

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



February 13, 2016

Investment is Dropping in Afghanistan

As the concerns regarding the security are rising, the concerns regarding other walks of life are also multiplying in Afghanistan. One of the major of them is the economy. Afghanistan would be faced with great challenges of stabilizing its economy and striving to stand on its own in the post-withdrawal era. As international support would diminish and the investors do not seem very much interested in Afghanistan because of uncertain conditions, the future for Afghan economic system does not seem a smooth sail. It is important to see how much the responsible authorities in the country would be ready to face all these challenges.

Highlighting the same concern Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI) disclosed on Friday, February 12, that foreign investment in the country sharply dropped to its lowest level since the start of new solar year, which is a warning of an economic recession if the government does not take firm steps to tackle the decline.

According to ACCI, a surge in violence across the country and government's failure for providing fresh incentives to foreign investors have also affected domestic investments. Khan Alokozai, the deputy head of ACCI, said in a statement, "There has not been any foreign investment in the country this year, no one is prepared to invest amid the fragile security situation, even our domestic investors are faced with numerous problems right now and they are not willing to continue." Meanwhile, Afghanistan Investment Supporting Agency (AISA) has said that investments dropped by 26 percent this year.

The ACCI and AISA have warned that if the government does not come up with strategic economic reforms to boost the economy and attract foreign investments, the country may collapse into a financial recession.

The situation seems really threatening and if the country is not able to attract investors, it would be very difficult to construct an infrastructure that would be helpful for the future of Afghanistan's economic system. Aid and support would be helpful but they can only be of any advantage when Afghanistan's economy is able to stand on its own. Therefore, it is vital that the authorities should make efforts to pave the way for better economic opportunities for both the national and international investors.

The doubts and uncertainties of the Afghan market have made the international investors think thousand times before they take an initiative to start their businesses in the country. Though there are great opportunities in Afghanistan and the country is blessed with different types of mineral and other natural resources, the economic infrastructure has not been able to get enough attention.

Apart from that there are other factors as well that have been influencing the economic system of Afghanistan. Among them the rising corruption is the most dominant one. It is important that the menace of corruption must be tackled with iron fists to enhance economic opportunities. Additionally, the insufficient and unfavorable business environment is also one of the issues affecting Afghan economy. There have to be strong business laws governing the society and controlling the business. The laws should not only safeguard the rights of investors and businessmen but also make sure that the competition within the system is maintained on strong and fair footings. The evils like monopoly based on unfair competition must be tackled properly and there should be strong bodies that control the prices within the markets, which at the present are non-existent and the businessmen are fixing the rates on their own. This has given rise to a political system that, on the exterior, is called as democratic but in reality is an ad-hoc arrangement that has no strong foundation.

Afghan economy, therefore, requires structured development towards a capitalist society. And in this regard, businesses can play a vital role. If within a system there are consistent investments and different businesses, the system is on a track towards development and prosperity. Since the very inception of human society, human beings have required businesses so as to have their requirements fulfilled. Throughout human history, businesses have taken different forms and characteristics and today have reached to a very advanced form. From the barter system to today's advanced era when the businesses are taking place online, there has been a series of different practices, but the vitality of the business has never been lost.

Having developed its economic infrastructure based on capitalism or free market economy marked with stability, Afghanistan can hope to tackle some of the major social problems as well. It can then be in a position to tackle the major problems like poverty and unemployment that are basically giving rise to many other social problems. Moreover, the political stability is also largely dependent on the economic stability. If the country is able to have a stable economic system, it would on a track towards a truly democratic society. In addition to that, the economic stability would, in the long run, support Afghanistan to fight terrorism and restore peace and tranquility in the country.



Vibrant Media; A Pre-Requisite to Democracy!

By Asmatyari

Mass media has a prominent role to play in modern society. It can bring about radical changes and improve social situation as it influences social, civil, cultural, political, economic and aesthetic outlook. Modernization has converted media into an indispensable feature of human activity. However, factors like age, education, economic condition, personal needs and availability of proper components decide the quantum and frequency of media use.

