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

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Legitimacy is Ensured through Justice

There is a direct link between justice and legitimacy. Even if a country does not have many resources, it can survive if there is justice prevailing in it. People can go through difficult times if they believe that their government is just and the system is able to strive justly for their wellbeing. However, if there is no justice within a society, excess of resources would end up creating an imbalanced society. In the presence of injustice the society would tend to become highly polarized. Moreover, crimes, corruption and many other social evils are directly linked to the unavailability of justice and the societies that have strived to maintain true justice have, in fact, set themselves on the way to a prosperous future. While the countries, which have neglected it, have fallen to the depths of troubles and instability.

At the same time, the people of a country are attached to a country that prioritizes justice and accept the authority of the government that practices it.

Finding law and order consistent for every one and treating every one as per merit, gives people confidence in the system and they start belonging to it and ultimately strive to play a positive role within the society. However, if they find that the justice system is biased and favor a certain group of people, they will definitely become neglected and alienated from the system and will, resultantly, follow a path that may be illegal or even unjust.

Afghanistan is also one of the countries that is lacking justice in its system. The people are not treated the way they deserve and the justice has, in fact, become the will of the rich. The ruling class, along with the elite and the authoritative individuals can easily take advantage of the law and order system or totally surpass it; while the poor people have to be treated in the most terrible way. Therefore, the government seems to be losing its legitimacy.

The government authorities and institutions are not believed and in most of the cases they are not even accepted as having the right to rule. There are certain parts of the country where the people still consider Taliban as the legitimate rulers.

These are the parts where the government has not been able to penetrate through the miseries of the people. The government services in these parts of the country are almost non-existent. Therefore, the people have lost any appreciation of the government's role. It remains a fact that the justice system in Afghanistan for some of the rural parts of the country are either non-functional or they are very slow.

People mostly do not go to the law or the formal system for solving their matters as they have to wait for a long time before they can get their cases solved and their rights given. That is one of the reasons that the tribal setup has existed and has provided the background for Taliban to function.

In such a setup Taliban with their speedy way of providing their own form of justice come to action and, at the same time, earn the support and the favor of the people.

In certain ways, Taliban in those areas have more legitimacy and support than the government institutions. Moreover, terrorism and terrorists have further debilitated the justice system. Insecurity and clashes have created a situation wherein the powerful can easily escape the law and order. There are many war crimes that go unnoticed or if they are noticed, they are not pursued properly. The national mechanism to control such crimes has not been strengthened, while the international pressure has not resulted in enough action. Therefore, the situation has remained grim.

Afghanistan is passing through a very crucial juncture in its history. It has to make sure that it survives through it. And, for that to happen, it must guard justice.

Definitely, the support and assistance of the international organizations can be helpful and the country needs to cooperate with them in that regard. However, the pursuit of justice by the government itself is also very much crucial. There should be efforts on the national level to strengthen the institutions that may guard justice, promote it and protect it.

Without national efforts for strengthening Afghanistan itself to fight against injustice and establish strong and independent law and order system, it would be very difficult to imagine that the country would be able to fight the prevailing injustice successfully. Afghan government needs to understand that no state in the world can maintain its integrity and order if it does not possess and guard justice. Justice is the requirement to maintain law and order and reduce crimes from a society.

If a state fails to establish strong institutions that can practice and provide justice, it is bound to be filled with instability, corruption and illegitimacy.

No Silver Lining for Our Cloud

By Hujjatullah Zia

With the escalated insurgency, the hope for a peaceful future declines. Afghan nation continues falling victim to terrorist attacks and suicide bombings. Life is as cheap as ever before. The peace agreement with Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar does not seem to alleviate violence and bloodshed. The nation has been fluctuating between hope and despair but the dream for a civil society, where the true spirit of democracy is supposed to be practiced, has been elusive. Democratic discourse is debated hotly in the media and academic atmosphere; however, the political and social challenges hamper democracy in real life.

Warring factions violate humanitarian law via killing non-combatants, including women and children and international aid workers, which will blacken the reputation of Afghanistan at international level.

Of late, gunmen have reportedly killed six members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Jawzjan province. Suspending some of its efforts in the country, the head of the ICRC called the incident the "worst attack against us" in 20 years, but the group said it did not know who was responsible.

"We will put our operations on hold for at least a week after our colleagues were killed in the attack last night," Thomas Glass, an aid worker and public relations officer with the ICRC is cited as saying.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid denied the responsibility of the attack. The governor of Jawzjan province, Lotfullah Azizi, said the aid convoy was attacked by suspected Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) gunmen. Afghanistan is the Red Cross' fourth-largest humanitarian program in the world, and the attack follows a warning by the charity last month that mounting security issues made it difficult to deliver aid across the country. Gunmen in northern Afghanistan kidnapped a Spanish ICRC employee in mid-December, releasing him nearly a month later.

ISIL fighters are considerably involved in militancy and challenge the National Unity Government (NUG) in one way or another.

Within the two past years, ISIL outfits targeted the minority group on the grounds of its race and creed to stoke sectarianism and trigger tensions between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. They killed men, women and children in the worst possible way to spark off an outpouring of sensation and expected a backlash against Sunni Muslims which was, fortunately, proved abortive and no unwise reaction was shown. Hence, the ISIL fighters have, now, ushered in killing the international aid workers to challenge the NUG; this is believed to be the second project.

ISIL fighters violated humanitarian law anywhere they gained foothold, mainly in Iraq and Syria, through raping women and children, beheading ethnic minority group, shooting at civilians in foreign countries. In other words, the militant fighters seek to create horror and terror around the globe.

Their ideology stems from evil and sinister nature. They neither care nor know about the rule of war and violate this rule not only through spilling the blood of non-combatants and torturing the wounded in action but also destroying the historical monuments.

