

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



February 22, 2017

Growing Tensions within NUG

The differences among the members of National Unity Government (NUG) are very evident now. First, the differences prevailed between the two teams that formed NUG and were led by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah; however, now there are rifts among all the members of both the teams, further complicating the fragile political situation. The dominant gap in this regard is the one that is being developed between the first Vice-President (VP) Gen. Abdur Rashid Dostum and President Ashraf Ghani. The differences first appeared in October last year when Dostum accused President Ghani of nepotism and said people from the president's ethnic group were important to him, but those from his province were even more important. He gave similar comments about CEO Abdullah as well. However, the differences were further invigorated when Dostum was accused of ordering the maltreatment and sexual harassment of former Jawzjan governor and tribal elder, Ahmad Eshchi. Dostum's eight bodyguards were mainly accused in the same case and Attorney General Office (AGO) prosecutors had asked Dostum to hand them over to the office. And, now since Dostum has returned to his office in Kabul after a couple of months, there are different sorts of pressure on him to hand over his bodyguards to AGO.

Security forces on Tuesday, February 21, closed roads to the presidential palace and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) in the capital Kabul to arrest the accused bodyguards of first vice-president Gen. Abdur Rashid Dostum. All roads to Sherpoor area of Kabul city where Dostum lives were also closed for traffic.

Officials said that Kabul garrison was ordered to arrest first VP's bodyguards. Some sources also added that police forces of 10th police district of Kabul on Monday night also tried to arrest the bodyguards of Dostum, but they failed to do so. However, the government then ordered Kabul garrison to prevent Dostum from going to his office and take his bodyguards to justice.

The situation seems very tense and may easily erupt into a tussle if it is not managed properly. The need of the time is to control the situation through candid negotiations, instead of display of power. A clash between Dostum's bodyguards and the security officials in the heart of capital Kabul will have a far reaching consequences and may raise many serious questions about NUG that has already failed to overcome its differences. In this crucial circumstances when the country is going through a serious juncture, it is important for NUG to maintain unity and discipline among its ranks and rather focus on the issues that benefit the poor people of Afghanistan, instead of running after their own interests and differences.

Since the formation of NUG, there has not been any improvement in security and many other sectors still suffer from lack of attention. As a matter of fact, the arrangements to tackle the security situation are not up to the mark. The government authorities do not see eye to eye with each other regarding the security situation and the measures to control it. As there is no guideline or consensus on the higher level, the operational teams are not sure about what sort of steps they have to take. In most of the cases, they respond only after the insurgents attack somewhere. They, in short, have only a defensive mechanism to follow. A comprehensive strategy, that should be able to tackle major issues of insecurity in different parts of the country, is the need of time and the government must stand united and committed if it wants to develop such a strategy.

Good governance, on the other hand, has never been the focus of the government, nor are there possibilities that it would achieve something in this regard in near future. Still a large portion of Afghan society suffer from poverty and unemployment and lack of rudimentary requirements of life. Education for all, rule of law, justice, gender equality, transparency and participatory government, all these can only be achieved when the very basic problems are solved. Thus, making developments in good governance would really be a Herculean task for the government.

Moreover, the economic situation is not getting better as well since the investment has fallen during NUG tenure. Corruption, on the other hand has remained as the most dominant issue even after clear promises by NUG that it will take tangible steps to control this menace. Keeping in view all these issues, NUG needs to focus more on their solution instead of wasting energy on their own differences.

With the issues of rising insecurity, poor governance, declining investments and rampant corruption threatening the stability, security and legitimacy in Afghan society, there is no other option for the Afghan government to take speedy, effective and tangible measures to control the situation. It cannot keep on prioritizing its internal differences and clashes. Doing so would further deteriorate the situation and weaken the government and its authority and legitimacy.

Terrorism - A Common Enemy

By Hujjatullah Zia

The issue of terrorism has changed into a bone of contention between Kabul and Islamabad and the mutual relations hit rock bottom following the deadly attack in the southern Sindh province for which the self-styled Islamic State (IS) group claimed the responsibility. Pakistani officials did not only lash out at Afghanistan but also reportedly violated the country's territorial integrity through firing rocket at Nangarhar province. The escalated militancy created a wide gap between Afghan-Pak officials, mainly after the establishment of the National Unity Government (NUG) and large civilian casualties caused as a result of the Taliban's Omari Operation.

No wonder, Afghanistan bore the brunt of militancy within the last two years and Afghan officials believed that the Taliban orchestrated the attacks against Kabul government from across the border under the leadership of Mullah Akhtar Mansour and his successor Mullah Haibatullah.

