

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



April 11, 2018

Advancing Gender Equality in Afghanistan

After 17 years of setting the Taliban regime and establishing a democratic governance system in Afghanistan, violence against women is still endemic in our country due to a climate of impunity and weak state action. Discriminatory legislation and a dysfunctional criminal justice system have contributed vastly to put women at grave risk in Afghanistan. Women are one of the main targets of the extremist terrorist groups that gender oppression tops their overt agenda of expanding violent extremism across the country, the region and beyond. Women's security is especially alarming in the Helmand, Kunduz, and other areas that the terrorist armed groups and illegal armed groups operate freely due to absence of rule of law or weak rule of law. It is a common issue to hear of killing or tutoring of women in Afghanistan; an issue that usually is not addressed due by the rule of law and justice institutions.

Women and other minority social groups have been the principal victims of state policies in Afghanistan. After the Taliban regime was toppled, there has been some progress in Afghanistan, specifically through progressive legislation. However, the best laws will only provide little protection as long as the social attitudes and perceptions toward women remain biased, and police is not capable to or is not held accountable for investigating gender based crimes, and the judiciary fails to give justice to women survivors of violence and either the discriminatory laws remain in place or anti-discriminatory laws just remain on the papers.

The National Unity Government has taken some specific measures in terms of protecting and empowering women; these include taking legislative and administrative steps in this regard. However, most of the government policies remain on paper or are implemented partially. Full protection of women in Afghanistan requires to end institutionalized violence and discrimination against them, including removing unjust laws, countering extremist threats across Afghanistan and especially in the remote areas. And involving women and including their perspectives in development of state policies that directly affect women, and developing practical strategies to protect them against violent extremist groups and domestic violence.

The government of Afghanistan constitutional obligation and international commitments, calls it to take specific measures to ensure the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); The NUG has pledged the nation and international community to combat gender inequality and take all the necessary measures to remove such barriers to women's empowerment in Afghanistan. Eliminating discriminatory legislation and practices and enforcing laws that protect women is the sole responsibility of the government. And it challenges that they have access to a gender-responsive police and courts, in order to end the impunity that promotes violence against women in the country.

Women's rights violations is widespread in the country and it is alarming in the certain parts of the country including the remote areas or the areas where the terrorist armed groups are present. In these areas women are more subjected to discrimination, militant violence, religious extremism and sexual violence. Every and then, militants target women's rights activists, political leaders and development workers without consequences and even they are captured and not punished dully. In many parts of Afghanistan, informal justice mechanisms are widely practiced, which are also highly discriminatory toward women inherently. At the same time, the government's military operations, in some cases have further aggravated the challenges women face in the conflict zones that requires the government to reconsider its operations policies in order to ensure women protection in the context of military operations as well.

On the other hand, research findings show that women's meaningful presence in policy decision making, including political and economic participation, is central to sustainable reform in any country. As a result, Afghanistan has to invest in the women empowerment and reflect their priorities in all government policies, including counter-insurgency, peacebuilding and administrative reform efforts. Yet, giving women equal access to resources and equal opportunities is not enough, but the government also should give them the means and tools in order to benefit from equality mechanisms that have put in place for them. To ensure this, the government needs to ensure gender equity, a mechanism that realizes the fairness in the way women and men are treated in a given context. As women have a lower status in our society they need gender equity to redress this inequality in order to enable them to take advantage of the opportunities provided to them. As a result, gender equity is vital to achieve gender equality in our society.

Violence against women is one of the main challenges to the Afghan government. It not only shall put in place practical women protection policies but more importantly than that is to ensure they are implemented indiscriminately. Further, including women in policy making decisions and ensuring their participation in political and economic decision making processes will improve the overall outcomes of these processes. And it can contribute to closing the gender gap in Afghanistan.

Pak-Afghan Relations- Time to Break the Ice

By Dr. Hussain Yasa

On Friday, April 06, 2018 Pak Premier had a full day visit to Kabul where in addition to the President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, he met Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, Abdur Rab Rasool Sayyaf, Mohammad Karim Khalili and Hamid Gilani. Undoubtedly, the meetings with such leading Afghan stakeholders from various ethnicities show a fair degree of realization on the part of Pakistani establishment and increased desire of Pakistani government in helping Afghanistan resolving its internal issues which are barricading both the countries to excel in their relationship.

