

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



December 29, 2016

Fighting Extremism through Cultural Activities

A fragile security situation is dominating Afghan society, it is really important for Afghans to keep their spirits high and stand strong against such a situation. Their high spirits to fight violence, extremism and war would prove to be a catalyst that can speed up the process of development and peace building. They can also counter extremism and violence through promoting positive activities in the society that should have aesthetic aspects and that may have the potential to promote entertainment and hope. Cultural activities, mostly the ones related to music can be of great support.

Afghan society is a society that is filled with people who have had different cultural traditions. People belonging to different ethnic groups reside here and all of them have had a long history of traditions and values. Unfortunately, their lives have been dominated by instability; therefore, they have not been able to promote those values to a great extent. However, after decades of wars as the circumstances have improved a little, they can at least divert their attentions towards promoting their cultural practices. This will help them not only in highlighting the beauty of their cultural practices but would also prove to be a strong force against negative activities. Prioritizing such activities would definitely generate an atmosphere wherein the people, particularly, the youngsters would be motivated towards them instead of becoming the part of terrorism and other social evils.

One of the cultural items that have been part of Afghan society is music. It has existed within Afghan culture in some form or the other. Though different ethnic groups present in Afghan society have had their own types of music and their own festivals to enjoy it, the love for music has always been there. During somewhat stable eras, the national music in Afghanistan flourished to a certain extent and those times also gave birth to some prominent names as well. Among them the names of Saraban, Nashanas, Ahmed Zahir, Ahmad Wali, Hungama, Beltoon, Farhad Darya, Dawood Sarkhosh, Amir Jan Sabori and Najim Nawabi are the most prominent ones.

Unfortunately, there have been many hurdles in the way of promotion of this cultural item – it has been victimized by the extremist religious thoughts and practices. On many occasions the extremist fanatics have tried to discourage it as much as possible. Particularly, Taliban put a ban against all sorts of music and even banned televisions. During their tenure, music in Afghanistan suffered to a great extent.

However, nowadays it can be observed that it is once again being promoted by young and energetic Afghan artists. They are trying to mix modern music with traditional Afghan music. They are, in fact, doing a service to Afghan culture and society, therefore, they should be encouraged and promoted as much as possible. Doing so would not only divert the attention of Afghan youth towards constructive cultural activities but would also support in promoting Afghan music throughout the world keeping in consideration the approach of today's media; particularly social media. One of the current efforts to promote Afghan music within Afghanistan is being led by Afghan National Music Institute. The institute has really made some remarkable endeavors to revive Afghan music and bring about modern trends within it as well. It, on Wednesday, December 28, launched its seventh winter music festival where students and musicians from around the country would be trained for eight weeks in preparation for concerts. The head of the institute, Nasir Sarmast, said that they would send a group of 35 female musicians to Europe where they will play traditional music of Afghanistan. They would hold concerts in Zurich, Geneva (Switzerland) and then in Germany. And later, they would return home.

This will provide them an opportunity to let those countries, their people and the Afghan people living there enjoy Afghan music and know more about it. This will further support in cultural exchange programs and initiatives. Ultimately, there will be more entertainment and learning for all the cultures involved.

It is also vital to observe that the institute, in a manner, is developing Afghanistan's human resource. Music is an art and also a skill. It can support those who are involved in it financially as well. They can make their living by playing different instruments and by singing. Thus, those who have interest in music can satiate their thirst for music and at the same time make a reputable earning for themselves.

Rahil Mohammad Formuli, deputy head of vocational studies at Ministry of Education currently revealed that National Music Institute has a good criterion and at least 50 percent of its students are street children. Moreover, it can be observed that most of these students want to pursue a profession in music in future. Most of them have the intention of completing their formal education in music and then develop their careers accordingly. Keeping in view the importance of music and the cultural activities it is imperative that government must also be active in this regard and encourage such initiatives by providing them moral and financial support.

Poverty: Crisis of Modern-Day

By Muhammad Zahir Akbari

In spite of hundreds of aid organizations and humanitarian conventions world wide, the poverty mortality rate is terribly increasing in modern age. Almost half of the world – over 3 billion people – live on less than \$2.50 a day. The GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the 41 Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (567 million people) is less than the wealth of the world's 7 richest people combined. Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names. Less than one percent of what the world spent every year on weapons was enough to put every child into school and yet it did not happen.

