

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



December 14, 2015

Governance Crisis

Afghanistan's long march towards gradually restoring stability, peace, prosperity and all-round development seems to have halted in tracks. There appears to be continuous degeneration and a steep decline in almost all the aspects and areas in which Afghanistan saw drastic improvement in the early years immediately after the fall of the Taliban. The heady days of early years when a sense of rejuvenation, excitement and overflowing hope for a better tomorrow dominated minds as well as the headlines seem to be over. Uncertainty and a state of dark pessimism have cast a long shadow over the perceptions among both common people and the Afghan intelligentsia alike. Parallel to a rising graph of war, violence and bombings, no one would fail to see the kind of hopelessness and despair that is slowly seeping in. According to the analysts, perhaps, what Afghanistan desperately needs the most and foremost now is getting back that lost sense of optimism, hopefulness and nation-wide momentum for a fresh start that we had in the earlier years but lost along the way as problems mounted.

Many within the international community, including some voices in such Western governments have come to publicly voice deep concern over what they see as a futile military strategy in Afghanistan while civilian efforts aimed at building a viable government have delivered only limited dividends. The NATO mission to Afghanistan moved to defend the organization's and the broader achievements in Afghanistan citing a number of progress areas such as education, healthcare provision, GDP growth, thousands of kilometers of roads and greater women participation in Afghanistan society. While these are indeed solid areas of progress in Afghanistan over the past decade, no one can close eyes to many glaring shortcomings that have come to have deeply negative impacts on Afghanistan of today. In essence, the extent of success or failure of the international community and its Afghan partners should be assessed based on the main indicator of whether or not the government of Afghanistan - as the main vehicle of delivering the international community's will and wishes - has been able to deliver on a minimum of responsibilities that it is supposed to deliver as a government. The yardstick for measurement of Afghanistan's progress should not be eye-catching advertisements of Afghan women and children giggling in newly-built classrooms, but the ability of Afghanistan of today to successfully and progressively manage its own affairs while upholding the values that the international community has fought for in Afghanistan since 2001. The real yardstick for measuring the progress made by Afghanistan should be the question whether the government in Afghanistan has been able to deliver on the most basic and fundamental of all its duties: its responsibility to provide some extent of security and good governance. The real yardstick for measuring the progress made by Afghanistan should be the question whether or not the government has been able to gain and preserve the kind of trust and faith that any successfully functioning government is able to garner from its people. Even on these sets of minimum requirements expected of a functioning government, the performance of the government of Afghanistan is abysmally poor. It is difficult not to miss the sorry state of affairs in the country has steadily been losing its momentum to initiate positive change and as a result, the breakdown in security and governance across Afghanistan is reaching catastrophic levels.

Afghanistan and its government in particular, both ideally and as an inescapable necessity especially after 2015, should be gradually moving towards greater self-reliance and self-sufficiency in terms of how it governs the country especially in the areas of delivering development plans and programs and bringing about inclusive governance. "Inclusive governance", being currently the mantra across the developing world as both a national goal and an increasingly popular public policy imperative, should be the hallmark of governance in Afghanistan of today. Unfortunately, it is not and the government has failed in moving towards this critical policy imperative. Inclusive governance means making not only varied ethnic groups but also communities, and major social groupings direct stakeholders in the process of running their own affairs. The stark reality in Afghanistan of today is a government that is inching farther away from these imperatives and is bent on further concentrating national-level power in hands of yet fewer persons with the decision and policy making being increasingly left to the whims and tastes of a handful of persons.

Saving Afghanistan, restoring normalcy and order, and reversing the tide of failures would be, clearly, a multi-stage long journey. At present, Afghanistan has a government that is heavily concentrated in the center - Kabul - and most of the provincial capitals around the country. Outside these provincial centers and out in districts and villages, there is not much of a functioning government and governance even in those areas which have always been calm and secure from Taliban infiltration. Government offices in these outlying areas might be staffed and salaries disbursed for them on a regular basis but when it comes to actual work, nothing is being done.

Now and on one hand, blowing a new life into the dying veins of this pathetic, non-existent governance is one thing and on the other hand, making the national politics at the center - Kabul - more democratic, efficient, accountable and less authoritarian quite another issue. Afghan leaders, from all ethnicities, just focus all their attention on making the central government in Kabul more inclusive and accountable without paying due attention to the goal of building a nation-wide functioning governmental system. Striving towards making the National Unity Government at the center in Kabul more accountable, efficient and democratic should not come at the cost of losing sight of the over-arching goal of making better the apparatus and system of governance in every province and part of the country.

Condition of Agriculture in Afghanistan!

