

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



February 13, 2017

A Political System Requires Accountability

Accountability is a key requirement of good governance. Not only governmental institutions but also the private sector and civil society organizations must be accountable to the public and to their institutional stakeholders. The institutions in Afghanistan, on the other hand, have lacked this basic factor which has resulted in uncontrolled corruption and mismanagement.

Therefore, it can be easily observed that billions of dollars have been spent for the development of the country yet the country is not able to develop as much as it could. As a matter of fact accountability can be achieved when there is transparency and the rule of law.

In a democratic country the ultimate authority lies within the people. The modern concept of state and government says that the sovereignty lies with the people. And ultimately, all the governments are answerable to the people. Moreover, to guarantee such accountability the modern states have established and strengthened their political systems in such a way that people have most of the power, though indirectly. However, in our country, Afghanistan, which claims to be democratic, the people are suffering because of the lack of any sort of accountability of the government and the deprivation of participation in the affairs of the state.

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 presidential elections were vehemently dominated by corruption and insecurity.

The government that was formed as a result of the election was not in accordance to the will of the majority of the people. Most of the people because of the security concerns and many other problems could not even cast their votes. Moreover, the election fraud and misuse of power to influence voters also played dominant role in forming the government not fully favored by the people.

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. Unfortunately, such systems are present in the contemporary world of ours and they may even exist under the disguise of democracy. 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 personalities. 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 necessary for accountability that not only governmental institutions but also the private sector and civil society organizations must be accountable to the public and to their institutional stakeholders. Afghan government, on the other hand, has been formed in such a way that it is difficult to hold the Presidential Office accountable for its policies and actions. It can do whatever it wants without standing accountable to its people. 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 Presidential Office decides. Moreover, the powerful and the rich are mostly considered above the law and the poor and weak have to go through the 'quagmire of law and order system'. The present rise in corruption, which is now turning out of control, is because of the same fact that the powerful are not made accountable to the rule of law. 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.

The Next Phase of Climate Action

By Moha Ennaji

Last November, while much of the world was trying to unpack Donald Trump's election as US president, the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 22) was held in Marrakesh, Morocco. Participants from all over the world, including 38 heads of state and government, came together to create a plan for implementing the 2015 Paris climate agreement, which aims to limit global warming to well below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. It was an important step forward, but the issue remains far more complex - and politically charged - than most would care to admit.

The global cooperation that has emerged lately is certainly welcome. But, while teamwork is critical to success, so is recognition of the distinct roles and responsibilities of governments in the industrialized and developing worlds.

The industrialized countries have long produced massive amounts of emissions and other kinds of pollution, while consuming a huge share of the world's resources - including 90% of the world's water - all in the name of their own development. As a result, these countries now enjoy high standards of living and food security.

The situation for developing countries is very different. Not only have they contributed substantially less to climate change; they are also suffering its worst effects, including food shortages and the loss of livelihoods, brought about by increasingly extreme and frequent weather events like floods and droughts.

Africa is paying a particularly heavy price. Though the continent is responsible for only 4% of greenhouse-gas emissions, it is suffering more than any other continent from climate change, as rising temperatures, shifting seasons, and proliferating droughts deplete biodiversity, destroy ecosystems, and undermine security and stability.

Lake Chad, once an immense reservoir of fresh water, has lost around 90% of its surface area since 1963 and is at risk of drying out permanently. Four million hectares of forest disappear every year in Africa - double the world average. Agriculture, predominantly subsistence farming, employs over 60% of the African workforce, implying widespread destruction of livelihoods, to say nothing of increased food insecurity as crops are disrupted. Indeed, Africa's agricultural yields could be reduced by 20% from now until 2050, as the population grows twofold. Entire sections of Africa's coastline, including almost one-third of its coastal infrastructure, will be submerged.

Already, Africa has ten million "climate refugees." If nothing is done, that figure will rise to almost 60 million in just three years. This jeopardizes not only the tremendous economic progress that the continent has made in recent years, but also the basic rights of tens of millions of Africans.

The industrialized countries have pledged to support their developing-country counterparts, like those in Africa, in their effort to steel themselves against climate change. But their promises are modest, relative to what is actually needed, and doubts about whether they will be fulfilled persist. Policymakers often tout "sustainable development," but lack clear answers for how to achieve it. In many cases - Trump being the most notable example - they seem determined to do just the opposite.

As it stands, economic power is being used as a political tool, wielded by leaders attempting to evade their global responsibilities. The world's "great powers" do not adhere to UN agreements meant to regulate industries that emit greenhouse gases and dump heavy metals in the sea and soil. They not only hold fast to their nuclear industries; they mismanage those industries' waste, which can destroy ecosystems, from oceans to forests, while infecting humans with deadly diseases. Trump has explicitly declared his intention to ignore the Paris agreement. But, as the Marrakesh declaration emphasizes, success in mitigating climate change will require political commitment at the highest level. Moreover, climate action must take into account the special needs and context of developing countries, especially the least-developed economies and those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

With this in mind, the declaration demands greater efforts to eradicate poverty, ensure food security, and meet the agriculture challenges posed by climate change. And it calls for greater support for climate projects, including through capacity building and technology transfer from developed to developing countries.