It is rightly said that media use is an index of development. The greater the use, the higher will be the level of education. As social beings, humans are sustained by mutual interactions, exchange of ideas, information and views with the fellow beings. Illiteracy, which is nothing but absence of education and information is a tentative block for any aspect of development-social, economic, political, cultural and even spiritual. Media has become the forerunner of development through the removal of these roadblocks and the provision of information and knowledge.

In a democratic country, the ultimate power lies with the people. But a democratic society needs vigilant and informed people who are able to see through the gimmick of political parties and politicians. Media creates such valuable citizens. Besides, media has done much good to society by exposing various scams, scandals, frauds, embezzlements and many other cases of corruption leading to initiation of enquiries and other processes of prosecution against the perpetrators of these crimes. History is witness that press has been instrumental in putting an end to atrocities and bringing the downfall of ruthless dictators.

In democratic countries, a special relationship exists between media and government. Although the freedom of the media may be constitutionally enshrined and have precise legal definition and enforcement, the exercise of that freedom by individual journalists is a matter of personal choice and ethics. Modern democratic government subsists in representation of millions by hundreds. For the representatives to be accountable and for the process of government to be transparent, effective communication paths must exist to their constituents. Today these paths consist primarily of the mass media, to the extent that if press freedom disappeared, so would most political accountability. In this area, media ethics merges with issues of civil rights and politics. However, media too suffers from some pitfalls; growing consumerism and materialism have adversely impacted our media. The partisan attitude, sectarian outlook and biased

individualism in some sections of media are a testimony that media too is susceptible to harmful influences. Often, in fierce rivalries, ethics of journalism are thrown out of the window to settle old scores. Running after opportunistic gains is another malady our media suffers from. The incidents of throwing are against the ethics of media. Deliberately creating sensational stuff to attract with reality- is another tactic that media must avoid.

Media has critical in a democracy and its stature is in no way less than that of politicians. Hence it is rightly called the fourth Pillar of democracy i.e. Fourth Estate. It is through media that people become aware of so many aspects of life of which they are normally ignorant. Democracy is meaningless without a free, neutral and active media. Media carries with it a huge responsibility in a democratic setup which it has to fulfill very carefully without any bias toward anyone by bringing out the real facts before the public.

Responsible media is the essence of fostering democratic setup. Regarding the aforementioned facts, a higher degree of leniency is observed in many democratic countries towards an independent and responsible media. The case is otherwise in Afghanistan, where an elevating restraint is put over nascent media, curtailing its democratic and independent functioning.

Political elites considering, free and vibrant media, threat to prolongation of their rule, suffers pragmatic leadership qualities.

Therefore, one has to imbibe the crucial connotation and purpose of the free press, as enunciated by key founders, was to keep the citizenry informed, engaged, and in dialogue with one another about the crucial issues of the day. The health of any democracy can be diagnosed by the degree to which information flows freely in the culture. Anything that interferes with that free flow of information is a form of censorship, which acts to derail, distort, and deny the efficacy of any true democratic experiment.

The political leadership of Afghanistan should understand by now, that media occupies the most vital position in a democratic setup and forms the very bedrock of democracy without which democracy is an aimless, futile exercise and never fulfill the aspirations of the people in real terms. The role of media in a democracy is as crucial as that of the politicians and should never be underestimated. If a democracy is to run smoothly in any country, it is a must that the media in all fairness should be given full autonomy and a free hand it deserves in airing its views among the people and no unnecessary restrictions should be imposed on it.

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The Dark Heart of ASEAN

By Joshua Kurlantzick

Next week, at a summit in California, US President Barack Obama will meet with the leaders of the ten countries of Southeast Asian Nations. The event, the first-ever US-ASEAN summit on American soil, is being touted as a sign of America's growing interest in Southeast Asia. The question is whether the US, by inviting all members of ASEAN, has allowed its interests to overwhelm its principles.

The upcoming summit is the latest manifestation of the Obama administration's strategic "pivot" toward Asia - a national security strategy that entails a shift of American military, economic, and diplomatic resources toward the Pacific Rim countries. In many ways, this move toward closer relations makes a lot of sense.

For starters, tensions between several Southeast Asian countries and China are on the rise, owing partly to the fact that China, under President Xi Jinping (its most autocratic leader since Deng Xiaoping), has been acting increasingly assertively in staking its contested territorial claims in the region's waters. Most recently, China decided to move an oil rig into waters claimed by Vietnam. A similar decision two years ago led to deadly anti-China riots in Vietnam.

