

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



December 14, 2016

Support for the Least Advantaged

There are many parts of Afghanistan where the people are suffering from the dearth of rudimentary requirements of life. Because of decades of instability and improper attention to the basic issues of people and failure to develop the basic infrastructure, the poor people in those areas have gone through very tough times. The government has not been successful in providing services to the remote areas and there are major governance issues prevailing there. The circumstances get more tragic and challenging when those areas have to face the surge in insurgency or when they have to go through severe weather changes, as they do not have proper food, cloth, shelter and health facilities.

Afghanistan's Bamyan province is one of the examples. Though the province is equipped with some natural blessings and historical importance, the administration and governance have failed to play any major role in utilizing the advantages. Therefore, the people have kept on suffering to a large extent.

A recent study shows that thousands of cave-dwellers near the Buddha statues in the province are suffering from poverty, health issues and deadly animals such as snakes and scorpions threaten their lives. Around 3,000 caves are dotted around the famous Buddha statues, inhabited by 250 families from Bamyan and other provinces. Caught up in grinding poverty, the people living here do not have other shelters. Moreover, as they do not have any source of income their children and family members have to be content with eating breadcrumbs and unhygienic leftover food collected from restaurant rubbish.

Braving under subzero winter temperatures and other day-to-day privations, the cave residents do not have blankets -- much less other home appliances. Resultantly, starvation, illiteracy and backwardness appear to be their destiny.

It is an irony to find the people around such a historical place in such condition. The place could be best used to attract the tourists, where they could be shown the historical beauty of the place but what they can find there is misery and an ugly shape of administrative arrangements.

People of Bamyan, like all the other Afghans, require proper and due attention of the government authorities.

Governor Spokesman Abdul Rahman Ahmadi, when asked about the situation, said that over 50 percent Bamyans lived under the poverty line including the cave-dwellers who had been suffering from poverty and other problems. He claimed that the government provided help to the people living in caves.

In 2004 as many as 120 families were provided with shelters and this year 20 families were provided with shelters. He also claimed that the local government tried to coordinate distribution of assistance so that deserving families could get the assistance.

Nevertheless, looking at the condition it is easier to draw a conclusion that there is really something wrong our administrative and governance mechanism as they are suffering from serious challenges. The question at this crucial moment is whether the country can go ahead with such a setup, wherein most of the people of the country suffer from hunger and poverty.

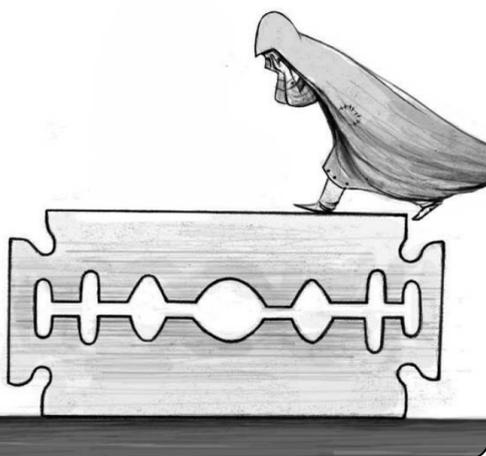
Is it just that almost all the people of the country went through era of instability and chaos and mostly the common people gave sacrifices and their whole lives were influenced negatively by socio-political and economic circumstances, yet they remain the most unprivileged stratum? Is it really ethical that by gaining authority the ruling elite has gotten the license of having all the privileges they want it and, at the same time, remains unaccountable?

It is really important to consider all the questions thoroughly and try to find out their true answers.

The sort of negative practices and thinking mentioned above have become a part of daily life and soon they will become a part of our nature; therefore, it is necessary to understand them and take action against them before they are able to become irreversible.

Unfortunately, the common people are so ignorant that they do not even realize that they are being dodged and their rights are being violated. They are kept in dark and instead of demanding for light they have started to make compromises in order to live in the darkness. It is the demand of better living and higher thinking that civil society and people representatives must rise to the occasion and strive to let the people know the evils of ignorance they have and must suggest economic reforms and clear changes in the socio-political setup.

The government needs to listen to the voices of the people who are suffering from lack of basic requirements of life and it needs to take tangible measures in this regard. It has to start from the areas that are the least developed and where the needs are required on emergency basis.



