

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



February 04, 2016

Concerns Regarding Parliamentary Elections

The ambiguities and concerns regarding Afghanistan's parliamentary elections persist as the date for the elections has already been announced. It was a couple of weeks ago when the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) announced that elections would be held on October 15, 2016 (which was to be held in June last year), provided that the government provides necessary support and assistance.

One of the major concerns is the election reforms that were promised but have not been introduced so far. In the presidential election there were serious allegations of fraud and inconsistencies, which ultimately resulted in conflicts between President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah. After various discussions and assistance from the US, both agreed to form National Unity Government (NUG) and bring about necessary reforms in electoral institutions, their roles and responsibilities and at the same time in the overall process before the parliamentary elections. However, no major work has been done in that regard.

One of the reasons is basically the lack of attention and considerations that are devoted to the task. Over-burdening itself with other issues, NUG has not been able to spare time for concentrating on electoral reforms. The issues of insecurity and the reconciliation process with Taliban have dominated the socio-political environment and NUG has not been able to come out of this quagmire.

On the other hand, there is no consensus regarding the shortcomings in the election institutions and processes. It is only feasible to suggest reforms when the real issues are identified and agreed upon. There seems to be great differences in the opinion of the president and the CEO in this regard. Both consider different issues as the top priority. With such a scenario in hand, it is really a Herculean task to bring about necessary reforms before October, 2016.

CEO Abdullah's team seems to question even the legitimacy of election institutions. Javid Faisal, CEO's spokesman had said, "The current election commission has no legitimacy because it was their weak management of the previous election that brought us on the brink of chaos. Electoral reforms are a precondition to any election and that includes changes to the commission." This means that this team would only consider other reforms when there are marked changes in IEC and even in Independent Electoral Complaint Commission (IECC).

It is important to see whether president Ghani would suggest reforms keeping the same commissions intact or he would suggest for bringing about necessary changes in these institutions and then discuss the processes, roles and responsibilities. And, vital would be to reaction of CEO Abdullah in this regard.

Another major conflict or stalemate would definitely put pressure to change the date of the elections once again and raise questions about the legitimacy of the current political system as a whole.

There are also questions about what the actual issues are and what the practical possibilities are to control fraud and manipulation. If both the suggestions from the CEO and President are considered as biased (as they both have their political considerations), is there a possibility that any independent body suggests the best options? And, practically speaking is there any such body and is it acceptable for both the teams? It is difficult to answer these questions and thus show that there are real difficulties and hurdles before the nation reaches to parliamentary elections (if they are ever held).

Apart from these issues, the real challenge is security, as well. Currently, the country has seen a rise in insecurity with the deadly attacks of Taliban insurgents in the capital Kabul. There have been preparations regarding negotiations with Taliban but it is important to see how the process proceeds. If there is not agreement regarding the cease-fire till October, there will be severe security challenges. Insecurity will, therefore, not only discourage the people to cast their votes but will also encourage lack of transparency and increase in the chances of fraud.

It is only possible to make the parliamentary elections a reality and success it has to be understood by everyone that one of the most dominating attributes of democracy is the process of election. If free and transparent elections continue democracy prospers. True elections let the public govern themselves; therefore, in a democratic state government is not anything beyond the General Will. Therefore, for Afghanistan's political survival and its journey towards a democratic country, it is vital that the parliamentary elections are held on time, without fraud and manipulation and with maximum security arrangements so that most of the people who desire to cast their votes are able to do so. In short, 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 discontinuation and delays. Only then we would be able to guarantee political stability and continue our journey towards a true democracy.



China's Engagement in Afghanistan's Peace Efforts

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

As the four-way initiative is preparing the ground for peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, China's role in the process is emerging as a key opportunity for the talks to succeed and end the long-lasting conflict in the country. Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani recently paid a visit to Chinese capital Beijing to discuss the peace efforts as well as security and cultural issues with the Chinese officials. Rabbani's visit to China came after the second meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group - comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, US and China - was held in Kabul last week. The four-nation coordination group is set to finalize a framework and draw a roadmap for the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban groups. At conclusion of its last meeting in Kabul, the group called on the Taliban to enter peace negotiations with the government of Afghanistan.

