

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



August 30, 2015

## Afghanistan-Turkmenistan: Shifted From Friendly to Brotherly Ties

Afghanistan and Turkmenistan have been good neighbors and friend for couple of years. Turkmenistan is an old friend of Afghanistan and we have historic and cultural ties between us. Turkmenistan is one of the world's fastest-growing economies and Afghanistan can draw in enormous riches from this potential neighbor. Earlier two premiers, affirmed to increase the volume of bilateral trade between the two neighbors to double of current stand point which is \$1 billion.

Formerly, Turkmen, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow paid a state visit to Afghanistan where he was hailed by president Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah. The visit assures significant importance cementing the bilateral relation. The two premiers held wide-ranging discussions on a number of key topics including major economic projects and further expansion of trade, transit and economic development security issues and commercial ties. Later the two premiers signed in at least five accords ranging from education to energy supply at the Presidential Palace in Kabul. The ceremony was attended by high-ranking government officials from both countries. Turkmenistan - besides expanding the volume of exports to Afghanistan - is also willing to invest in a number of key projects in the country such as the establishment of railway links, expanding energy export and establishment oil and gas pipelines to Aqina port, Ghani.

Afghanistan at present is facing extreme power shortages. It largely relies on neighboring countries for its power needs. It was worth meeting the Turkmen president announced to increase electricity supply to Afghanistan five-fold. The Turkmen premier afforded willingness to export 500 megawatts of power to Afghanistan. It's indeed a great step ahead, to cope with increasing power demand. Earlier the Turkmen head of the state, hinted plans to construct maternity home in Torghondi district, an orphanage in Jawzjan and two mosques in Aqina and Andkhoi.

The central Asians and South Asians countries bridged via roads and rails facilitate the fastest business between these countries; it in fact opens the new avenues to financial development. President, Ghani stressed a railway line between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries including China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Turkmenistan. He believed such a track would pave the ground for spurring regional trade. The roads connecting the neighboring countries facilitate the export and import goods from and into the said countries. Afghanistan imports over \$1 billion USD worth of goods from Turkmenistan annually. A railway connecting Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan (TAT) is under construction which is said to be completed by beginning of next year. This was a key project for the three countries and when complete will boast an overall length of 400km. The TAT railway will cost an estimated \$1.5 to 2 billion USD and is being developed as part of the Central Asia Regional Cooperation Program. It is primarily financed by the Asian Development Bank, which has allocated \$350 million to Afghanistan for its section.

Turkmenistan owes the world fourth largest reserves of natural gas resource and substantial oil reserves. The premier Berdimuhamedow asserted willingness to help implement the gas pipeline project in addition to railway link. Earlier, the leaders of, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India agreed to import gas from Turkmenistan to meet their domestic and industrial needs. This project accorded by four countries is known as TAPI gas project. The shaky relationship between some of aforesaid countries is serving the undesirable delay. Afghanistan alone can benefit from similar bilateral import provided the financial assistance is guaranteed by any monetary schemes.

Turkmenistan is Afghanistan's major economic and transit partner in the region. It is said that the implementation of the economic projects between the two countries will change Turkmenistan into one of Afghanistan's major economic partners in the region. Carpet industry was deemed as giant industry of Afghanistan. Carpet was one of Afghanistan's major export products and up to 1.6 million Afghan populations is engaged with this occupation. The decade long conflict defected this very industry to the worst. Turkmenistan can play decisive role in revival of this industry bringing large number of people back to business.

The unchecked production and smuggling of opium is rendered an ill affecting the neighboring countries. Afghanistan must revisit to tighten surveillance and keep a check to restrain mass production and smuggling of opium. Despite a good signs of political and financial progress, the illicit opium trade might affect the brotherly relation of the two countries. Afghanistan is responsible for more than 90 percent of the world's illicit opium production, and 15 percent of the opiates produced in Afghanistan are smuggled through Central Asia on their way to Russia, Eastern Europe, and China. Furthermore, 20 percent of Afghan heroin, which accounts for more than 90 percent of world supply, is trafficked through Central Asia. However, because of the closed nature of Turkmenistan's society, it is not known how widespread drug abuse and drug trafficking is there. Another serious problem Afghanistan is passing through is insurgency and terrorism that not only disturb the neighboring countries but also the entire region. The president of Turkmenistan consciously offered its commitment helping the peace talks should continue until meeting its fate. It promised the country jointly fight against drug smuggling and terrorism.

Maintaining good and trustworthy relation with all countries must feature a significant part of its foreign policy. The incumbent government must prioritize, establishing and continuing a balance relationship with the countries both regional and extra-regional, given it encompasses more gains than harms. It must be remembered a strong cooperation for sustainable and unchangeable relation of countries are pivotal. Keeping reliable neighborly relation will serve the people of countries bring development, sustainable stability and harmony in the region.