Although, the recent visit of Pakistan's Premier Shahid Khaqan Abbasi to Kabul, like always, is treated on the fairway of positive optimism in contributing towards lasting solution for Afghan political problems – the persisting mutual stalemate on multiple fronts are still made on the cheap for Afghans in particular. Both, the political narrative on Pakistan's side and rampant anti-Pakistani sentiments on Afghan side, breed to distrust between both the states that demands much more than such occasional political showoffs by the heads of states for bringing both the nations in the fold of regional cooperation interdependence.

However, the fact that issues of peace and security remained atop of agenda on both side, both heads of states, according to the Afghan Presidential Palace, also focused on how to materialize seven key principles leading to finalize Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity. As sign of good gesture, ahead of his visit Pakistani Premier Abbasi also gifted Afghan government with 40,000 tons of wheat for Afghan people and promised to further ease regulatory duty on Afghan goods exports in Pakistan.

While both sides underlined the importance of peace and cooperation, Pakistan vowed to support an Afghan led and owned Peace Process by all means available. Taliban were again invited to positively respond to the call of peace, lay down their arms and join in to promote negotiated peace as a political entity rather than a militant group. Insofar, Taliban has observed silence in response, instead, vow to avenge the attack of Dasht-e Archi, Kunduz, which caused Taliban the death of many of its field commanders. The attack was carried out by the Afghan Forces on Monday April 02, 2018.

Bones of Contention

The prevailing soft tone and joint commitment towards peaceful settlement of Afghan deadlock, there are always issues discussed mutually without clear and well defined outlines.

Three out of seven issues discussed in Pak-Afghan dialogue during PM Abbasi's visit, deals with the border issue and cross border activities of unwanted elements from both sides. Afghan press release reported both sides agreement on the issue and reassured that they would undertake actions against fugitive and rogue elements posing security threats to either side. Both countries agreed to avoid territorial and aerial violations of each other's territory and would not allow their soils to be used by any country, network, group or individuals for anti-state activities.

In this context the followings could be thought provoking points,

1. Since last couple of years, instead of a shared and joined mechanism to fight the same menace, both countries wasted time and money to play counter blame game for harboring anti-state elements. The only beneficiary of this lack of coordination between the two effected countries has been the terrorist elements on both sides.

No doubt that there are shortcomings on both sides which is natural in dealing with such a challenge which is a threat still strategic in nature for the region in particular for Afghanistan where in spite of the presence of US led coalition with huge resources it controls a reasonable portion of territory and the graph of violence has been remained on its hike.

2. The second issue is the definition of border which differs from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Kabul has been reluctant to call the Durand line as the official border between the two countries and matters that concerned the Pashtuns of Pakistan remains the area of their interests. No doubt cultural and intra community communication between the Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns are normal but ambition beyond that is not only against the international norms but also could be dangerous in nature for Afghan peace and prosperity. The quote from ... a famous hard-liner Pashtun Nationalist based in Kabul that Pakistan is an artificial country; they copied religion from Saudi Arabia, culture from India and soil from Afghanistan, is not helpful rather may provoke certain circles in Pakistan.

In this regard the issue of sudden rise of "Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)" in Pashtun dominated Pakistani areas could be a good case in point. The Pashtun Ethno-centric circle of Afghanistan as well as the President Ghani himself enthusiastically became involved with this issue in support of PTM. Although it is still a big question that what really is it? Is it really an indigenous uprising against the status quo in Pakistani Pashtun society suffering from a lengthy wave of violence since the last four decades? Or a natural revolt against the tradition Pashtun nationalist and religious parties who have been unable to deliver for decades and involved in corruption?

Any role or support from the state or non-state actors or even invisible forces in Afghanistan for PTM to engage Pakistani establishment could further complicate the already unsmooth relations with the immediate neighbor.

3. The last but not the least issue which is raised in the press release is the probable interference of a third party or countries from the soil of one country against the other. It is undeniable fact that some areas around the Pak-Afghan borders (so called Durand Line) being used by the terrorist elements against both countries which can't be curb by unilateral efforts and will remain as a problem for sometimes but intentionally and systematic plan to sabotage the affairs may have grave consequences. In this regard both neighbors need to address their legitimate concerns. In particular, Afghanistan where the multiple actors with different approach persuading different interests.