In the recent years, the Chinese government have signaled a more active engagement for resolving the conflict in Afghanistan. Afghan governments have long been trying to engage Beijing in efforts for resolving the conflict in Afghanistan. Former president Hamid Karzai initiated the efforts to get China involved in matters of the war and peace efforts in Afghanistan. However, with the presence of the US-led coalition fighting the Taliban, China largely avoided to get drawn into the conflict which Beijing was not viewing it as it as relevant to its interests. With the gradual exit of the Western coalition ahead of 2014, China signaled greater presence in Afghanistan's development efforts and more active role in the regional diplomacy for resolving the conflict in the country. A flurry of high-profile diplomatic trips of Chinese diplomats to Kabul and Islamabad was the first signs of a shifting approach in Beijing over the country's engagement in Afghanistan. The country has made it clear now that it is going to play a completely different and more active role in persuading the Taliban to reach a peace deal with the Afghan government.

The visit of the Afghan foreign minister to Beijing was an opportunity for both countries to work together more closely to establish a plan for the peace talks and bring the Taliban to the table of negotiations. Afghanistan and China has much to do as part of the four nations working jointly on the resumption of the Afghan peace efforts. China's role is crucial in both the initial preparation phase of the ongoing initiative and the real process of negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The ongoing preparations led by the four countries would play a key role in success or failure of the overall peace process. Most of the past peace efforts failed at the very beginning and mostly even before the inception of the talks. China is believed to have considerable influence over Pakistan, who in turn is believed to have unchallenged influence and

control over the Taliban militant group. Given that Afghanistan highly values China's role in the Afghan peace process, Beijing can play an exceptional role in persuading Islamabad and Kabul to continue to work on peace-related issues and even the trickiest challenges which have failed both sides in the past. Afghanistan and China need to work with the Pakistani government to ensure that the efforts would remain on track at events of any unexpected circumstances. As China is going to play an active role in the assumed peace process aimed at ending the long-lasting conflict, the government of Afghanistan needs to do more to further expand relations with Beijing as it is pursuing more improved relations with Islamabad. Improving ties between Afghanistan and China is as much important for the prospect of peace process as improvement of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The parties involved in leading the preparations for resumption of peace talks have come a long way forward as they now pursue the efforts through the established four-way governing platform. The four-way efforts is going to institutionalize the joint cooperation among the four involved countries and would result to development of an efficient and well-functional body governing the whole peace process. The coordination group provides China and the US to join their cooperation for resolving the Afghan conflict in a coordinated and organized way, which was not possible without such a joint working group.

The four-way initiative preparing the framework for the peace talks could viably work as the governing body for leading the peace negotiations in the future. Therefore, it is crucially important for the involved countries to develop and further boost the initiative as a robust and comprehensive governing body overseeing the future peace talks into success. While the previous trilateral efforts of the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan did not prove effective for making consensus over the war and peace efforts in Afghanistan, there are many reasons that the four-way initiative - that includes China - would work in successfully leading the peace efforts. China is emerging is a savior of the struggling US efforts in Afghanistan while Beijing has also good relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ironically, the Taliban also have positive views to China due to the Chinese policy of non-interference.

China's engagement is one of the rare opportunities for the long-awaited peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. All parties, including the Taliban, need to realize the opportunity and remain aligned with the overall efforts to lead them to success.

The Afghan government hopes the Chinese involvement in the process would be a milestone for the peace efforts. However, the Chinese engagement will also be a crucial test for success of possible future peace negotiations aimed at ending the long-lasting conflict in the country.

