

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

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Avoiding Setbacks in Democratic Achievements

After the downfall of Taliban in Afghanistan, the system that emerged in Afghanistan was said to be based on democracy; however, even after 17 years, the country has not been able to form a democratic system. And, now as the peace deal with Taliban are on the way, there are fears that the country will face further setback in this regard. Some fear that Taliban may not agree to the Constitution of Afghanistan that supports the democratic system in the country, Afghan government may give up their strict stance on limited democratic gains that have been achieved. Nevertheless, it is imperative that Afghan authorities, leaders and people as a whole must stand for democracy and try to further nurture it so that a true democracy can flourish in the country.

In order to save democracy, it is very important that there must be efforts to promote accountability and check the shift towards the authoritarian rule.

In a democratic country the ultimate authority should lie within the people. And ultimately, the government should be answerable to the people. Moreover, to guarantee such accountability the modern democratic theory emphasizes to establish and strengthen political systems in such a way that people have most of the power, though indirectly. The underdeveloped and developing democracies must pursue the same theory to help promote better democratic systems. Afghanistan, being in a very primary stage of democracy should make efforts on the same principle. However, the democratic trends in Afghanistan are also under threat of authoritarian inclinations.

One of the basic ways the people can participate in the affairs of the state is through elections. Well-established and developed election systems can provide opportunities to all the members of the society to cast their votes and have their say in the making of the government. However, in Afghanistan this basic institution of democracy has not been able to function appropriately. The last parliamentary and presidential elections were vehemently dominated by fraud, corruption and incapacity.

The proper and well-developed election process can play an important role in creating accountable government. A political party or a politician in order to be elected by the votes of the people tries to perform properly so that it gets chance of remaining in authority for a longer period of time. If the political parties and the contestants in the elections come to know that they can win the election even without the consent of the people, through illegal ways, they will never remain accountable to the people and would not care much about the public opinion. Afghan political scenario, at the moment, is facing almost a similar sort of situation.

Another issue of unaccountability arises when a system is made personality-oriented, wherein the individuals are prioritized on the basis of their actual or assumed personality traits. This property is mostly found in dictatorial and authoritarian forms of government. Such ideologies are basically the remnants of the monarchies that could be found long ago in human history.

The institutions, which can play a dominant role in establishing democratic culture and accountable system, are underestimated and even ignored in such systems. Our country Afghanistan happens to be a similar country. The democratic institutions are ignored to a great extent while the political system circulates around the personalities. Even the election system is designed in such a way that promotes personality-worship. The absence of political parties and their influence within election system have made many overlook the importance of political parties which happen to be very important institution for the growth and institutionalization of democracy.

It is also unfortunate to note that Afghan government structure has been formed in such a way that it is difficult to hold the presidential palace accountable for its policies and actions. As a matter of fact, accountability can be achieved when there is transparency and the rule of law. However, both these characteristics seem to be non-existent in Afghan society. Transparency and rule of law can be maintained when there is proper separation of power and the different organs of state can function on their own - independently. In fact, judiciary and law enforcement agencies must be capable to hold the law as the top priority matter. In Afghan political system the separation of powers is not clear and the judiciary is composed of what the government decides.

A thorough analysis of Afghanistan's political scenario will depict that currently the political processes are also being kept aloof of accountability along with the institutions. The current efforts for the reconciliation and reintegration processes are very much non-participatory and non-transparent. As the major stakeholders are being kept away from the processes, a sort of ambiguity and distrust is being generated within different circles and the people of Afghanistan. Moreover, there is a disadvantage of such an approach as well - it is likely to result in improper and incomplete outcomes of the processes, which will further generate controversies.

Afghan authorities have in fact kept on striving to limit the power and authority to themselves and, on certain occasions, have used the same irresponsibly. The need of time is to make the political institutions and processes accountable to the people through proper democratization of the political structure.

Pavements, Culture of Using Pavements, Role of Both in Urban Congestion

By: Nasir Ahmad Salehzada

Pavements are the key component of cities' infrastructure which are constructed in cities particularly in crowded and less crowded areas as the citizens' rights for safe commuting and comfortable urban traffic. Pavements are inseparable parts of the cities' infrastructure and are considered as key elements in urban design. "Pavements consist of three parts: the free zone, where people actually walk; the service area, where street furniture is placed as a chink or rubbish bin; and the transfer area, where the access for people inside the sidewalk to the buildings. Understanding the relationship between these elements is an essential element in designing appropriate size footpaths."