# The Need for Comprehensive Electoral Reforms

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

With the electoral reforms commission working on recommendations for reforms to Afghanistan's electoral system, many stakeholders of the Afghan politics expect the reforms commission and the National Unity Government to bring genuine reforms to the electoral system including the two main election bodies responsible for holding and overseeing the elections. However, uneasy with the reforms process and worried about implications of the process for the two electoral bodies, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) has been expressing concerns over the reforms specifically concerned with the mandate and authority of the two election bodies. The chairman of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), Ahmad Yusuf Nuristani, has urged the government to prepare the ground for the parliamentary and provincial councils' elections, stressing that the government should keep the process out of political games. At a press conference, IEC chairman stressed that the setting a date for the upcoming parliamentary elections is the authority of the commission and no other agency has the right to illegally intervene in the matter.

The statements made by the IEC head is a tacit reference to the electoral reforms commission which is working extensively on proposed recommendations for reforming the electoral system. The IEC chairman also said that the government should support the IEC's decision on the election date and prevent "irresponsible statements from individuals and groups". This is while the reforms commission has not rule out the possibility of providing recommendations to the structures of the IEC and Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) and the current commissioners of the two electoral bodies. In the meantime, some election monitoring organizations have urged the reforms commission to first address the status of the current commissioners and members of the IEC and ECC. The election monitoring groups and many political groups believe that any genuine reform of the country's electoral system without reforms to the structure and members of the two bodies would be imperfect.

The IEC and ECC played controversial roles in holding and monitoring the last year presidential elections. The two election bodies were the main authorities for holding safe and sound elections that could produce a legitimate president. However, Afghanistan had one of the worst elections of the world that triggered a potential political crisis in the country. The national process which was supposed to facilitate the first ever transfer of power in Afghanistan was marred by widespread rigging. The IEC and ECC were blamed for electoral mismanagements and holding a fraudulent election. The two commissions are widely criticized for taking side in the elections and helping widespread rigging of the presidential elections. Earlier, some MPs in the Wolesi Jirga and Meshrano Jirga of the National Assembly demanded trial of the members of the two commissions on charges of rigging the elections.

Given the flawed leadership of the presidential elections by the IEC and ECC, the reforms commission should not be indifferent to the two crucial agencies that are responsible for holding and overseeing safe and sound

elections. Afghanistan cannot afford another mismanagement of the national process and misuse of authority by members of the two election bodies. Any changes to the country's electoral system need to include reforms to the structures and composition of the commissions. The IEC and ECC should be in some way accountable regarding management of the election process and soundness and legitimacy of the election outcomes. The reforms commission needs to propose comprehensive recommendations for reforming the electoral system and the responsible bodies. The recommendations should include substantial measures for dismissal and trial of commissioners who are believed to have helped rigging the last year presidential elections. The reformed structures and composition of the two commissions should ensure enhanced oversight and monitoring of electoral management. In order to achieve this, the commissioners of the two commissions should be directly accountable to the parliament.

The leaders of the National Unity Government need to commit to bringing real and substantial reforms to the electoral system including the IEC and ECC. Any flawed outcome from the electoral reforms process would be a receipt for further disasters for the country in the future. It will set the ground for interminable political crises stemming from national elections. Therefore, the government needs to bring about a far-reaching consensus among the stakeholders of the Afghan politics over the reforms process and the final outcome of the process. Only through a consensus the government would be able to bring the crucial reforms acceptable and justified for all major political trends. The National Unity Government needs to heed the recommendations of the electoral reforms commission and implement the recommendations in full to bring real reforms to the electoral system. Politicization of the process will not lead to creating transparent and accountable election commissions. So far the process has been suffering from power struggles between the leaders of the National Unity Government, leaving the process in a stalemate for months. Despite some flaws to the composition and role of the reforms commission, the formation of the reforms commission was a major step forward. While its legitimate is shaky, the government should beware of another major setback in creating sound electoral procedures and leading transparent and fair elections. The date for the upcoming parliamentary elections should be set as soon as possible by the government and based on the recommendations of the reforms commission. The remarks made by IEC head Yusuf Nuristani also echo the legitimate calls from various political parties and other institutions to the government to set a timeline for the upcoming parliamentary elections. The parliamentary election is already passed its due date which is a gross violation of the constitution. The election bodies need to have sufficient time for making preparations for the parliamentary elections. It will take months for the election bodies to prepare for the elections. Given the security challenges and the problems with registration of voters, the challenges ahead of the preparations for the parliamentary elections would be enormous. The government and the election bodies need to waste no time in setting a date and starting preparations for the parliamentary elections.