And it is not just Vietnam that's worried. Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines are also trying to upgrade their navies and coast guards. Indeed, two decades after essentially tossing US forces out of local bases, the Philippines has welcomed back American troops as part of a new military cooperation deal.

Even countries whose economies rely on China are worried. China is Laos's biggest aid donor and largest trading partner; yet Laos's ruling communist party last month elected a new leadership reportedly devoid of any pro-China politicians. In Myanmar, which also depends heavily on Chinese aid and trade, the fear of becoming a Chinese satellite was a key reason why the military junta ceded power to a civilian government in the early 2010s.

Beyond security challenges, the US has a growing economic interest in Southeast Asia. Together, the ASEAN countries comprise America's fourth-largest trading partner. Some evidence also suggests that the new ASEAN Economic Community, a framework for a regional free-trade agreement, is helping Southeast Asian countries weather an increasingly turbulent global economic environment.

But there is one very serious problem with the upcoming US-ASEAN summit. Since the US pivot to Asia was launched in 2011, Southeast Asia's political systems have, on the whole, regressed significantly. Over the last few years, Thailand has gone from flawed democracy to military rule, which could persist through 2018, or beyond. Similarly, Malaysia appeared to be headed for a two-party democracy in 2011. Today, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim is in jail on dubious sodomy charges; the government has passed legislation that essentially authorizes it to detain critics indefinitely; and Prime Minister Najib Razak remains embroiled in multiple economic and political scandals. Cambodia, too, seemed like it had reached a political breakthrough after the opposition coalition nearly won the 2013 general election. But in the last two years, Cambodian Prime

Minister Hun Sen has reasserted his political dominance. Opposition leader Sam Rainsy, fearing arrest, has fled into exile.

Then there is Myanmar. Although the Obama administration has touted the country as a shining example of democratic change, genuine democracy remains over the horizon. True, the longtime opposition party, the National League for Democracy, won last November's general election. But the military still controls many ministries and a quarter of the seats in parliament. Moreover, civil wars are erupting along Myanmar's borders, and gangs and other radical groups are slaughtering Muslims in the country's west.

Laos, Vietnam, and Brunei remain among the most repressive states in the world, with no evidence of political opening at all. And though democracy has advanced in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore, progress has been slow; in Singapore, the ruling party continues to dominate the political system.

Many factors account for the weakening of democracy in Southeast Asia. The region's first generation of elected leaders, like former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, often proved to be no more than elected autocrats who used their majorities to crush their opponents and suppress technologies that could be used as tools for change. Indeed, Thailand, whose online repression has increased under the junta, now blocks more than 100,000 websites from its citizens.

Weak institutions mean many countries, such as Malaysia, struggle to resolve political crises; in Thailand, army takeovers have become the modus vivendi. Add to that the influence of China - hardly a force for democratic change - and Southeast Asia's democratic regression is not particularly shocking.

What is troublesome is that the Obama administration has been reinforcing this damaging trend by bolstering ties with Southeast Asian autocrats. Obama has maintained close relations with Malaysia's Najib (the two are reportedly golfing buddies). When Obama visited Malaysia last year, he barely mentioned Anwar's imprisonment. The Obama administration also has been conspicuously quiet about abuses in Brunei, Laos, and Vietnam, inviting the head of Vietnam's Communist Party to Washington, DC, last July for a showy and warm visit. In recent months, the Obama administration has begun to restore links with Thailand that were put on ice after the May 2014 coup, including by resuming a high-level strategic dialogue. Yet according to Human Rights Watch, "Thailand's military junta tightened its grip on power and severely repressed fundamental rights" last year. And, so far this year, it has shown no signs of changing that approach.

The upcoming US-ASEAN summit will include leaders - like Hun Sen, who has ruled Cambodia for 25 years - who were previously considered too ruthless and repressive to be received by the US president on American soil. It seems that security and economic considerations have now usurped democracy as leading determinants of US foreign policy in the region. For the people of Southeast Asia, this approach may ultimately create more risks than benefits. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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