Nearly 1 billion children live in poverty (1 in 2 children in the world). 640 million live without adequate shelter, 400 million have no access to safe water, and 270 million have no access to health services. Almost 10.6 million children die before they reached the age of 5 (or roughly 29,000 children per day). According to World Bank reports, the number of people living under poverty line is 702 million or about 9.6% of the global population whereas the poverty line defined as living on \$1.90 or less a day.

As a pioneer country in terms of poverty crisis, Afghanistan ranked 162th out of 185 poorest countries of the world in 2015 while this year is far worse comparing to the last year. Development-wise, Afghanistan is the fifth least developed country in the world. Despite recent minor progress, millions of Afghans still live in severe poverty with limited access to food and other basic requirements. According to WFP, 7.6 million people, roughly one-third of the population, are food-insecure, and a further 14 percent are considered to be borderline food-insecure. But the depth of poverty crisis and economic recession in Afghanistan is beyond cursory reports; just it is common to call it is the most dangerous place to live. Over a quarter of Afghan children die before their fifth birthday mostly from preventable diseases such as pneumonia and diarrhea. Afghanistan has some of the worst child malnourishment, stunting, underweight and vitamin deficiency figures in the world. According to the World Food Program, 39% of children under the age of five are underweight and 78% of Afghan children lack access to safe water and 1 in 8 Afghan women die in childbirth.

People are addicted because they try to block pain, the pain of hunger, sickness, physical and mental trauma, by addictive drugs. Nearly three million addicts in this nation of about 30 million people, including 60,000 children under 15, and about 13 percent are women and 7 percent are children. Most of the women are opium addicts desperate to blunt the trauma of endless war. Many are illiterate mothers with unemployed husbands. Most have a little in the way of job skills, and some became addicts while picking opium poppies to earn a living and support their families...these have been happening for

years while the politicians are indifferent.

According to the constitution of Afghanistan, the government is responsible to provide job opportunities to citizens to remove poverty and unemployment. But, today one of the most important challenges in the country is unemployment after insecurity. Currently, the people are stuck in challenges and the parents of the families are mostly concerned over joblessness of their children.

Unfortunately, most of the university graduates, after receiving their degrees, start looking for a job, but majority of them do not succeed in this regard. Based on statistics, unemployment is the main factor behind increasing crimes in the society. Regrettably, we can see there are hundreds of unemployed people who are waiting for someone to take them for work on the avenues. Most of them even wait until evening, but unfortunately, they go home with empty hands and hungry stomach. However, billions of dollars have poured into Afghanistan, but alas, the number of unemployed people have been increased unprecedentedly.

It was expected to end the crisis with support of international partners, but fifteen years have passed and things have not improved yet. Afghanistan still ranks third in the world in corruption according to Transparency International, which contributes to its extreme poverty. Somewhat, education is available but the quality is awfully poor.

The teaching profession is not attractive because of the low pay. Despite minor improvements in the health sector but health indicators are unsatisfactory. Agriculture – the second largest contributor to GDP growth after services – declined by a projected 2 percent in 2015. Growing Conflicts and a lack of economic opportunities have caused young generation to leave the country, leading to both capital flight and brain drain. Though the international community, led by the United States, has appropriated billions of dollars of aid in one and half decade to reconstruct Afghanistan and rebuild its unbalanced economy, there have been some improvements in GDP growth, life expectancy, poverty reduction, child and maternal health, education, and infrastructure, these improvements are relatively modest in relation to the amount of dollars poured into the country as aid. Moreover, this rate of improvement is too low and slow to rescue from crisis and become self-sufficient. The primary solution is that the current leaders are unable to end the crises. So, the first important step towards change is to choose the leaders who have proven their commitments and propose specific solutions to fundamental issues of country including security, poverty and illiteracy. As long as our people are undetermined, unaware and do not know who to vote, their leaders will be the same. We should accept that weak nations deserve the weak governments!

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Poverty Persists

By Hujjatullah Zia

The war in Afghanistan, preceded by decades of conflict, has had a profound impact on many families. Insurgency and enduring poverty have made life particularly challenging for millions of people. Many families who fled the country in earlier years have gradually returned, but are greeted with poor infrastructure, including a lack of health-care facilities, substandard sanitation and not enough clean water.

Despite some progress, human security remains Afghanistan's major challenge. Some districts remain inaccessible due to continuing anti-government activity. Other areas of the country have also experienced deterioration in the security situation, and 2015 saw the highest number of civilian casualties since the UN started keeping records. Likewise, law and order has been a national challenge, with high-turnover rates, lack of professionalism, and a decreasing presence of international security forces.

