

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



December 18, 2017

The Age of Enlightenment

Democracy must be built through open societies that share information. When there is information, there is enlightenment. When there is debate, there are solutions. When there is no sharing of power, no rule of law, no accountability, there is abuse, corruption, subjugation and indignation." Atifete Jahjaga. Human societies passed a highly tortuous history throughout the centuries. People suffered severely in the ups and downs of historical phenomena. They had to grin and bear the religious exploitations of the churches, the chains of slavery, the flogging of their masters, the cruelty of the kings and emperors, etc. No one dared breathe a word against the status quo however their rights were violated and their human dignity was trampled upon.

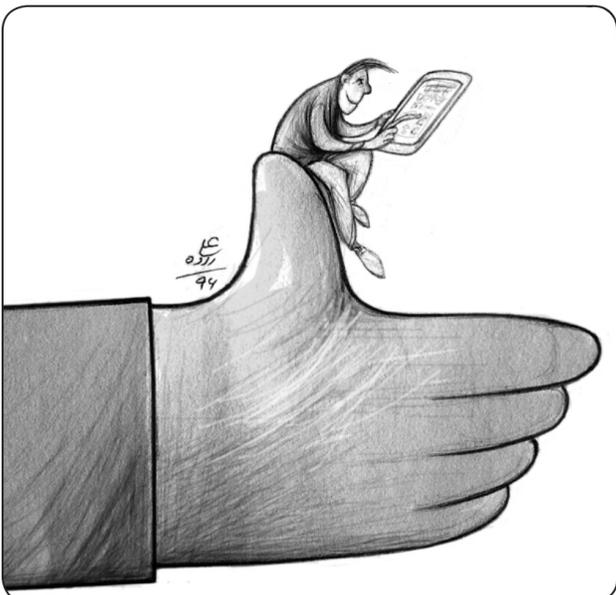
Gradually, such barbaric attitudes went beyond the tolerance of the lower class and the spark of salvation flashed their minds. The spark was so perilous for the exploiters that would change all their dreams into ashes. The desires of the subdued slaves and docile yes-men for freedom and their intentions to say "no" to subjugation would shake the dictators up. But for the exploited part of the society, it was light at the end of the tunnel. In the 16th and 17th centuries, people in Europe were beginning to open their minds to new possibilities and started to question the Catholic Church and the "divine right of kings". Monarchs were all-powerful, as was the Church. Anyone who spoke out against either was arrested, tortured or even executed. This harsh treatment brought the people together in their quest for truth, the real truth, not the biblical truth that the Church swore by. It was a time when curiosity and experimentation took off. Jean Jacques Rousseau, the Swiss born French politician and philosopher, for example, began to question the idea of the divine right of Kings. He wrote that the King does not, in fact, receive his power from God, but rather from the general will of the people. This, of course, implies that "the people" can also take away that power! The Enlightenment thinkers also discussed other ideas that are the founding principles of any democracy - the idea of the importance of the individual who can reason for himself, the idea of equality under the law, and the idea of natural rights. The Enlightenment was a period of profound optimism, a sense that with science and reason - and the consequent shedding of old superstitions - human beings and human society would improve.

You can probably tell already that the Enlightenment was anti-clerical; it was, for the most part, opposed to traditional Catholicism. Instead, the Enlightenment thinkers developed a way of understanding the universe called Deism - the idea, more or less, is that there is a God, but that this God is not the figure of the Old and New Testaments, actively involved in human affairs. He is more like a watchmaker who, once he makes the watch and winds it, has nothing more to do with it.

"For Kant, Enlightenment was mankind's final coming of age, the emancipation of the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance." According to historian Roy Porter, the thesis of the liberation of the human mind from the dogmatic state of ignorance that he argues was prevalent at the time is the epitome of what the age of enlightenment was trying to capture. According to Bertrand Russell, however, the enlightenment was a phase in a progressive development, which began in antiquity, and that reason and challenges to the established order were constant ideals throughout that time.

Russell argues that the enlightenment was ultimately born out of the Protestant reaction against the Catholic counter-reformation, when the philosophical views of the past two centuries crystallized into a coherent world view. He argues that many of the philosophical views, such as affinity for democracy against monarchy, originated among Protestants in the early 16th century to justify their desire to break away from the Pope and the Catholic Church. Though many of these philosophical ideals were picked up by Catholics, Russell argues, by the 18th century the Enlightenment was the principal manifestation of the schism that began with Martin Luther.