The ISIL's loyalists intend to put their radical ideology into practice in Afghanistan, wherever possible. They sow the seed of discord among the multi-ethnic nation of Afghanistan and put the reputation of the country into disrepute. Such strategies will be damaging for the country and will lead to horrible consequence if not in near but in far future.

It is simply said that 'a stitch in time saves nine'. This is a right time for the government and international community to launch a far-reaching and comprehensive campaign against terrorist networks or else they will grow stronger with each passing day.

No wonder, the security situation worsens with the process of time. A report released by a US watchdog agency says that Afghan government controls less than 60 percent of the country. "SIGAR's analysis of the most recent data provided by US forces in Afghanistan suggests that the security situation in Afghanistan has not improved this quarter," it said. "The numbers of the Afghan security forces are decreasing, while both casualties and the number of districts under insurgent control or influence are increasing."

According to US military estimates, the number of Afghans living under insurgent control or influence decreased slightly in recent months to about 2.5 million people. But nearly a third of the country or 9.2 million people live in areas that are contested, according to SIGAR, leading to some of the highest civilian casualty rates the United Nations has ever recorded in Afghanistan.

The tip of the iceberg was solved with the peace agreement signed with HIA and Mullah Mansour's successor is believed to organize heavy attacks against Afghan nation. That is to say, the insurgents will never succumb to the call of Afghan government for peace and stability.

Since violence and ferocity run in the militants' blood, their appetite for bloodshed will not decline. The public hope for democracy is waning and the NUG failed to gain the nation's trust despite the mouth-watering agenda expressed by the heads of NUG during their presidential campaigns.

The questions are that how long will the nation suffer from militancy? Isn't it time to stop investing on the High Peace Council (HPC) and resorting to only and only military operation against all militant fighters?

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Managing Big Data's Big Risks

By Ernest Davis

In the last 15 years, we have witnessed an explosion in the amount of digital data available – from the Internet, social media, scientific equipment, smart phones, surveillance cameras, and many other sources – and in the computer technologies used to process it. "Big Data," as it is known, will undoubtedly deliver important scientific, technological, and medical advances. But Big Data also poses serious risks if it is misused or abused.

Already, major innovations such as Internet search engines, machine translation, and image labeling have relied on applying machine-learning techniques to vast data sets. And, in the near-future, Big Data could significantly improve government policymaking, social-welfare programs, and scholarship.

But having more data is no substitute for having high-quality data. For example, a recent article in Nature reports that election pollsters in the United States are struggling to obtain representative samples of the population, because they are legally permitted to call only landline telephones, whereas Americans increasingly rely on cellphones. And while one can find countless political opinions on social media, these aren't reliably representative of voters, either. In fact, a substantial share of tweets and Facebook posts about politics are computer-generated.

In recent years, automated programs based on biased data sets have caused numerous scandals. For example, last June, when a college student searched Google images for "unprofessional hairstyles for work," the results showed mostly pictures of black people; when the student changed the first search term to "professional," Google returned mostly pictures of white people.

But this was not the result of bias on the part of Google's programmers; rather, it reflected how people had labeled pictures on the Internet. A Big Data program that used this search result to evaluate hiring and promotion decisions might penalize black candidates who resembled the pictures in the results for "unprofessional hairstyles," thereby perpetuating traditional social biases. And this isn't just a hypothetical possibility. Last year, a ProPublica investigation of "recidivism risk models" demonstrated that a widely used methodology to determine sentences for convicted criminals systematically overestimates the likelihood that black defendants will commit crimes in the future, and underestimates the risk that white defendants will do so. Another hazard of Big Data is that it can be gamed.

When people know that a data set is being used to make important decisions that will affect them, they have an incentive to tip the scales in their favor.

For example, teachers who are judged according to their students' test scores may be more likely to "teach to the test," or even to cheat.

Similarly, college administrators who want to move their institutions up in the US News and World Reports rankings have made unwise decisions, such as investing in extravagant gyms at the expense of academics. Worse, they have made grotesquely unethical decisions, such as the effort by Mount Saint Mary's University to boost its "retention rate" by identifying and expelling weaker students in the first few weeks of school.

Even Google's search engine is not immune. Despite being driven by an enormous amount of data overseen by some of the world's top data scientists, its results are susceptible to "search-engine optimization" and manipulation, such as "Google bombing," "spamdexing," and other methods serving parochial interests.

A third hazard is privacy violations, because so much of the data now available contains personal information. In recent years, enormous collections of confidential data have been stolen from commercial and government sites; and researchers have shown how people's political opinions or even sexual preferences can be accurately gleaned from seemingly innocuous online postings, such as movie reviews – even when they are published pseudonymously. Finally, Big Data poses a challenge for accountability. Someone who feels that he or she has been treated unfairly by an algorithm's decision often has no way to appeal it, either because specific results cannot be interpreted, or because the people who have written the algorithm refuse to provide details about how it works.

And while governments or corporations might intimidate anyone who objects by describing their algorithms as "mathematical" or "scientific," they, too, are often awed by their creations' behavior.

The European Union recently adopted a measure guaranteeing people affected by algorithms a "right to an explanation"; but only time will tell how this will work in practice. When people who are harmed by Big Data have no avenues for recourse, the results can be toxic and far-reaching, as data scientist Cathy O'Neil demonstrates in her recent book Weapons of Math Destruction.

The good news is that the hazards of Big Data can be largely avoided. But they won't be unless we zealously protect people's privacy, detect and correct unfairness, use algorithmic recommendations prudently, and maintain a rigorous understanding of algorithms' inner workings and the data that informs their decisions.

(Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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