

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



December 31, 2015

Parliamentary Elections Expected in 2016

One of the most important qualities of democracy is the process of election. In a democratic country, if elections continue democracy prospers. This claim can be strengthened by the examples that can be found in the history of greatest democratic states. American democratic history has a series of elections, continued for more than two centuries. United Kingdom's history depicts even a longer continuation of series of elections and today both the countries enjoy a dominant role in international political arena. They both enjoy economic and political might and there are many countries that have been trying to pattern their systems in accordance to these democratic giants.

As a matter of fact, elections let the public govern themselves; therefore, in a democratic state government is elected as per the will of the people. People get the chance of listening the motives and mottos of the leaders and they get time even to analyze them properly. Afterwards, they are given a chance of casting their votes and choosing the leaders whom they consider capable enough to govern their country. It is possible that the leaders who are chosen to form government may not be the best, but they are better than the ones who are not chosen by the will of the majority as every nation in the world has the right to choose what they think better for themselves, without bringing harm to others.

It is important that there should be consistent elections within a democratic country if it really wants to prosper and develop. In fact, every new election is a new step in the evolution of democracy and every new step is better than the earlier one. That is basically the demand of an evolutionary process. Even if the government after new election is corrupt, it is always better than the earlier one as the election before the earlier one had also contributed a little in the awareness enhancement; so will do this new one and the election after this one would have better decisions. People will have a chance to see what the chosen government has been able to offer to them. They can have the chance of not casting their votes to ones who have not been able to serve them properly.

In the context of Afghanistan, there have been certain hiccups regarding the elections process. There have been certain delays and allegations of fraud and the road to a truly democratic election process has not been smooth. There are intellectuals who even believe that democracy will not be able to lead Afghan political system and they even argue that Afghan society is not so far ready for it. But, it would be better to be more logical and scientific. The history of democracy in Afghanistan is very short and blaming democracy for the miseries in our country is not just. It should be given more time and space to grow and serve the people in true sense.

The presidential election took place last year after many controversies and there has been a delay in the parliamentary election as well. Parliament had completed its term in June this year, but because of unpreparedness and security concerns, the elections could not be held before that time and President Ashraf Ghani issued a decree in June, extending parliament's mandate until a vote could be held.

Though Afghanistan's system is a presidential system and the parliament does not enjoy much authority, it is important that the elections must continue without delays and problems as it will ensure improvement in the role of the parliament in the country. Moreover, the district council elections that have to be held along with the parliamentary elections can support in the development of grass root democracy. Though there are still serious concerns regarding the setup, there can be amendments and improvements to make the setup more people oriented and convince the people to participate in such elections to a large extent so that they are able to have their say in the system.

President Ghani, along with Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, pledged in a meeting with the members of the Electoral Reform Commission and selection committee at the Presidential Palace on Tuesday, December 29, that the parliamentary elections will be held next year between summer and fall. He also said that the exact dates for holding parliamentary and district council elections were for the Independent Election Commission to announce under the relevant law. He also said in the meeting, "The important issue is that reforms will be brought and the election date will be announced by the new leadership of the Independent Election Commission."

It is really important for Afghanistan that there should be better power-sharing formula between the parliament and the presidential palace. Moreover, important amendments are required to make district council elections more effective; as, a democratic country can best provide services to the people when the district councils are truly effective, authoritative enough and are formed by the votes of the majority of the people.

We need to understand that in order to have a fruitful tree of democracy, we need to water it continuously with elections, safeguard it from the parasites of corruption, fertilize it with freedom of expression and above all avoid deforestation by dominance of dictatorship. Only then we would be able to continue our journey towards a true democracy.



Nangarhar: A New Hotbed of Insurgency

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

The Nangarhar province has earned the stigma of being the powerbase, if not the birthplace, of the Islamic State group in Afghanistan. Security has been deteriorating in the province in recent months as the Islamic State group is fighting both the government forces and the Taliban for strengthening its foothold and establishing a "regional base" for the ambitious Syria-born Islamic State group led by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. The government has been leading a fierce battle this year against the Islamic State militants to prevent the province from becoming a new hotbed of the insurgency. The government has set up a special unit led by the security and intelligence agencies to fight the militants in the province. Only a few days ago, the authorities announced that around 80 militants of the Islamic State group has been killed in security operations launched in Nangarhar.