The American Enlightenment is generally discussed in terms of America's political evolution, the thinking that led to the fomenting of a revolution against Great Britain and the creation of a modern republic. Many figures associated with Enlightenment thought have been regarded as influences on American thinking between 1760 and 1800. Among those commonly mentioned include John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Voltaire, Baron Montesquieu, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, Denis Diderot and others. Enlightened Founding Fathers, especially Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and George Washington, fought for and eventually attained religious freedom for minority denominations. According to the founding fathers, the United States should be a country where peoples of all faiths could live in peace and mutual benefit. James Madison summed up this ideal in 1792 saying, "Conscience is the most sacred of all property." Many historians find that the origin of this famous phrase derives from Locke's position that "no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions." Roger Williams' most important contribution to American thought is generally regarded as advocating of the separation of church and state. In his writings he carefully detailed the roles of the church and the state and how they occupied separate realms. Churches functioned within the state but were no more an integral part of the state than were corporation organized to conduct business. Whatever happened within the structure of a church should have nothing to do with the business of the state. Conversely, the state should have no right to interfere with the business of the church, or with the practices of individuals in their relationship to the divine. He believed strongly that people of all faiths - Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or faiths practiced by Indians - should be allowed to follow their own consciences without any outside interference whatsoever.



Beginning of Democracy, Death of Culture

By Hujjatullah Zia

I was engrossed in the gradual death of Islamic culture and country's tradition, by a highly fashionable style of an Afghan girl wearing Chinese sunglasses, mini-skirt dress, tight cowboys and high-heeled sandals. Many thoughts were flashing my mind and I sighed deeply murmuring with myself that it is the birth of democracy which leads to the death of our pure Islamic cultures targeting the younger generations of our country. The growth of democracy and flood of European cultures will, certainly, result in the slaughter of our customs and gradual bleeding of our religious beliefs. In addition, following the wrong path of democracy will debilitate our moral values and enervate the socio-moral milieu of the country. Abraham Lincoln introduced democracy rightly saying, "Democracy is government of the people, for the people, by the people." According to this definition, which is widely accepted, democracy does not mean to choose the updated fashion of the time giving up our origin or identity. An Islamic philosopher and thinker, Allama Mutahhari, says that we should improve with the world's improvement, however, fight against the world's moral corruption. He adds that improvement is the need of time when it is naked of nakedness and jeopardy of slaughtering religious beliefs. Of course, it is very naïve of us to risk our modesty for modernity or moral values for immoral ones. Mohandas Gandhi, the former leader of India, says, "The truest test of civilization, culture, and dignity is character, not clothing." It is believed that a high mentality bespeaks of high humanity and character. Younger generations are the mind of a community, therefore, they will have to develop mentally and also lead the society towards the same desired pinnacle of progress.

I agree on the sociological idea which says that the chic and modish fashion and clothing of a society displays a deep and serious deprivation of the people in that society, and I add that this is an epidemic disease which will bleed the former wound rather than curing it and it is not a solution at all. So, again I emphasize on mental development and believe that an updated style and clothing with an outdated frame of mind is highly ridiculous. Some may think that religious beliefs are not the need of the present time and they were good for traditional people in a close society. In other words, they may think that the frame of their minds are updated whereas religious beliefs are outdated and these two are in direct opposition like parallel lines which will never join each other. However, I think it is the very need of the present society and time for being setback ahead of moral corruptions and social disorders. Many religious beliefs, especially Islamic laws, are based on moral standard and they are unchangeable facts the same as nature's law. For example, when thousands of years ago, people were saying that two plus two equals four still this rule is ruling and we believe and say the same

however modern we are. Same is the case with our religious beliefs. When our religion stated that honesty, morality, high social and moral norms are the need of a society, still we strongly believe them otherwise we will face many challenges and disorder in our social and individual life. It is a matter of great concern for me when democracy gives birth differently in our community. The great reason behind this issue is that democracy is being fed by the poisonous food of either ignorant mentality or biased-political minds. Sometimes, I think that democracy may be the illegitimate son of modernity, but soon I come to know that there is nothing wrong with democracy or modernity but it is all our mistakes originating in misunderstanding and misusing. A well-known Islamic poet, Hafiz Shirazi, says, "Have a mercy on you by eschewing the bullet of mine." This poem, as if addressing the current society of us saying that have mercy on you by shunning the bullet of moral corruption under the name of democracy, freedom, modernity.... So, let's eschew from self-hurting incidents by indiscriminate following of every voice or embracing of every fashion. Though I believe that practicing the very pure religious beliefs is not possible in any communities, but nonetheless the secularity of our people and marginalizing religion from social life is not justifiable. I emphasize again that it is not right to believe that democracy and religion are the historical enemy of each other and one is supposed to give up one of them for saving the other. In other words, they may think that it is a ground for competition of democracy and religion and one of them must swallow and digest another. Those who attach more significance to democracy will think that religion will not survive the flooding storm of democracy and may drown in it. Anyhow, the cruel slaughter of moral values in the presence of democracy is a big crime.

