

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



August 29, 2016

## Controversy over Electoral Reform

Election is a key element in democratic systems and people have the right to elect their president and representatives through their suffrage. Democracy without the will of nation and their right to vote is meaningless. Since democracy is simply defined as "government of the people, for the people and by the people", nations' will play a significant role in democratic states. Parliament, which is the beating heart of democracy, is supposed to embody nations' determination and its members are to be selected via transparent, secret, public and free election.

Following the fall of the Taliban's regime, Afghanistan was redirected to democratization. The Constitution of Afghanistan - which entitles the individuals to exercise their natural rights and liberty and recognizes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and International Charters - was approved and national sovereignty belonged to the nation "manifested directly and through its elected representatives." Moreover, presidential and provincial elections were conducted and Afghan men and women flocked to ballot boxes for electing their president and representatives - this marked a milestone in the history of Afghanistan.

Since the nation took part in building state for the first time, they celebrated the festival of democracy (election) and hoped that democracy would be a panacea for their chronic wound, bleeding as a result of war and violence that continued for decades. Afghan women embraced freedom and equal rights with men. During the first presidential election a number of women got entry into the parliament. The process of democratization seemed to move rapidly and women took active parts in social and political activities. Patriarchal system and sexual discrimination, which held strong sway during the Taliban's regime, were abolished by new law.

However, the unbounded hope of Afghan people did not last long as the process of democratization encountered barriers from the state machinery. The transparency of election slowed down and a sense of mistrust emerged between state and nation. Political parties exploited their influence and disturbed the transparent flow of the election. The Constitution was violated by political figures during campaigns and elections and the independence of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) was put under question, mainly during the 2014 presidential election as Muhammad Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah were involved in disagreement over the outcome of election and the IEC failed to announce the final result. Subsequently, Abdullah and Ghani negotiated a political agreement and formed National Unity Government (NUG). A central part in the negotiation was a commitment to electoral reform. After a protracted disagreement between them on who should lead the reform portfolio and what should be its composition and authorities, the NUG finally formed the Special Electoral Reform Commission (SERC) as prescribed in the political agreement to review and propose reforms to electoral structures and laws. Since then, the reform was slow and unsteady, though under hot discussions.

In his recent statement, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr. Abdullah said one of the important points of the political agreement on the national unity government was electoral reform. According to him, the way for the Wolesi Jirga and district council elections had been opened after the cabinet approval of the draft election law.

The cabinet approved the draft, underlining the imperative of a single-seat system at polling stations. He further added, "Another important pledge of the government is convening a Loya Jirga (National Grand Assembly) but the time is not right for it because of the upcoming elections. We hope the Jirga will be held after the elections." Reportedly, the cabinet has approved "in principle" a draft election law, underlining the imperative of a single-seat system at polling stations for the upcoming Wolesi Jirga polls. A statement from the Presidential Palace said that Ghani had tasked his second deputy Sarwar Danish with finalizing the draft law keeping in view cabinet suggestions.

In past presidential elections, there was only one polling station in the entire country. In parliamentary polls, each province had its own polling station and the number of representatives each province could elect was from 2 to 33 - proportional to its population. In short, out of 249 seats, 239 seats were divided among the provinces and 10 others were considered for nomads. However, under the single-seat election system, the polling stations will be divided into 249 and each station will be allowed to send only one representative to the parliament. At each polling station, votes are cast only for candidates from the relevant area.

Currently, the issue of "single-seat election" has triggered anxiety among the people since the country is not ripe for it and it will place great hurdle for women, who are to form 25% in parliament. Dividing polling stations into 249 parts seems backbreaking financially for a country which suffers from economic recession and will minimize the chance of women to gain enough votes in such minute stations. However, if the single-seat election be considered only for men, as some political pundits believe, elections will be held twice for men and women, which will be more costly. According to public beliefs, a single-seat election will not be suitable for Afghanistan and the electoral reforms should be done in accordance with the status quo so that it alleviates the challenges rather than aggravating them.