The importance of the Pak-Afghan mutual relations was also acknowledged by Binlali Yildirim, the Turkish Prime Minister on Sunday April 08, 2018. During visit to Kabul in a joint press conference with Abdullah Abdullah, the Afghan Chief Executive, he supported the improving Pak-Afghan relations and extended further assistance to through a trilateral forum.

Turkey is an important regional player and has the capacity to be a useful bridge among the regional countries. Afghanistan and Pakistan should get the best advantage of this capacity of Turkey.

It is hope that for the sake of peace and stability of the region and prosperity of both nations, the Pak-Afghan statesmen will start a new chapter in bilateral relations.

Dr. Hussain Yasa is the founder of Afghanistan Group of Newspapers and currently is the coordinator of Munich Process.

The Significance of Intellectuals

By Dilawar Sherzai

Through most part of history, the intellectuals and writers have not been given their due position and respect. It can be observed that during the monarchies and aristocratic regimes the poets and writers were given rewards and gifts but they were meant to display the magnificence of the kings and the rulers and to pay for the unwarranted approbation they would receive in the works of those poets and writers, not to pay them what they deserved as the reward for their work on truth and reality.

In contemporary era, it can be observed that the values of the commodities are assessed as per their appearance and external worth. People only see the material benefits they can gain from them. And they appear to be very swift in order to gain such benefits. In such a scenario it is really tough for them to develop any sort of interest for poetic thoughts and philosophical deliberations. If they have the authority, they will definitely pronounce thinking and inquisitiveness to learn as crimes – crimes that have no other punishment except death. It has to happen in a society where, though, philosophy and literature have some sort of respect but they do not have the aptitude to fulfill the requirements of the society.

In the modern technological and scientific world, people do not find any achievement of philosophy and literature, as they are not directly involved in inventions and discoveries. They do not seem to need any poet or philosopher in their routines and daily activities; thus, it is not possible for them to appreciate their significance and their status.

Nevertheless, this sort of thinking is not only business-oriented but at the same time it is logically unfitting. If everything in the society is measured as per their capacity to fulfill the temporary material benefit, the whole system of the society would collapse and the whole world would become nothing else except a market, where people can only sell and buy commodities. Though, the world has almost been turned into a market, there is still some respect for values and ethics, which can be a ray of hope in complete darkness. The most tragic and unfortunate aspect of this sort of thinking is that it does not try to see the actual reasons of the incidents and happenings. The whole society, based on the same sort of thinking, starts accepting the material advancements as miracles and tends to neglect all those pillars on which the building of all these advancements is placed. If the modern technological and scientific era is analyzed, there would be few ideas of some thinkers and few thoughts of certain intellectuals and today's material-

istic advancement is based on the same ideas and thoughts.

It has to be understood that the material advancement itself is not an achievement; rather it is a source to satiate the psychological and spiritual thirst. While, the wisdom and the experience, which are shared through philosophy and literature, are the real achievements – the real creativity of human capacities. And, on the other hand, the attitude of the society towards such wisdom and experience is nothing more than a bad joke. And a bad joke can never be considered a solution to the issues and problems of life.

Our societies really need intellectuals. It is really weird to note that the intellectuals are totally dependent on society and their favors, whereas, the society should depend on them and seek their favors for proper guidance. If there is any relation between the real beauty in nature and the society, it is because of the intellectuals. If there is no intellectual in a society, such a society is really orphan, as far as aesthetic sense and spiritual guidance is concerned. It is really important that in a society the intellectuals must have the authority to set the standards; only then the society can have balanced development and advancement. The advancement then would not be limited only to the materialistic aspects but would also include the emotional and the aesthetic aspects of life.

Nonetheless, it is also important to understand: "Who are the real intellectuals?" Whether, the ones in our society whose most dominant quality is their ignorance and self-praise are the intellectuals? As a matter of fact, the definition and title of intellectual has become very cheap. Every other person claims to be intellectual, poet or critic. Therefore, poetry and literature have no credibility left within them. They have become a joke though they should be the most reputable part of the culture, which is their true status.

Every profession needs some sort of practice and hard work. Even a beggar has to practice and then he is able to earn money; otherwise, he won't be able to earn even a penny. However, our poets can be the authors of tens of books and poetry collections without even reading a single book. With such a setting how would it be possible to face the society and ask for status, respect and proper position? Definitely, it is a fact that the intellectuals and writers must have the most reputable status in the society; however, have they really satisfied the requirements of being the real intellectuals and have they proved themselves deserving enough for such eminent position?

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