Pointing a condemning finger to Taliban for the misuse of religion is a blunder when we misuse it in another way. Of course they abuse religion radically while we abuse it democratically. They are indulged in violence and bloodshed, whereas, we are indulged in practicing wrong democracy. Therefore, we are also either to be condemned or choose our religious path correctly. Mohandas Gandhi says, "Democracy is an impossible thing until the power is shared by all, but let not democracy degenerate into monarchy." It is the same thing that we are experiencing bitterly in the country. Democracy has degenerated into monarchy and the characters of people have metamorphosed greatly. To be more exact, even though, elections are being conducted in our country, still Afghanistan is introduced one of the most corrupt countries. Official corruptions put democracy under question in our country and it is a major challenge to be dealt with by Afghan authorities - as soon as possible. By mentioning this, I mean that democracy is being abused on one way or another or through one group or another.

Hujjatullah Zia is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at zia_hujjat@yahoo.com

Populist Plutocracy and the Future of America

By Nouriel Roubini

Donald Trump won the US presidency with the backing of working-class and socially conservative white voters on a populist platform of economic nationalism. Trump rejected the Republican Party's traditional pro-business, pro-trade agenda, and, like Bernie Sanders on the left, appealed to Americans who have been harmed by disruptive technologies and "globalist" policies promoting free trade and migration.

But while Trump ran as a populist, he has governed as a plutocrat, most recently by endorsing the discredited supply-side theory of taxation that most Republicans still cling to. Trump also ran as someone who would "drain the swamp" in Washington, DC, and on Wall Street. Yet he has stacked his administration with billionaires (not just millionaires) and Goldman Sachs alumni, while letting the swamp of business lobbyists rise higher than ever. Trump and the Republicans' plan to repeal the 2010 Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) would have left 24 million Americans - mostly poor or middle class, many of whom voted for him - without health care. His deregulatory policies are blatantly biased against workers and unions. And the Republican tax-reform plan that he has endorsed would overwhelmingly favor multinational corporations and the top 1% of households, many of which stand to benefit especially from the repeal of the estate tax. Trump has also abandoned his base in the area of trade, where he has offered rhetoric but not concrete action. Yes, he scrapped the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), but Hillary Clinton would have done the same. He has mused about abandoning the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA), but that may be just a negotiating tactic. He has threatened to impose a 50% tariff on goods from China, Mexico, and other US trade partners, but no such measures have materialized. And proposals for a border adjustment tax have been all but forgotten.

Trump's bullying tweets against US firms that move production offshore or undertake tax inversions have been no more than cheap talk, and business leaders know it. Manufacturers who fooled Trump into thinking they would keep production in the US have continued to transfer operations quietly to Mexico, China, and elsewhere. Moreover, international provisions in the pending tax legislation will give US multinationals an even greater incentive to invest, hire, and produce abroad, while using transfer pricing and other schemes to salt away profits in low-tax jurisdictions. Likewise, despite Trump's aggressive rhetoric on immigration, his policies have been relatively moderate, perhaps because many of the businesspeople who supported his campaign actually favor a milder approach. The "Muslim ban" doesn't affect the supply of labor in the US. Although deportations have accelerated under Trump, it's worth remembering that millions of undocumented immigrants were deported under Barack Obama, too. The border wall that Trump was going to force Mexico to pay for remains an unfunded dream. And even the administration's plan to favor skilled over unskilled workers will not necessarily reduce the number of legal migrants in the country. All told, Trump has governed like a plutocrat in populist clothes - that is, a pluto-populist. But why has his base let him get away with pursuing policies that mostly hurt them? According to one view, he is betting that social conservatives and white blue-collar supporters in rural areas will vote on the basis of nationalist and religious sentiment and antipathy toward secular coastal elites, rather than for their own financial interests. But how long can anyone be expected to support "God and guns" at the expense of "bread and butter"? The pluto-populists who presided over the Roman Empire knew that keeping the populist mob at bay required substance as well as diversion: panem et circenses - "bread and circuses." Raging tweets are meaningless to people who can scarcely afford a dignified living, let alone tickets to the modern-day Colosseum to watch football. The tax legislation that Republicans have rushed through Congress could prove especially dangerous, given that millions of middle-class and low-income households will not only get little out of it, but will actually pay more when income-tax cuts are phased out over time. Moreover, the Republican plan would repeal the Obamacare individual mandate. According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, this will cause 13 million people to lose health