Afghanistan faces an uncertain economic outlook. Growth has slowed considerably and unemployment is on the rise. Ongoing insecurity hampers investment and encourages many of the most productive and well-educated citizens to migrate. Fifteen years have passed and things do not seem to have improved much.

Afghanistan still ranks third in the world in corruption according to Transparency International, which contributes to its extreme poverty. Although education is more widely available, the quality does not meet world standards.

The teaching profession is not attractive because of the low pay. Despite improvements in the health sector, health indicators still remain below the average for low income countries.

As China, India, and other developing countries are advancing at a rapid rate, Afghanistan, despite the world's military and financial investment, is being left behind.

According to World Bank, Afghanistan ranks 177th in terms of regulation quality and efficiency for investment, with no improvements during the past year.

The number of new firm registrations in 2015 remains well below that of 2012-13. This shows the difficulties in launching new businesses in Afghanistan. The fact that the country has made no improvements over the past 15 years shows that the government is failed to create jobs opportunities – or creating systems for entrepreneurships.

The reason is that government officials do not rely on taxes to stay in office – they rely on aid.

Foreign aid also causes the Afghan government to underperform. Even in the best-case scenario, when there is no corruption, aid money is spent in providing public goods including healthcare, infrastructure, security, and education. Afghans elect their leaders in a democratic process to provide public goods for them; there is no point in elections if these goods are provided by foreign money.

Furthermore, mismanaged aid, hinders democracy in Afghanistan. It is believed that Poverty actually kills more Afghans than those who die as a direct result of the armed conflict either accidental, or inevitable; it is both a cause and a consequence of a massive human rights deficit.

The deficit includes widespread impunity and inadequate investment in, and attention to, human rights. Patronage, corruption, impunity and over-emphasis on short-term goals rather than targeted long-term development are exacerbating a situation of dire poverty that is the condition of an overwhelming majority of Afghans.

Decades of warfare have also had repercussions on traditional, community-level, dispute resolution mechanisms that have significant financial and other implications for the rural poor.

Frequently, personal enmities and local disputes, particularly in the context of access to, or use of, natural resources such as land, water, forests or pastures, lead to outcomes that are disadvantageous to the least powerful. The high inflation during winter, which seems that the cartels and officials have turned a blind eye to it, is unfair.

The sporadic or fortuitous attention from the government will not mitigate the backbreaking burden of the poor citizens. Hence, the government is supposed to stop paying lip service to the challenge and take a serious step to end the problems. The rich are too busy to think about their poor neighbors and humanitarianism is hardly felt in the people's social life.

In other words, the schism between the rich and the poor has widened and those who have buried themselves in the flamboyant world of wealth will not be touched with the excruciating pain of their underprivileged fellows.

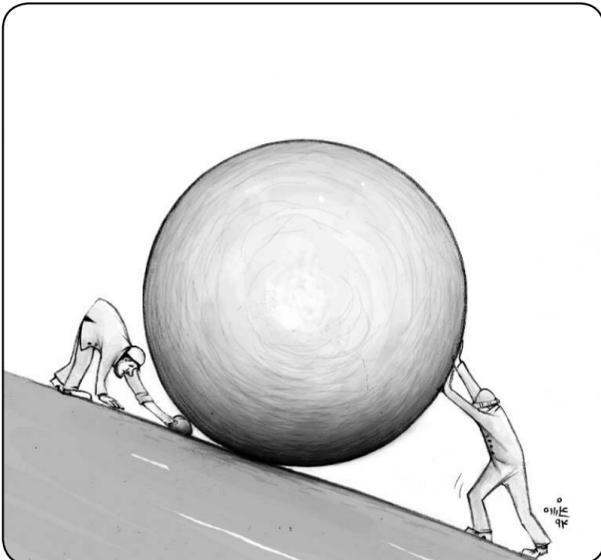
Those who eat sumptuous meal and live in expensive apartments and skyscrapers, have never, actually, imagined about the empty stomachs of their neighbors and their numbness caused by cold weather.

Most probably, same is the case with high-ranking officials. The officials who ride on the most updated and costly vehicles guarded by armed bodyguards, their families lack nothing and their children study in foreign countries, never bothered themselves to help or visit the poor.

So, one will conclude that injustice is rampant across the country. The heads of National Unity Government, who assured the citizens during their electoral campaigns that the economic agenda would alleviate the financial constraints, are supposed to obviate the problem via putting their plans into practice.

The lurid reports of the country's economic challenges and mass unemployment, which were affected negatively by the withdrawal of foreign forces, investors and some of the NGOs, should make the officials seek for a proper solution and effective mechanism.

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