Civilians are increasingly becoming a target for the insurgent group as it attempts to promote horror, savagery and fear so that the local Islamic State group resembles the main group in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State group in Nangarhar does not only target the Taliban and the government forces, but also the civilian. Recently, members of a family were brutally killed by the militants. There has been increasing calls from members of Wolesi Jirga and local politicians as well as the public on the government to take action against the group. Militants loyal to Islamic state in Zabul province beheaded seven Hazara passengers, sparking a nation-wide outcry and a huge demonstration in the capital. On Wednesday, dozens of locals and civil society members took to the streets in the provincial capital Jalalabad, demanding government's action for promoting peace and stability in the province and curb the growing insecurity in the province by taking action against the militants. The demonstrators also urged the National Unity Government (NUG) to revise its security strategy for the province.

The demonstration comes only a few days after militias loyal to Zahir Qadir, a prominent Nangarhar MP in the parliament, beheaded a number of IS militants. The beheading is coming as a revenge to the IS beheadings of Taliban members and local pro-government militias. The trend of beheadings in the eastern province has sparked fresh concerns across the country over the deteriorating security and the changing nature of the conflict. The militants belonging to the main Taliban group and the Islamic State in Nangarhar province has been involved in such revenge targeting for months. The two groups have brutally killed and beheaded each other's members in the province. In a show of savagery this year, members of Islamic State planted bombs in a field and blew up members of the rival Taliban. The local Islamic State have been imitating the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria by inventing more sophisticated methods of killing and torture.

The approach by all parties involved in the fight for prominence in Nangarhar, including the Taliban, the Islamic State and pro-government militias fighting the Islamic State indicate that the

conflict is undergoing a crucial metamorphosis which may have long-term impacts over the traditional insurgency led by the Taliban over past fourteen years. What is clear is that the militancy in Afghanistan is to some extent evolving into a more sophisticated and brutal insurgency, in which there is no place for protecting civilians or avoiding from desecration of dead enemy combatants. The only hope is that the reach of the Islamic State and other groups with similar approaches are limited over the far-reaching insurgency against the government across the country.

However, the concerns still are in place because the Taliban and local pro-government militias also are starting to follow the lead of the Islamic State group in exercising savagery and brutality as their war tactics. The recent beheading of members of the Islamic State group proved the concerns of such a vulnerability justified. The ongoing crisis in Nangarhar is gradually becoming a starting point for a changed militancy in the country which would compound the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. The rise of the Islamic State group in Nangarhar and some other provinces such as Kunar and Zabul is becoming as another puzzle in the already sophisticated nature of the conflict. The ground is ripe in Nangarhar for radicalization of the youths by groups such as the Islamic State and for becoming the province as a hotbed of a much headed insurgency.

This should be considered by the government in any peace talks with the militant groups particularly in peace talks with the main Taliban group led by Mullah Mansoor. The Taliban and all other parties involved in the conflict must respect wartime universal laws and protect civilian population disregard of situations on the ground.

The government of Afghanistan should talk this with the militants entering in peace talks, and the UN must specifically pressurize the militant groups to avoid targeting civilian. Taliban's stated war approach in the past has been to prevent targeting innocent civilians. Despite that the group, which loosely controls its fighters across the battlefield, failed to ensure protection of civilians as they say. A large portion of the civilian casualties is attributed to the Taliban targeting non-combatant targets.

At such a difficult time for the government of Afghanistan, it is crucially important to beef up the anti-insurgency campaign both by strengthening Afghan security forces and international community including the Resolute Support mission. Media reports say that the US commander in Afghanistan has suggested of his intention to persuade the US government of maintaining the current level of its troops in Afghanistan by 2017.

The government and the Resolute Support mission must be able to keep sustained pressures over the militant groups to deprive them of strategically valuable gains across the country. In the up-roar of the evolving insurgency, the government and the allied nations should take the lead both on the battleground and the peace negotiations with the Taliban.