insurance, and insurance premiums to rise by 10%, over the next decade. Not surprisingly, a recent Quinnipiac poll found that a mere 29% of Americans support the Republican plan. Nevertheless, Trump and the Republicans seem willing to risk it. After all, by pushing the middle-class tax hikes to a later date, they have designed their plan to get them through the 2018 midterm elections and the 2020 general election. Between now and the midterms, they can brag about cutting taxes on most households. And they can expect to see the economic-stimulus effects of tax cuts peak in 2019, just before the next presidential election - and long before the bill comes due.

Moreover, the final legislation will likely lower the federal deduction for mortgage interest and eliminate deductibility for state and local taxes. This will hit households in Democratic-leaning states such as New York, New Jersey, and California much harder than households in Republican-leaning states. Another part of the Republican strategy (known as "starve the beast") will be to use the higher deficits from tax cuts to argue for cuts in so-called entitlement spending, such as Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, and Social Security. Again, this is a risky proposition, given that elderly, middle-class, and low-income Americans rely heavily on these programs. Yes, the working- and non-working poor who receive welfare payments or food stamps include minorities who tend to vote for Democrats. But millions of the blue-collar, socially conservative whites who voted for Trump also rely on these and similar programs. With the global economy expanding, Trump is probably hoping that tax cuts and deregulation will spur enough growth and create enough jobs that he will have something to brag about. A potential growth rate of 2% won't necessarily do much to help his blue-collar base, but at least it could push the stock market up to its highest point ever. And, of course, Trump will still claim that the US economy can grow at a rate of 4%, even though all mainstream economists, including Republicans, agree that the potential growth rate will remain around 2%, regardless of his policies. Whatever happens, Trump will continue to tweet maniacally, promote fake-news stories, and boast about the "biggest and best" economy ever. In doing so, he may even create a circus worthy of a Roman emperor. But if gassy rhetoric alone does not suffice, he may decide to go on the offensive, particularly in the international sphere. That could mean truly withdrawing from NAFTA, taking trade action against China and other trading partners, or doubling down on harsh immigration policies. And if these measures do not satisfy his base, Trump will still have one last option, long used by Roman emperors and other assorted dictators during times of domestic difficulty. Namely, he can try to "wag the dog," by fabricating an external threat or embarking on foreign military adventures to distract his supporters from what he and congressional Republicans have been doing. For example, following the "madman" approach to foreign policy, Trump could start a war with North Korea or Iran. Or he could post further inflammatory tweets about the evils of Islam, thereby driving disturbed and marginalized individuals into the arms of the Islamic State (ISIS) or other extremist groups. That would increase the likelihood of ISIS-inspired attacks - for example, "lone wolves" blowing themselves up or driving trucks through crowded pedestrian areas - within the US. With dozens, if not hundreds, slain, Trump could then wrap himself in the flag and say, "I told you so." And if things got bad enough, Trump and his generals could declare a state of emergency, suspend civil liberties, and transform America into a true pluto-populist authoritarian state. You know it's time to worry when the conservative Republican chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Bob Corker, warns openly that Trump could start World War III. And if you're not convinced, consider the recent history of Russia or Turkey; or the history of the Roman Empire under Caligula or Nero. Pluto-populists have been turning democracies into autocracies with the same playbook for thousands of years. There's no reason to think they would stop now. The reign of Emperor Trump could be just around the corner. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

Nouriel Roubini, a professor at NYU's Stern School of Business and CEO of Roubini Macro Associates, was Senior Economist for International Affairs in the White House's Council of Economic Advisers during the Clinton Administration. He has worked for the International Monetary Fund, the US Federal Reserve, and the World Bank.

Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Moh. Reza Huwaida

Vice-Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari

Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019

www.outlookafghanistan.net



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