Shocking Corruption

By Muhammad Zahir Akbari

According to the latest report by Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA), an estimate of \$3b bribes paid during the year - an almost 50% increase compared to last year. The amount of bribes estimated is much higher than the Afghan government revenue estimates for 2016. It is said that after insecurity and unemployment, corruption is the third biggest problem that Afghans face. In fact, The IWA's report and figures on corruption by people in an impoverished country like Afghanistan whose 46 percent of population lives below the poverty line is really shocking. Izatullah Adib, a researcher of the survey, said they collected statistics about bribery from people who had the experience of paying bribes. "We used international research standards in this survey," he said. IWA said most of the respondents in the interview believed that corruption had a negative impact on stability and the phenomenon was one the main causes empowering insurgency in Afghanistan. Therefore, it is said that due to widespread corruption and some people in areas under Taliban control referred their cases to Taliban courts rather than government ones.

Based on IWA reports, the residents who dealt with the courts reported that they were asked for bribes an astounding 55% of the time. Results were not much better when they dealt with prosecutors, or municipal government. But these institutions were not alone. The Electoral Commission, Law Enforcement, the Office of the Chief Executive, Customs, Parliament, Municipalities, the Office of the President, and the Afghan Government as a whole were all implicated, with more than 60% of respondents saying they were corrupt to some extent. This gives citizens very limited options about where to go to seek redress when they are confronted with corruption. Fewer than half of those who experience corruption ever report it, many saying that it would be useless, or could even provoke revenge. In addition, 49% of the population believes that the international community has no interest in fighting corruption, while 46% think that the international community does not support honest officials.

As reflected by a separate source, bribes are paid in different ways for dissimilar purposes; they might pay to finalize or speed up a procedure, to do a political deal, to avoid paying a fine or to receive better treatment and so on. In Afghanistan as a whole, by far the most common of those purposes is "getting things done" or, in other words, to facilitate or speed up the delivery of a public service that would not otherwise be provided (59.4 per cent). Other purposes such as reducing the cost of a procedure (10.6 per cent), avoiding the payment of a fine (13.3 per cent), receiving better treatment (6.7 per cent), and other purposes (7.4 per cent) are less important. Interestingly, the finalization or speeding up of a procedure is a more common motive for bribery in rural than urban areas (61.1 per cent vs. 53.2 per cent), whereas reducing the cost of a procedure

and receiving better treatment are more common motives in urban environments. Thus bribes are paid in various methods including cash, valuables, foods, services and etc.

Though the National Unity Government (NUG) inherited corruption from the former administration, the NUG not only has failed to fight it, but disagreements between its leaders and lack of political will have also allowed it to grow. Despite the fact that the government established the National Procurement Committee (NPC) and the specialized Anti-Corruption Justice Center (ACJC) as part of its deceitful anti-corruption drive, the outcomes are against the claims. The government claimed that the ACJC was designed to try senior government officials has no tangible achievement. They should realize that they cannot deceive the people for ever; Instead of playing with public perception, the government leaders have to combat corruption faithfully. Afghanistan needs effective tools and tactics in order to combat corruption, including monitoring and supervision of adherence to the law and regulations, protection of whistle-blowers and anti-bribery rules. The government of Afghanistan needs to identify missing policies and take steps to establish them. For instance, whistle-blowers can be strong tool to identify corruption, but Afghanistan still does not have a law to protect them.

Similarly, the anti-money laundering law and anti-terrorism law need to be properly implemented to prevent illegal financial activities, including those that fund militant groups. However, several types of anti-corruption organizations have been created within the Afghan government in order to bring reform and pursue corruption cases. These organizations, such as the High Office of Oversight (HOO), received international assistance but in many cases failed to live up to their promise. For example, USAID has reported that the HOO was dysfunctional, ineffective, and highly politicized. The bitter reality thereof is that the majority of institutions active in the fight against graft are more corrupt than other government institutions. Many surveys have found out that the legal and judicial institutions are more corrupt than others though their key responsibility is to counter corruption and ensure justice.

Finally, the successful fight against this paralyzing disease needs far more fundamental strategy to build a free ground corruption and functional system in the country: we have to appoint honest leadership in key institutions; make the judiciary independent; promote the law of access to information; establish an independent anti-corruption agency; make asset declaration mandatory for all those who hold power; pay sufficient and justly salary to government personnel, establish transparent mechanism for procurements, provide quality services to citizens and eliminate the culture of impunity in Afghanistan. Corruption is like a ball of snow, once it's set a rolling it must increase. - Charles Cateb Colton

Mohammad Zahir Akbari is the newly emerging writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at mohammadzahirakbari@gmail.com

Will Trump Get Trumped?

By Elizabeth Drew

This is not a city overflowing with the holiday spirit. As the US Congress heads home for the holidays, there's a sense that something ominous lies over the horizon. People might try to avoid discussing the pending inauguration, on January 20, of President-elect Donald Trump but the topic rarely stays out of conversations for long.