## Unfortunate Consequence of Child Hunger

By Muhammad Zahir Akbari

Chronic child hunger caused epidemic of behavior problems and learning disorders in our children both schools, Universities and communities. While treatment of these hidden challenges is very costly for our society - not only in terms of the financial cost, but also in terms of emotional cost on the future generation. No attention is focused on diet and nutrition for the treatment and prevention of these tragic conditions in Afghanistan! Social and political daily occurrence caused to forget some fundamental topics, and discussions on the mental and emotional development of children ignore the fact that brain is a very important organ of the body, and just like every other organ of the body, it requires good nutrition. And when we talk about the brain, we also need to talk about the second brain, the small intestine, where digestion and assimilation take place. The brain looks like guts, and they have similar interrelated effects in many ways. For example, there are just as many nerve cells in the gut as there are in the brain, and most of the nerve cells in the gut connect with the brain. So, the nutritional requirements of brain and guts need to be considered together when we talk about emotional and mental health of our children, the future of Afghanistan. And we need to have this conversation very soon because we are facing an incredible crisis, the likes of which we have never seen before in the history of mankind. Some children are damaged so profoundly that they cannot even make emotional contact with their parents and their siblings. And also we have thousands of children who are retarded due to iodine deficiencies and malnourishment. But these retarded individuals could express emotions. Today the horrible condition called autism along with other manifestation of brain starvation such as learning disorders, mental problems, and inability to concentrate behavior problems, violence, addiction and mental retardation threaten the fabric of our culture.

Research shows that many children who do not have enough to eat wind up with diminished capacity to understand and learn. Quality of food and certain nutrients such as vitamins A, D, B12 and K2 are the most critical factors for the brain to form, to develop and to function properly, for good mental health and for nervous system to function normally, and deficiencies manifest as psychiatric disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive behavior, irrational anger, depression, manic depression, Alzheimer's and dementia. And where do we get these nutrients? Do we get them from vegetable oils? No, do we get them from imported chemicals? No, do we get them from margarine? Only a little bit of synthetic vitamin A added to the margarine. We get them from the fat of grass-fed animals - the very food that are disappearing from our daily food items. Also, scarcity of nutrients such as iron and iodine can impair cognitive and motor development, and these effects are

often irreversible. Iodine deficiency can lead to enlargement of the thyroid and irreparable mental retardation in infants and children whose mothers were iodine deficient during pregnancy. Moreover, chlorine, folic acid, and zinc, to name just a few - have been linked specifically to early brain functioning.

The deeper burning effects of most nutrient shortages depend on the extent and duration of the shortage, and in many cases, the brain's need for a particular nutrient changes throughout its development. Early shortages can reduce cell production; later shortages can affect cell size and complexity. Nutrient deficits also affect the complex chemical processes of the brain and can lead to less efficient communication between brain cells.

Close to a billion people - one-eighth of the world's population - still live in hunger. Each year 2 million children die through malnutrition. This is happening at a time when doctors in some countries are warning of the spread of obesity; even go so far as their estimated one billion dogs are prioritized than starving innocent children throughout the world and they have better access to food, health and life facilities. In fact, there are genuinely sufficient resources on the earth to ensure that no one, nowhere, at no time, should go hungry. The numbers of hungers are as many as the number of oppressing rulers.

It is time now that we must act together, as a united people for the birth of a new Afghanistan and new world. Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all. Let there be work, bread, water for all. Thousands of neighbors go to bed hungry. It may be our child's schoolmate who is undernourished and has difficulty learning on an empty stomach due to unemployment. Or it could be our co-worker, a mother who lost her husband. Perhaps it's an elderly neighbor who has to make a decision whether to delay filling a prescription or buying groceries. Eventually, having happy, healthy and well-nourished children depend to having enough, healthy and secure food. We will need to combat poverty, support our natural livestock, train food experts and raise mass awareness. Citizens must be aware that the burning consequences of malnourishments are mentally retarded, unhealthy and poor generation. They must know that pregnancy and infancy are important periods for the formation of the brain, laying the foundation for the development of cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional skills throughout childhood and adulthood. Children with restricted development of these skills during early life are at risk for later neuropsychological problems, poor school achievement, early school dropout, low-skilled employment, and poor care of their own children, thus contributing to the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

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## Vaccines for an Aging Population

By Melvin Sanicas

The world's population is getting bigger - and older. With the elderly increasingly close to outnumbering their younger counterparts - by 2050, there will be nearly three times more people aged 65 and above than people under four years old - many fear that the burden on government budgets, health-care systems, and economies will become untenable. But there is something we can do to ease that burden: improve the health of the elderly.