In Afghanistan, municipalities have made tremendous efforts in pavement construction and thus constructed appropriate pavements in every parts of the cities aimed at providing basic urban infrastructure. Citizens use these pavements for various purposes knowingly and unknowingly which sometimes makes life easy for them. Sometimes, unreasonable use of the pavements by citizens causes urban problems to others. In this article, the situation of urban pavement, the culture of using pavement and their role in urban congestion in Afghanistan are discussed.

As per the Afghanistan Urban Development Law, all urban infrastructures are constructed in accordance with the city master plan and detailed plans. It should be noted that most of Afghanistan's cities either have no master plans or even if they have any, they are not properly implemented. Despite all the challenges, in the construction of cities, whether planned or unplanned, the construction of pavements is well considered, and you find fewer neighborhoods in a city that lack pavements. The condition of these pavements in better developed and rich cities is much better with good decoration by mosaics, while in less developed or poorer cities, existing pavements are without mosaics which are dusty during summer and muddy during winter that makes the commuting difficult for citizens.

Other challenges that add to urban pavement issues include poor urban culture, lack of civic education, inappropriate role models, and lack of social corporate responsibility by academic institutions in culture building that makes life difficult for people and increases potential risks. Here are some examples which reflects poor urban culture among citizens particularly in use of pavements in Afghanistan cities:

Blockage of pavements by government institutions, national and international organizations, commanders, etc; Operation of street

vendors in pavements; Putting of merchandise by shopkeepers in pavement to attract customers; Commuting of passersby on the streets rather pavements even though the roads are open; which create traffic accident risks and group movement of citizens in horizontal line sometimes blocks half of the road. When car horns at them, it may lead to quarrel sometimes. Sometimes, this causes accident and injuries to passerby. Improper implementation of law indirectly motivates passersby to use roads for pavement because in case of accident, the car drivers are subject to punishment even certain individuals on the roads are proved to be guilty. Boarding of passengers by public transporters in pavements or in the middle of the streets; in crowded and less width street, hundreds of vehicles must wait for hours for only one vehicle to complete its passengers which can cause heavy traffic. And indifference of traffic police despite monitoring the situation; examples of this indifference could be seen in Kote Sangi, Jada-e-maiwand, Sarai Shamali square and many other locations in Kabul.

It is worth to consider that urban facilities and infrastructure, especially pavements, acceptable culture of using these infrastructures and proper implementation of civil law are complementary to each other and, each of these set ups plays a significant role in urban life. Urban facilities provide citizen with better commuting infrastructure, cleaner urban environment, safe and comfortable traffic, etc. and all together depend to an appropriate culture of using them. Mutual respect to humanity mandates every human being to avoid misuse of public facilities. Also, for personal benefits or businesses whether small, we should not block pavements and roads which are built for public use. Meanwhile, citizens are encouraged to comply with rules on use of public facilities and avoid using roads for pavement while drivers are encouraged for safe driving to guarantee safety of theirs, the citizen and their social environment.

With due consideration to the current urban realities, existence of pavement, culture of using it and role of both in urban life were thoroughly highlighted and indicate that growing challenges exist. Thus, to minimize the above challenges, responsible authorities are called for to pay serious attention to implementation of the relevant rules and regulations while citizens are requested to act like a responsible citizen so that we have safe, beautiful, clean and inclusive cities that everyone enjoys life.

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Prince Mohammed's Khashoggi bullet: An insight into Saudi strategic thinking

By: James M. Dorsey

Continued, albeit slower-paced US and Turkish leaks potentially provide insight into far more than the circumstances of the October killing of Saudi journalist and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi. They focus attention on crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's strategic thinking as well as his tightened control of the kingdom's media.

In the latest disclosure, The New York Times, quoting anonymous US intelligence sources, reported that Prince Mohammed had threatened a year before the killing in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to take out Mr. Khashoggi with "a bullet" if he refused to return to the kingdom or continued to publicly criticize Saudi policies.

While significant in and of itself, equally interesting is the fact that the crown prince was speaking at the time to Turki Aldakhil, a prominent Saudi columnist and former general manager of the of Al Arabiya television network.