At last week's White House Christmas party for the press, reporters speculated about whether this might be the last such party for years to come. It's difficult to imagine that Trump, no fan of the press, would host such an event, much less stand stoically with his wife Melania greeting each individual guest, as Barack and Michelle Obama did for eight years. One reporter joked that the next press Christmas party would be held at the recently opened Trump International Hotel down the street from the White House, and there would be a cash bar.

Of course, if the press Christmas party was the only precedent Trump and his team broke, no one would be too distraught. But Trump has so far shown such indifference to rules and norms, such a disregard for limits, and such unpredictability, that the prevailing mood among Democrats and Republicans alike is one of uncertainty and unease. But the concern goes beyond Washington: many ordinary citizens in the US and elsewhere genuinely fear the consequences of a Trump administration.

Given Trump's capriciousness, many are looking to his cabinet for clues about the country's direction over the next four years. The results thus far aren't comforting, not least because he's shown a predilection for choosing generals to run civilian agencies - three thus far - and even more so because several of Trump's nominees will, if the Senate confirms them, be heading agencies whose missions they have opposed.

Trump's choice for Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, is an ultra-wealthy heiress whose résumé includes a disastrous effort to privatize Michigan's schools. Trump's pick for Labor Secretary, Andy Puzder, is a fast-food chain owner who opposes raising the minimum wage to livable levels or expanding overtime pay; indeed, his company has run afoul of overtime laws. Trump's pick for Attorney General, Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions, cares little for civil-rights laws or immigration.

Then there is Trump's choice to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Ben Carson - the retired neurosurgeon who endorsed Trump after bowing out of the Republican primary - is no fan of social programs or fair-housing initiatives. Perhaps Trump thought that naming a black man to lead the dismantling of public housing, which largely supports African Americans, would be good cover.

To lead the Environmental Protection Agency, Trump has nominated Scott Pruitt - the Attorney General of Oklahoma, an oil and gas-producing state, and an avid climate-change denier, who has brought several suits against the EPA. Pruitt's selection was announced soon after Trump's transition team delivered a questionnaire to employees of the Department of Energy, asking whether they had attended meetings where climate change was

discussed. More recently came the stunning news that, after a protracted search, Trump has settled on Rex Tillerson, CEO of Exxon-Mobil, to serve as Secretary of State. In his extensive international deal-making - which isn't the same as diplomacy - Tillerson has developed a close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, toward whom Trump has been notably soft.

More worrying, the news of Trump's intention to nominate Tillerson emerged on the same day that the Washington Post reported the CIA's disturbing conclusion that Russia had interfered in the presidential election to help Trump win. Trump also looks likely to name John Bolton - a bombastic neo-conservative who still defends the Iraq war and thinks the US should bomb Iran - to be Tillerson's deputy.

Trump's highly conservative cabinet choices - who include an uncommon number of billionaires - are not at all consonant with his campaign, during which he presented himself as the champion of blue-collar workers, the non-ideological businessman who would make the government work. But his choices place him firmly in the camp of plutocrats with little concern for workers and the middle class. Trump seems to think that if he offers enough bread and circuses, he can distract his supporters from the real direction his administration is taking. He's taken time off from managing his transition to hold a few rallies - which he apparently enjoys more than the chores of governing - and to pull off stunts, such as lauding his deal with Carrier, which manufactures furnaces and air conditioners, to keep jobs in the US.

But it took only a couple of days for the public to learn that Trump had saved far fewer jobs than he had claimed. When the local United Steelworkers union president complained publicly, the famously thin-skinned Trump responded by getting into a Twitter spat, blaming the union president for the lost jobs. That sort of thing won't go over well with many of the white blue-collar workers Trump so assiduously courted during his campaign. And his uncontrolled use of Twitter as his literal bully pulpit may wear thin. Trump may also run up against more opposition than he expects in other areas.

As his administration proceeds to dismantle environmental rules, he's likely to find that there's a much stronger constituency for clean air and clean water than he apparently thinks. The Democrats, in the minority in the Senate, will give Trump's Cabinet nominees a tough grilling, potentially defeating one or two. But the Republicans are the ones to watch. Leading Republicans have already dissented from Trump's threats to start trade wars. If he pushes them too far, Trump may be a general with few troops. Republicans' disaffection could be enhanced if - as now appears likely - Trump's private interests are not sufficiently disentangled from his public responsibilities, making him something of an embarrassment. There's nothing like a good scandal or two to discourage already unenthusiastic followers.

Trump's campaign against Hillary Clinton should have taught him that. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

Elizabeth Drew is a regular contributor to The New York Review of Books and the author, most recently, of Washington Journal: Reporting Watergate and Richard Nixon's Downfall.



Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Hussain Yasa
Vice-Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari
Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com
Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019
www.outlookafghanistan.net



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