As we age, our bodies undergo complex changes that, among other things, progressively weaken our ability to respond to infections and develop immunity (this is called immunosenescence). That is why diseases in older adults tend to be more severe, with a greater impact on quality of life, disability, and mortality, than the same diseases in younger patients.

Put simply, aging adults' immune systems need backup. That is where vaccines come in.

Vaccines are most often discussed with regard to young children, who should receive a series of inoculations against childhood illnesses like measles and polio. Childhood vaccinations are one of the greatest medical success stories of the twentieth century, not least because of so-called herd immunity (the indirect protection of entire communities, including those who cannot be immunized for reasons like illness or age, by vaccinating most of their members). Nothing prohibits adults from taking advantage of the same science. In fact, they would reap far-reaching benefits - including the protection of their family and neighbors - from doing so. Yet few actually do.

Adults need to understand that some of the more common infections to which they are vulnerable are vaccine-preventable. Consider shingles, an infection that can affect anyone who has had chicken pox in their lifetime (that is, 95% of adults worldwide). In the United States, roughly one-third of the population will get shingles at some point in their lives.

A case of shingles may be benign and relatively bearable for someone in his or her thirties. But the disease is far more common among people aged 50 and above - for whom it can be extremely painful. Older adults with shingles may experience chronic discomfort and serious complications that make it difficult to sleep, leave the house, or carry out daily activities. If they have been vaccinated - the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends getting vaccinated at age 60 - they can avoid this painful, sometimes debilitating, condition. Influenza is another vaccine-preventable disease. While the influenza virus can cause disease in people of all ages, the elderly - those 65 and above - are disproportionately affected, in terms of both death and hospitalization, with the oldest being at the greatest risk. The problem is that older people are more likely to suffer from one or more underlying health conditions, such as heart disease or diabetes. As a result, they are also more

likely to experience more severe influenza-related complications. Systematic analyses among elderly populations found influenza vaccination - which must be delivered annually, to account for constantly emerging new strains - to be not only successful in protecting people from contracting influenza, but also cost-effective.

The list does not end there. Diphtheria, caused by the aerobic gram-positive bacterium *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*, is an acute, toxin-mediated disease that can manifest as an upper respiratory tract infection or a skin infection. Most complications of diphtheria - such as myocarditis (inflammation of the middle layer of the heart) and neuritis (inflammation of a peripheral nerve or nerves) - are attributable to the effects of the toxin. The overall fatality rate is 5-10%, with higher death rates among people younger than five and older than 40. Tetanus, commonly known as "lockjaw," is a bacterial disease that affects the nervous system, causing painful tightening of muscles throughout the body. It does not lead to a very high number of deaths among the elderly; but, given that it is preventable, any number higher than zero is unacceptable.

Then there is pertussis. We do not know precisely the extent to which it affects the elderly, because the disease is badly underdiagnosed and underreported in all age groups. But the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices thinks that the burden of disease is at least 100 times greater than currently reported.

The Tdap vaccine, which protects adults from diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis, could reduce this burden considerably. Another vaccine, called Td, protects against tetanus and diphtheria, but not pertussis. A Td booster should be given every ten years.

Finally, there is pneumococcal disease, a bacterial infection caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, which can cause pneumonia, meningitis, or bloodstream infection (sepsis). Depending on which complications occur, symptoms may include cough, abrupt onset of fever, chest pain, chills, shortness of breath, stiff neck, disorientation, and sensitivity to light.

Pneumococcal disease can lead to brain damage, deafness, tissue damage (potentially even requiring the amputation of limbs), and death. In the US alone, pneumococcal pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and meningitis kill tens of thousands of people each year, including 18,000 adults aged 65 years and above. Two main types of pneumococcal vaccine available for older adults - the 23-valent pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (PPV23) and the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV13) - could ameliorate the situation. Thanks to child immunization programs, fewer children die each year from vaccine-preventable diseases. A similar, concentrated effort is now needed to produce similar benefits for adults, especially the elderly. By viewing vaccination as a lifelong priority, we can help people remain active and productive for as long as possible, benefiting them, their communities, and the world. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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