By Muhammad Rasool Shah

Though Afghanistan is an agricultural country, yet this sector is under intense pressure and the condition is worsening with every passing day. It is a sad fact that an agricultural county depends on other nations for meeting its agricultural needs. The condition of farmer is the worst in the region. In our neighboring countries of Pakistan, India and Iran, the owner of land is usually called 'a landlord' as he earns enough to live like a lord but in Afghanistan, the landowner is in a fix. He is in loss and does not know how to fix this issue.

This year, the condition of farmers in a number of provinces was really helpless and disappointing when they brought their crops in the market. In Helmand, when melons came to market in large numbers, the supply badly surpassed the demand and the result was the plummeting decline in the prices of melons. In some cases, the melons were so cheap that it was not enough to cover the transport expenses from the farm to the market. It was the case in the production of grapes in a number of northern provinces of the country. The crop of grape was good this year and farmers were happy and confident to earn good income but once again, the difference between the supply and demand resulted in the crash of prices and majority of the farmers were not able to cover their expenses. This is not the case of this year only. The same sad story is repeated time and over again. At one hand, when farmers suffer due to the sharp decline in prices, the general consumers also suffer due to the unbelievable rise in prices due to failed crops and resultant difference between supply and demand. At many occasions, when the crops fail and the supply of a crop or fruit does not meet the requirements of the market, the product disappears from the market, resulting in the sharp rise in its price. The concept of failed crops and difference between supply and demand is not a new thing for farmers in every corner of the world but then government and its agencies interfere to maintain the equilibrium. They not only keep the supply and demand stable but also save farmers from losses and the price of a commodity remains stable, thus saving the consumers from high prices. Unfortunately, this concept is invisible in Afghanistan. Our past and present governments have been so busy in their political and other issues that they never thought of the welfare of farmers or general consumers. Rather, both the farmers and general consumers have been left vulnerable to the mercy of those market forces and rich and strong intermediaries who use the flaws in system and get benefitted from the loss of others. The concerned ministries are either inactive or they do not have sufficient potential and workforce to come into action and bring positive changes in this regard. The situation would remain the same until a government comes into power that should give priority to the miseries of both farmers and consumers. In last 14 years of democracy, a number of international donors and international and local NGOs worked for the progress of agriculture in the country but it was like feeding a person with fish and not teaching him how to fish. No doubt, some praise-worthy work has been done in this regard like the water routes have been paved and improved, the water reservoirs have been improved but in general, they all worked for short-term and temporary projects instead of having a long-term scope and ideology. The impacts of this shortsighted approach can be seen almost everywhere. For example, the farmers were provided with free but imported fertilizer but no efforts were made to establish a

factory where fertilizer should be manufactured inside the country. It is the reason why, when the supply of free fertilizer stopped, the farmers were once again at the same point as they were before the project. Millions of dollars were wasted in projects that were meant to benefit a few but the farmers were never in their consideration in launching the project. In the same way, people received free equipment and farming tools of millions of dollars but no effort was made that a competitive market should be established from where our farmers should be able to purchase these things. No actual problems faced by farmers were ever addressed.

The biggest problem faced by our farmers is the lack of an open and competitive market where they should be able to sell their products on reasonable prices. Due to this reason, they are badly exploited by the intermediaries who have made a strong cartel and they always benefit from the loss and helplessness of farmers. It is such a sad fact that the farmer who works the whole year, who provides with all the means of production and who does all the hard work, mostly earns less than those intermediaries who just take products from farmers and hand it over to the shopkeepers or consumers. Until and unless the government does not interfere, the role of intermediaries will remain the same and helpless farmer might not be able to do anything against them.

In a number of countries of the world, government gives special subsidies on agricultural products. Government also announces special tax discounts on products used by farmers in the farm. Similarly, different governments also announce lucrative packages to encourage more and more people to come towards agriculture in an effort to release pressure from urbanization. In Afghanistan, just like other businesses and fields of life, the agriculture is also the victim of the neglect of government and its different organs. High taxes, lack of incentives and discounts and other factors make farming one of the least profitable fields in the country.

Both public and private organs, which are responsible for proper guidance of farmers, are either absent or not working properly as our farmers are unaware of increasing their production, they cannot fight properly with pests, they are not much aware of latest machines and in most cases, they cannot import these machines and tools as taxes and duties are too high. Lack of access to regional and international markets is also a reason that our farmers are earning less than farmers of those countries who have access to these markets. In some cases, our farmers do not have access even to other cities and towns of the country due to unavailability of proper network of roads. Very recently, the network of roads has greatly improved but it is still poor in the far-flung rural areas and the agricultural products get rotten before they reach to the market.

With all these problems, our farmers are left with no other option except to switch to other fields of life. Many of them have moved to cities in search of other business opportunities. In a number of provinces, they have started the lucrative cultivation of opium and addictive drugs as they can earn better from these crops. It will take many decades before we become a successful industrial country but it is easy to work on our already established sector of agriculture and in this regard, the biggest responsibility lies on the shoulders of government to bring professional people in the concerned ministry to change the entire scenario.

