly, as Rafia points out, it relies on the assumption that ‘there isn’t anyone in Afghanistan who can write in English and tell the stories of Afghanistan to the world’. It also relies on the assumption that a foreigner, with no lived experience of our reality, can tell our story. Secondly, to the extent that it creates an expectation of unconditional gratitude on the part of its ‘beneficiaries’, this narrative denies the value of immigrants in society. Personally, through my work as a cultural adviser, I both pay taxes and contribute to building social cohesion in New Zealand’s multicultural environment. More generally, the economy and workforce rely on immigrants, as has become increasingly apparent in the face of COVID-19 restrictions. The media’s liberation narrative fails to do justice to the value and importance of this contribution.

As a side note, there was a strong message of support from Māori, in response to my letter, which was picked up and amplified by Māori media personalities like Mihingarangi Forbes, Tania Page and Tina Ngata. This is significant because, in one sense, Māori have the most valid reason to be hostile to immigration, and stand to lose the most from it, when their interests are already marginalised in a policy context. I can only assume this prevailing support reflects their own culture of hospitality, which I have experienced before on a personal level. For example, the first time I met Sir Taihakurei Durie, he greeted me with a mihi that was at least 10 minutes long, acknowledging my culture and its rich history and literary tradition, and honouring me with a welcome that warmed my heart and steadied my feet, and fortified my pride in my identity.

But I also think this message of support from Māori might be informed by a sense of solidarity. For example, Tina Ngata wrote a Waitangi Day reflection about colonielle oppression, referring to ‘women who benefit from and exploit

colonial patriarchy' (Ngata, 2022). During this reflection, she drew attention to Bellis's mischaracterisation of the situation in Afghanistan, alongside an instance of racial profiling of a young Māori woman by an older white woman, in a Farmers Department Store. She then made insightful observations about power, privilege, and the perpetuation of injustice through the failure to dismantle racist structures. I think this points to a narrative characterised by a *solidarity* trajectory, as the antidote to that of colonial liberation.

However, as Ngata (2022) noted, notwithstanding my efforts to draw attention to the reality of the situation in Afghanistan, and the harm done by Bellis's mischaracterisation of the Taliban, and notwithstanding the eloquence with which Rafia illustrated the privilege at play, the liberation narrative prevailed. This narrative denied any racism and continued to celebrate Bellis as an emblem and champion of women's rights. Bellis's lawyer told me on Twitter I was guilty of exactly 'what I had accused her of', by 'attacking a woman', and told long-time women's rights activist Sahar Fetrat that she 'needed gender training'. The question is not why someone like him apparently failed to comprehend the issues at hand (perhaps they were too far removed from his reality), but rather why the media afforded such extensive coverage to him and his perspective (DuPlessis-Allan, 2022; Ensor, 2022; Nixon & Bhan, 2022; Neilson, 2022).

I think this is because the interests represented by Bellis and her lawyer are presumed to represent the interests of New Zealand.² Indeed, they are valid and important interests, and perhaps those of the majority, but they are not the exclusive interests of the diverse people that make up New Zealand. There are some awful stories of people stranded overseas, unable to return home to give birth, attend funerals, see family, and be reunited with loved ones, as reported in the media (Cook, 2022; Fallon, 2022; Macdonald, 2021; MIQ room release, 2022). These stories need to be heard and engaged with.

However, there are also many awful stories of the difficulties, sometimes arbitrarily imposed, often aggravated by racism, that immigrants face to get into New Zealand, and to navigate the immigration system. These stories also need to be heard and engaged with, but the media tends to focus on those immigration stories that reflect New Zealand in a positive light and fit within a liberation narrative. Even some of the immigrant success stories are framed as 'success thanks to immigration support' when they are in fact in spite of a lack of support.

For these stories to be heard, especially those that involve an inconvenient or complicated truth, the media needs to allow them to be told by the individuals themselves. If their English makes this difficult, translators can and should be used. Otherwise, their truth is suppressed, and their stories appropriated in service of the liberation narrative, and what Rafia calls a 'cultural ranking', that suggests bad things only happen in the countries immigrants come from, not in New Zealand (Malik, 2021).

This starts with recognising that immigrants and non-citizens living in New Zealand are also an important part of the fabric of society, who contribute to the economy and community, and have a voice with valid concerns. It is also about recognising that our diverse society is interconnected with people and cultures around the world. In this context it becomes about visibility and equality, and that means creating a platform for diversity of voice and dismantling racist structures *within the media*.

My final observation is, without a diversity of voice in the media, an understanding of the reality of the situation in Afghanistan and elsewhere escapes the general public, to the detriment of discourse and engagement. For example, after my letter was published, I was featured on RNZ's *The Panel*, during which ex-Attorney-General Chris Finlayson said, whenever outsiders like Britain or Russia have tried to get involved in Afghanistan, they have left in body bags (NZ Afghanistani broadcaster speaks out, 2022). He concluded that getting involved was pointless, and that it is better to let Afghanistan 'go to the devil'.

Britain and the Soviet Union *invaded* Afghanistan (Satia, 2021). Even the US relied on former warlords to protect its own interests, which fuelled corruption and undermined democracy, and Pakistan trained and supported the Taliban (Bennett-Jones, 2022). The history of my homeland is as a battleground for foreign interests. Afghanistan already went to the devil, and its name is Colonialism. Getting involved in Afghanistan now is not pointless, as Finlayson suggests. Rather, it is desperately needed, but it means undoing colonialism. And this is where we need a narrative characterised by a solidarity trajectory, and a diversity of voice in the media.

After the coverage of Bellis's MIQ predicament had ended, she published an op-ed titled '23 million Afghans face starvation—where is the world?' This piece included reference to the plight of women activists and school-aged girls, and the Taliban's 'very limited tolerance' for anyone who questions its authority, which suggested she had seen and taken on some of the criticism directed at her open letter. However, while she defended her role as a foreign journalist, 'to amplify Afghan voices and mirror their reality into your homes', she failed to include such voices in her article, and she and the New Zealand media fail still to understand the importance of the people of Afghanistan *telling their own stories*.

This perpetuates the liberation narrative and the problem identified by Rafia in that, 'When news about Afghanistan does manage to break through this Western apathy, it usually involves Westerners themselves (Zakaria, 2022). To counter this, we need a narrative characterised by diversity and solidarity, that builds up and builds on the voices, experiences and wisdom of Māori and indigenous, minorities and immigrants.

Notes

1. On 7 May 2022, Taliban officials announced a crackdown with women and girls being expected to stay home. If they did venture out, cover up in encompassing loose clothing that only revealed their eyes—preferably, a burka, reported National Public Radio (NPR) News. (Hadid, 2022). Women on TV were required to at least wear masks, if not veils, to cover their faces, and in a protest dubbed #FreeHerFace on social media, men on Tolo News also wore masks in solidarity with their female colleagues (Joya, 2022).
2. On 27 April 2022 the High Court ruled that MIQ unjustifiably breached New Zealanders' rights from September to December 2021. Former COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins apologised to Charlotte Bellis, but said this did not extend to the government's MIQ system generally.—Bellis apology doesn't mean MIQ unjustified, says Hipkins (2022, June 22). Retrieved from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/469597/bellis-apology-doesn-t-mean-miq-unjustified-hipkins>

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