Notwithstanding Trump's reluctance, many countries seem to recognize the imperative to act. Participants in the Africa Action Summit, held on the sidelines of the Marrakesh conference, offered their own commitment to build an Africa that is resilient to climate change and able to advance sustainable development. To that end, African states must identify ways to access the necessary funding; design mechanisms to support the implementation of flagship programs; strengthen their institutions' capacity to tackle climate risks; and seize opportunities in low-carbon development in the fields of energy, technological innovation, and "green" industries. External support will be vital to enable these efforts. Of course, the responsibility for mitigating climate change does not fall only on government. NGOs, for example, are already having a major impact, implementing educational programs and even staging protests to raise awareness of the environmental challenges we face.

But, in many ways, government is critical to enabling such contributions. While tackling climate change effectively will be virtually impossible without civil-society organizations' participation, their impact has often been undermined by the political considerations of their governments, which may, for example, favor incumbent energy suppliers over green alternatives in order to preserve existing jobs.

Some governments have already implemented important measures to support the shift toward more environmentally friendly practices, including financial and market incentives. Only with more such initiatives, as well as a commitment to follow through on the Marrakesh declaration and to support the goals of the Africa Action Summit, can governments put their countries, and the world, on the path toward true sustainable development. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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The Female Resistance

By Sławomir Sierakowski

Antagonism is mounting between today's right-wing populists and a somewhat unexpected but formidable opponent: women. In the United States, much like in Poland, women's rights have been among the first targets of attack by populist leaders. Women are not taking it lying down.

Traditional conservatism in the West has largely come to terms with the need to grant women broad reproductive freedom. Today's right-wing populist administrations, by contrast, are downright pre-modern in this regard, attempting to reverse reforms championed not just by the left - and long accepted by the conventional right.

It is no secret that the mainstream consensus is a source of contempt - and success - for the modern populist, and not just on women's rights. Donald Trump's first acts as US President show an eagerness to reject longstanding norms in many other areas as well, including foreign affairs and economic policy.

But it is the attack on women's rights that is receiving the most powerful pushback. Poland's de facto leader, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, has retreated politically only once since his party's return to power in 2015.

Last October, when thousands of women of all ages took to the streets in the "black protest," his government was forced to withdraw from its plan to introduce a total ban on abortion. (Under the current law, abortion is allowed in the event of rape, severe fetal defects, or a threat to the health of the mother.)

Similarly, of all the sources of opposition to Trump, only women have been able to organize quickly and efficiently. Last month's Women's March on Washington boasted a turnout some three times larger than Trump's own inauguration the previous day. In other words, Trump began his term with a symbolic defeat at the hands of American women.

Trump's subsequent reinstatement of the "global gag rule," which undermines women's health in developing countries by defunding organizations that provide abortion counseling, could not obscure that loss, nor could his pledges to defund Planned Parenthood, which offers reproductive-health services in the US. Instead, women continued to resist - for example, by creating the #DressLikeAWoman hashtag on Twitter, to shine a spotlight on Trump's sexist demand of female staffers.

As women have stood in the path of the populists, mainstream political leaders and parties have practically cowered; unsurprisingly, they continue to lose ground.

But women have not been entirely alone. NGOs and other kinds of social movements have also stepped up. Even the media have helped the cause; though they are not accustomed to such a blatantly political role, circumstances - such as Trump's "war" on them - have forced their hand.

The composition of the resistance actually makes considerable sense. Right-wing populism is, at its core, an attack on liberalism, not necessarily on democracy. Separation of powers, a free press, an independent judiciary, and free trade are liberal ideals;

they are not democratic. Women have stood above the rest in the opposition, because they are, in many ways, the antithesis of right-wing populism, support for which comes primarily from poorly educated white men - the demographic cohort with the least comprehension of feminism.

The question now is whether women can win the battle against the populists. While the answer is not yet clear, they do have a few powerful weapons in their arsenal.

For starters, women are more numerous than any other single social group, including blacks, Latinos, the left, the right, liberals, conservatives, Catholics, and Protestants. There are more women than there are white men in the US - or in Poland, for that matter. And, most important, women far outnumber populists. (Women must fight for their rights as if they were a minority, though they are a majority, and as if they lacked human capital, though, in the West, they tend to be better educated than men.) Moreover, women are everywhere, and discrimination, to varying degrees, is part of all women's experiences.

This makes women something of a revolutionary class, in the Marxist sense. It also makes it relatively easy for women to build solidarity. During Poland's black protest, thousands more people protested in solidarity, from Berlin (where several thousand took to the streets) to Kenya (where about 100 people demonstrated). During the Women's March on Washington, up to two million people marched in solidarity around the world. Clearly, women are a global force. Who better, then, to resist the likes of Trump, Kaczyński, and other right-wing populists, as they launch an assault on globalism?

Perhaps the most important weapon in women's arsenal is that they are unshamed. While the twentieth century was characterized by discipline through fear, the twenty-first century has been characterized by repression through shame. Unlike fear, shame can be hidden - and that's the point.

Whereas one can feel fear without losing one's dignity, shame arises from feelings of inferiority. That is what women are rejecting in their anti-populist protests. Defending the rights of women to choose whether to have an abortion - particularly in places where abortion is still relatively accessible - amounts to defending women's dignity and autonomy.

Mainstream political parties, however, still experience shame, as do other traditional organizations like trade unions. They have scruples, and are concerned about how they are perceived. That makes them poorly equipped to stand up to the most shameless group of all: the populists.

The likes of Kaczyński and Trump have benefited massively from their lack of shame, saying and doing whatever wins them the support of their political base. But women aren't having it. They are throwing off the shackles of the shame that has long been used to repress them, and fighting fire with fire. Can the populists take the heat? (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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