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Peace Efforts and the Fresh Wave of Violence

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

The militants organized another audacious attack targeting a Spanish guesthouse in diplomatic district of Kabul which left at least 8 people dead. The assault followed another deadly attack by the militants group at Kandahar international airport which left more than 50 people dead. The recent attacks by the militants came at a time of fresh hopes for resumption of peace talks between the insurgent groups and the Afghan government. The recent surge of violence at a time of increased diplomatic efforts to get the peace process started is highly likely to be relevant with the likelihood of resumption of peace process. On the other hand, it is aimed to impact both the resumption and the outcome of the peace process. Coming back from his Islamabad trip, President Ashraf Ghani said that peace talks could start in few weeks. During Ghani's visit to Islamabad, Pakistani officials also reaffirmed their supportive role in the peace talks in Afghanistan.

Despite that many of previous attempts for kick-starting the peace process have failed at the end, the latest agreement between Afghan and Pakistani officials to resume peace talks with the Taliban seemed to be different from the previous endeavors. Many differences between Kabul and Islamabad over the initiative may remain in place, but the agreement to explore resumption of peace negotiations is a major step forward. The two sides started the negotiations centered on peace in Afghanistan at the sidelines of the Heart of Asia conference in Islamabad after a period of tense relations between the two countries. The fact that the two countries managed to agree on resumption of peace talks with the Taliban at such a crucial time shows that the two countries may have overcome many of their key differences over the peace process. After the relations between the two countries started to deteriorate a few months ago, the two sides traded accusations against each other. The recent agreement in Islamabad suggests the two countries have managed to resolve many of the sticking points related to the peace initiative.

President Ashraf Ghani has said that Islamabad would act against the militant groups who refuse to enter peace talks with the Afghan government. This statement was something new and different from the previous statements of Afghan officials over the outcomes of their talks with Pakistani officials. If proves true, and Islamabad takes action against militant groups who refuse to enter peace talks, it would define the success of the peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Pakistan's possible action against Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network would be a turning point in the country's policy over the Afghan conflict. If the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan manage to cooperate on taking action by Pakistan against the Taliban, the Taliban would have no option but to come to table of negotiations. However, Pakistan's promised action against the Taliban and the Haqqani Network could turn into a factor ruining the peace talks with the Taliban. In fact, the promise would make the peace negotiations possible or would further deteriorate the disagreements between Afghanistan and Pakistan over Islamabad's role in the Afghan conflict. If

the government of Pakistan really takes action against the Taliban it will result to improved cooperation and more trust between the two countries. However, if Islamabad fails to take the promised action against the militants who refuse to enter the peace process, it will result to another period of distrusts and blame games in the relations between the two countries. But the obvious fact is that the two countries need to cooperate over peace in Afghanistan at any circumstances. Therefore, both Kabul and Islamabad need to realize their need for a sustainable cooperation disregard of each other's failures and setbacks. This does negate the two sides' need for remaining committed to their stances and promises in the process.

However, the recent attacks by the militants in Kabul and other provinces suggest the path ahead of the peace efforts would not be smooth. There are concerted attempts from the various militant groups to hamper the peace process or gain military advantages before any peace talks gets underway. There may be conflicting approaches from the many militant groups including the main faction of the Taliban into the peace negotiations with the Afghanistan government.

Some of the Taliban groups may come to negotiation table or be included in the peace process while others may continue to wage offensives against the government forces. While entering peace talks with the Taliban, both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to exert pressures on the groups opposing the political process for the settlement of the conflict.

The Taliban will probably increase their attacks aimed at gaining military advantages and claim to have the upper hand in the war efforts in Afghanistan. Both Kabul and Islamabad need to realize that the Taliban needs to be pressurized militarily to be convinced for a peace deal with the Afghan government. Pakistan needs to know the fact that it is highly likely that the peace process may once again fail if the Taliban attempts to gain political advantages by waging another wave of war and violence across Afghanistan. As promised by Pakistan, both countries should take joint actions against the Taliban and counter their offensives in Afghanistan. If the two countries fail to do so, the Taliban's ongoing warfare could potentially hamper the fledgling peace talks and will further deteriorate the security situation not only in Afghanistan but Pakistan as well.

The two countries managed to largely overcome the distrusts of the recent months. Pakistani Prime Minister paid the most glorious welcome to Afghan president Ashraf Ghani when he arrived in Pakistan. The two countries reached agreements with representatives of world powers and regional players over starting the peace process in Afghanistan. Kabul and Islamabad should also be able to go ahead with the peace efforts in a sustainable manner. For this to happen, Pakistan should remain committed to its promise of taking action against the militants if they refuse to join the peace talks. In the past, the increase of the militant attacks has been a major factor behind the failure of the efforts to resume the peace talks. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to ensure this will not happen this time.

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