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The Afghan Molly Pitcher

By Hujjatullah Zia

Historically, Afghan nation made great sacrifices to achieve freedom and to exercise their rights under a democratic government. Religious tenets, moral principles and cultural values will have prompted the people of Afghanistan to safeguard their rights to life, liberty and property at the cost of their blood. Our past freedom fighters sowed the seeds of democracy so that we can live a peaceful and an honorable life. Their drops of blood stream down the pages of history to carry the message of freedom and self-esteem. Their departed souls do not look forward to hear soulful lyrics, doleful elegy or tearful mourning, but to see us protect their achievements through respecting the rights and dignity of one another.

Afghanistan has a glorious history - which records the selfless acts of our nation. Millions of people sacrificed their lives to hand down freedom to the next generation. They preferred an honorable death to a humiliated life and refused to live under the yoke of cruelty and despotism. They protested against the secular movements that could lead to the erosion of our ethical code or religious and social values. Our nation fought not only to save the soil and territory but also the values which originated in strong faith and firm beliefs.

The 18-year-old Afghan national heroine Malalai of Maiwand - who rallied local people fighters against the British troops at the 1880 Battle of Maiwand - will be kept alive in the heart of our history for her heroic act and considered as a role model. She was a native of Khig, a tiny village on the edge of the Maiwand battlefield, and the daughter of a shepherd. Like many women, Malalai was there to help the wounded and provide water and spare weapons. Eventually there came a point in the battle where the Afghan army was losing morale in Battle of Maiwand. Malalai, also known as "The Afghan Molly Pitcher", took the Afghan flag and addressed them by an epic poem as, "Young love! If you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand, by God, someone is saving you as a symbol of shame." This gave many of the Afghan fighters and ghazis a new resolve and they redoubled their efforts. At that moment one of the leading flag-bearers fell from a British bullet, Malalai went forward and held up the flag singing heroic song as, "With a drop of my sweetheart's blood, shed in defense of the motherland, will I put a beauty spot on my forehead, such as would put to shame the rose in the garden." But then Malalai herself was struck down and killed in cold blood. However, her words had spurred on her countrymen and soon the British lines gave way, broke and turned, leading to a disastrous

retreat back to Kandahar and the biggest defeat for the British army in the Second Afghan War. Afterwards, Ayub Khan, the king who led the Battle of Maiwand, gave a special honor to Malalai and she was buried at her village, where her grave can still be found. Indeed, her actions were enough to turn her into a national heroine where she is still revered today. Schools, hospitals and even a women's magazine have been named after her.

She sacrificed her life valorously and her blood was spilled, while defending the national flag, on the fertile soil of her motherland to ensure the rights and dignity of her compatriots and pave the way for democracy and freedom. Malalai intended to inject the spirit of manliness and courage against tyranny in our society. Her boiling blood in today's history should play more significant role than her sentimental songs in Maiwand Battlefield. Although, it is incredible for the world to hear that an 18-year-old shepherd's daughter gained victory over British army in a battlefield, nonetheless history records many heroic acts of Afghan women.

We are supposed to honor the historical glories which were achieved by national heroes and heroines while defending the homeland. The relatively free air that we breathe in is the fruition of the past struggles and the blood of the freedom fighters oozed to save national values.

Ill-fatedly, the religious intolerance and radical ideologies have narrowed the air for freedom and democracy. People's dignity and their rights to life, liberty and property are violated to a great extent. In other words, scores of individuals are killed in cold blood on the grounds of their cast, creed, color, etc. The current insurgencies, which root in radical ideologies, misrepresent the message of our past freedom fighters and hurt their departed souls. After all, the high death toll of the innocent civilians and current political turmoil are open insult to the blood of our real Mujahidin - who held high ambitions and sacred intentions.

Besides upholding historical achievements and national values, we have to respect the rights and dignity of mankind, mainly our brethren, irrespective of their race, color, sex or beliefs. Practicing upon the golden rule of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" will mitigate the public challenges on a large scale. All mankind are born free and have the rights to live freely and practice their religion freely. So, we are neither to live under subjugation nor to impose our beliefs on others. Let us live in peace but protest against tyranny in case of curtailing our freedom or violating our rights the same as "The Afghan Molly Pitcher" did fearlessly.

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