Prince Mohammed is believed to have obtained a controlling share in satellite broadcaster Middle East Broadcasting Center, Al Arabiya's mother company, when he detained scores of members of the kingdom's ruling family, senior current and former officials and prominent businessmen in November 2017 in what amounted to a power and asset grab.

Disclosures this week by The Wall Street Journal and Amazon Inc. Founder and Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos as well as earlier cooperation agreements with Bloomberg News and Britain's online independent newspaper suggest that Prince Mohammed's media ambitions are global, not just limited to Saudi Arabia.

The Wall Street Journal reported that Prince Mohammed had in August of last year invited Vice Media Executive Chairman Shane Smith to his yacht moored off the Red Sea coast to discuss cooperation. Vice had already been contracted to produce videos about Prince Mohammed's social and economic reforms.

In a blog post, Mr. Bezos alleged National Enquirer publisher American Media Inc. had tried to blackmail him and potentially colluded with Saudi Arabia to damage his reputation. The National Enquirer last year published a front-page cover of Prince Mohammed and nearly 100 pages dedicated to his kingdom's reform efforts.

In what was seen at the time as a reflection of his master's voice, Mr. Aldakhil detailed two weeks after Mr. Khashoggi's killing a laundry list of potential Saudi responses if the the United States were to sanction the kingdom and/or the crown prince for the murder.

The list included allowing oil prices to rise up to US\$200 per barrel, which according to Mr. Aldakhil, would lead to "the death" of the US economy, pricing Saudi oil in Chinese yuan instead of dollars, an end to intelligence sharing, and a military alliance with Russia that would involve a Russian military base in the kingdom.

It remained unclear whether Mr. Aldakhil was reflecting serious discussions among secretive Saudi leaders or whether his article was intended either as a scare tactic and/or a trial balloon. Mr. Aldakhil's claim that a Saudi response to Western sanctions could entail a reconciliation with the kingdom's arch enemy, Iran, seemed to make his

assertion more of a geopolitical and economic bluff.

Similarly, Mr. Aldakhil's suggestion that Saudi Arabia still maintained the ability to singlehandedly manipulate world oil prices was called into question in December when the kingdom needed an agreement with non-OPEC member Russia on production levels as well as Russian assistance in managing Iranian resistance to achieve an understanding within the oil cartel.

Mr. Aldakhil's column did, however, highlight the fact that uncertainty about US President Donald J. Trump's reliability as an ally and mounting anti-Saudi sentiment in the US Congress has prompted Prince Mohammed to hedge his bets by forging closer ties to Russia despite Russia's alliance with Iran and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

Prince Mohammed has been in Moscow several times since first travelling there in March 2017 with his father, King Salman, the first Saudi monarch to visit Russia. Oil and weapons topped the agenda of Prince Mohammed, who doubles up as Saudi Arabia's defense minister and oil czar.

Saudi Arabia is in advanced discussions for the purchase of Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft defense missile system and is entertaining a Russian bid to build 16 nuclear reactors worth US\$80 billion with far less restrictions on enrichment of uranium and reprocessing of spent fuel than the United States would likely impose.

Gulf analyst Theodore Karasik argues that Russia has been creating a 'north-south' economic corridor built on a web of commercial deals, monetray arrangements and soft power instruments such as business councils focused on the Gulf in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. Russia's sovereign wealth fund, Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), is discussing with Saudi Arabia billions of dollars worth of deals in oil refining, petrochemicals, gas chemicals and oilfield services.

Saudi Arabia has pledged to invest up to US\$10 billion in Russia's economy, with Saudi companies interested in investing in Russian infrastructure, agriculture, hi-tech, energy and mining sectors, including US\$5 billion in a liquefied natural gas project in the Russian Arctic. Russia's strategy of what Russian national security scholar Stephen Blank dubs 'strategic denial,' denying the United States the role of sole dominant power in the Middle East, serves Prince Mohammed's hedging of his bets.

Prince Mohammed would like the Trump administration to believe that Russia's strategy could work.

"Now we know who our best friends are, and who our best enemies are," the crown prince told Russian, Chinese, Japanese and French businessmen on the sidelines of an investment conference in Riyadh last October that was attended by a 40-man Russian delegation and boycotted by numerous Western CEOs and officials because of the Khashoggi killing.

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