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## Media Plights Needs Redress

By Asmatyari

Throughout human history, man aren't speak or preferred observing silence even if the authoritarian government exercised entirely unjust deeds. The masses rendered helpless to a degree that they had to deem an entirely ill-conduct of ruling class, licit. The disclosure of any truth that could harm the so-called self-defined reputation of ruling elites, led to disreputable consequences. World of regards to democracy that enshrined the right to free speech, an uncontested democratic right, making the government accountable for every deed they undertake. The media therefore is crucial organ of democratic society, keeping the citizen informed about every development taking place in governmental avenues.

It was earlier in an afternoon of an unfortunate day when a journalist Bezhan Barnawej, the Editor in Chief of Bidar Daily stabbed and left bleeds indefinitely by unknown assailants in Mazar-e-Sharif, the capital city of northern Balkh province. The unknown assailant particularized to be hitherto missing and the concerned officials are doing their best to uncover the missing assailants. Every journalist will have to face the consequences if found disclosing the harms of public officials or militants.

This piece of land transitioning towards vibrant democracy intervene certain degree of restraints -including violence and intimidation from both state and non-state actors. Reportedly, most cases of violence against journalists involved the Taliban, government employees and officials of private organizations, but rarely average Afghans. The public official, Taliban, tribal lords demanding censored news, favoring their deep rooted interests irrespective of their legitimacy regarded, serve a primary reason making journalists vulnerable to violence and endless threats.

In Afghanistan, media personnel often have to carry out their duties in an extremely precarious ambience. The variant functional groups owing variant interests try hard to avow their influence and strive earning the favor of media person by physical might. Hence journalists must act with promptness and caution, balancing their professional duties with awareness about when to pull back when things spiral out of control. In this piece of land numerous journalists have been killed in the line of their duties. Though, press censorship is not popular term -the great degree of restraint and severe and callous treatment from both state and non-state actors is worth mentioning. Such cold hearted attitudes are occasionally witnessed in states passing through totalitarian, despotic and dysfunctional or paralyzed democratic regimes. The functioning of media bodies, foreign or local, becoming targets for reprisal for their work as journalists might get worsened if appropriate actions are not taken.

In the latest report of Reporters without Borders (RWB)/Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) assert Taliban have been intensifying armed attacks on civilians and openly threatening freedom of information despite countries such as the United States, Iran, Norway and Qatar are "normalizing" their relations with the Taliban and certain Afghan politicians

are sitting with them at the negotiating table. Relying to the greatest on peace talks the international community must take a tangible stand conditioning it with promotion of democratic values -freedom of information is one of well held value. It is regretting subsequent to former wave of consecutive attacks none of the partner in peace talks warned Taliban their efforts to restraint freedom of speech might derail the efforts for peace talks.

Agreeably, the recent study by the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) attributes 72 percent of violence against journalists to government organizations, 12.5 percent of violence by armed insurgent groups for another 12.5 percent by unknown elements and the remaining three percent by local powerful people. According to the study, Afghanistan's western provinces recorded the highest number of incidents of violence against journalists. The violent incidents included one murder, four cases of assault, 19 incidents of beatings, two detentions and 13 cases of threats against journalists, the report added. Meanwhile, media supporting agency Nai expressed concerns over what it said was government's restriction on media and called it a threat to the freedom of expression. Its latest study however showed a 43 percent drop in the safety of journalists.

Prior to assuming the office of presidency, President and CEO promised to support the freedom of press. Some measures favoring freedom of information have also been begun which include modifying the access to information law, eliminating the Media Offences Commission, and the planned creation of a media regulatory body under a new media law. This won't suffice unless regulatory bodies to oversee its implementation are set in.

It's appreciable to learn the same time, there have been two key decisions favoring freedom of information in Afghanistan. The parliament adopted a law on access to information. It's to be remembered that any development hindering the smooth-running of media should be revised or the government is to face the consequently. It should be kept in mind, the press is the defender and the protector of the rights and liberties of the people and the government is facilitator. But it can perform this role only if it enjoys freedom in publishing news, views and reporting given there is no restriction on its functioning. It can function effectively only in an open society, where decisions are made in a democratic manner.

It is an irrefutable notion; democracy encompassing all its core values lay to implementation only when customary cultures are substituted with democratic culture. This renders achievable when ground turns richer for such adoption. Nonetheless, the case is otherwise in this piece of land where biases seek sectarian, racial, religious and regional support. Everybody is discriminated on flawed aforesaid grounds. Truth is lies off and falsehood dominates; the list goes on.

The functioning of media bodies, foreign or local, becoming targets for reprisal for their work as journalists might get worsened. The governments must come forth sincerely, addressing the boundless challenges afghan media faces and must not let this very functional organ of society, beleaguer.

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65



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