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The Political Instability

By Hujjatullah Zia

According to a report, the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in the second half of 2015, with Taliban fighters staging more attacks and inflicting heavy casualties on Afghan forces. The grim perspective prompted Obama to scale back his drawdown plans, which had previously seen the United States drawing down to an embassy-based presence by 2017. "It's time to immediately halt US troop withdrawals and eliminate any target date for withdrawal," said Senator John McCain. He further pointed out that cutting US troop levels from 9,800 to 5,500 as planned could undermine efforts to both bolster Afghan forces and combat al Qaeda and Islamic State militants. It came as a top Brig. Gen. Wilson Shoffner, deputy chief of staff for communications, said earlier that Afghan forces got better in their performances in 2015, the Taliban were unable to hold ground. "And in almost every case, the Afghan security forces were able to retake the ground that the Taliban took, whether it was a roadway or a district center or key terrain. The Afghan security forces bounced back and retook that," he said. He added that the best example of that was the fact that the Afghan security forces retook Kunduz City, with a population of over 300,000 people, just in a week.

On the other hand, however, a senior Pentagon official is quoted as saying, "The local forces need air support, intelligence and help with logistics. They are not going to be ready in three years or five years. You have to be there for a very long time." According to him, there is a wide recognition in the Pentagon that building an effective Afghan army and police force will take a generation's commitment, including billions of dollars a year in outside funding and constant support from thousands of foreign advisers on the ground. In spite of the fact that sustained efforts were made, billions of dollars were spent and hundreds of US soldiers lost their lives to combat militancy, Obama administration yet finds Afghanistan an unsafe country. "At this point it's clear that it's a very difficult situation in Afghanistan right now. It's a dangerous country," these words were spoken by White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest. "There's also been a mission that US military personnel have undertaken that is focused on counterterrorism that has both an element of protecting the forces that are serving in Afghanistan, but also protecting the United States and our interests from extremist organizations that are operating in that region of the world." It is beyond doubt that Afghan combatants and non-combatants suffered high casualties with the Taliban's spring offensive and the withdrawal of US soldiers. As a result, to-

tal civilian deaths and injuries in the first quarter of 2015 followed the record high levels of 2014. Between January 01 and March 31, UNAMA documented 1,810 civilian casualties. Indeed, Afghanistan has remained a "dangerous country" and the civilians' blood is spilled on the soil of their homeland despite the "war on terror" and NATO's long presence in the country. However, the US politicians express contradictory ideas regarding the security situation in Afghanistan. The fact is that the political structure has turned fragile and Afghan nation is vulnerable to terror and militancy. In other words, the withdrawal of foreign forces, the Taliban's heavy offensive and the emergence of the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) all have put pressure on the country. Therefore, it is hard for Afghan soldiers to tackle the pressing challenges overnight. The White House has recently given the military broad authority to target Islamic State in Afghanistan. Lieutenant General John Nicholson said that the Taliban came at the Afghan forces "more intensely than perhaps we anticipated.... Because of that, we did not make the advances we projected we thought we would make." Nicholson listed capability gaps within Afghan forces including in intelligence, air support and the evacuation of wounded forces from the battlefield. To mitigate the security challenges, Afghan officials seek to resume peace talk with the Taliban elements with the support of China, US and Pakistani officials. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said that representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States will meet in the Pakistani capital Islamabad within days to discuss how to resume the stalled peace process between Kabul and the Taliban - it will be third such meeting in recent weeks. According to officials, Taliban representatives will be invited when the four countries reach some understanding on the overall roadmap. Resuming reconciliation process is the only hope for Afghan nation to alleviate militancy and political turmoil, though, it was proved abortive frequently. Comparing to the ISIL, it is a good opportunity for the Taliban fighters to welcome the open door of talk as a peace offering. There is no choice for the ISIL militants other than being dealt militarily and therefore come under heavy attacks. Afghan President also ordered the Ministry of Defense (MoD) earlier to keep bombing the members of ISIL. So, if the Taliban miss this opportunity, they will also fall in the same boat as ISIL. Reportedly, the Taliban have shown green light about peace talk, but the success of the talk is still foggy - as it did not come to fruition despite the sustainable efforts of Afghan-Pak officials within the past years.

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