With the Taliban's intensified attacks, Afghans' gleam of hope for a civil society and exercising rights and freedoms had disappeared and a large number of people took refuge to foreign countries. The worse came to worst with the emergence of the IS group and about 20 warring parties are believed to be involved in militancy in Afghanistan. Since we live in "the global village", the security situation in a country is highly critical for its neighbors, the fact that we experience in our daily life. For instance, the declaration of "caliphate" in Iraq under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has posed serious threat to its neighboring countries, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. Now, the loyalists to IS party are able to carry out deadly attacks against both Afghan and Pakistani nations.

It is most likely that warring factions seek to create political tension among countries. In other words, the militant fighters are just pawns in this dangerous game which is masterminded behind the veil. The mercenary fighters are widely involved in insurgency, rather than ideologue ones, so that they can alleviate their economic constraints and satiate their carnal desire through raping women, especially those who belong to ethnic minority groups (as Yazidi women were the victims in Syria). Hence, an emotional reaction and sensitive approach to the issue will aggravate the challenges more than ever before.

Following a spate of terror attacks in which more than 100 people have been killed, Pakistan had sealed its border with Afghanistan. Authorities later issued shoot-at-sight orders for those found trying to cross over.

The Pakistan Army on Friday night said it targeted militant hideouts close to the Pak-Afghan border. Based on the international law, however, a country does not have the authority to violate its neighbor's territorial integrity.

It is an undisputable fact that terrorist have sanctuaries both

in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as many leaders of terrorist groups were killed in Pakistani soil. Afghan government leaves no stone unturned to combat terrorism within its territory and Pakistan is also supposed to fight insurgency and eliminate the Taliban's safe havens on her own soil. To put it succinctly, "Afghanistan is a country in the frontline of the war on terrorism, fighting against about 20 terrorist groups". At the 53rd Munich Security Conference (MSC), Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani said that fight against terrorism in his country was aimed not only at stabilizing Afghanistan and preserving freedom but also at ensuring global security. He added, "As long as we divide terrorists into good and bad terrorists, we will lose."

If we do not differentiate among terrorists and mobilize our forces, we can eliminate terrorism". It is firmly believed that terrorist networks practice upon harsh ideology and kill people on the grounds of their race, color and creed, both in Islamic and non-Islamic countries.

That is to say, terrorism has changed into a global issue and has filled the air with a sense of fear and anxiety around the globe. Temples, churches and mosques come under terrorist attacks, in different parts of the world, every once in a while. For instance, not long after the new American president Donald Trump announced a visa ban on seven Muslim-majority countries and a hold on the intake of Syrian refugees, a mosque in Quebec City, Canada, was attacked by a shooter that killed half a dozen worshippers.

So, terrorism is a global issue, in general, and a common enemy for both Afghanistan and Pakistan, in particular. In a nutshell, militants just hunt and target people wherever possible. Now, the questions are that will exchanging harsh rhetoric and pointing fingers at each other alleviate the challenges? Will violating the territorial integrity be appropriate for a country?

It should be noted that the death of Mullah Akhtar Mansour by the US drone in Baluchistan was condemned and was called the violation of territorial integrity by Pakistani officials. Subsequently, the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), which was founded to bring the Taliban to negotiating table, was suspended.

So, all countries are supposed to respect the territorial integrity of their neighbors. But in case of Mansour, he was the Taliban's leader who organized deadly attacks against the Kabul administration and deserved that, didn't he? Of course, there are no good and bad terrorists and in case of not stopping violence and bloodshed, they will have to be shot on the head. I have constantly pointed out that Afghanistan and Pakistan are in the same boat and must combat terrorists (common enemy) with strong military forces.

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Europe's Critical Elections

By Guy Verhofstadt

Upcoming elections in the Netherlands, France, and Germany will be held in what is arguably the most febrile political environment since the European Union's creation. The post-war liberal democratic order is under threat everywhere, but particularly in Europe, where the EU is confronting challenges that include an increasingly aggressive Russia, the constant threat of terrorism, democratic disenfranchisement, and uneven economic growth.

Following the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election as US president, the question facing Europe is straightforward: Will populist and nationalist forces exert the same influence in core countries of the EU?

In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders and his far-right Freedom Party are polling strongly ahead of next month's election. Wilders approves of Trump's executive order barring entry to the US for anyone from seven Muslim-majority countries. Like Trump's chief strategist, Stephen Bannon, Wilders views the world through a racist prism, and he believes that he is engaged in a battle to save Western civilization from Islam. No other Dutch parliamentary party holds such views, so a Wilders-led government is still far from certain. With Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte holding his ground, Wilders will most likely be denied power in the end.

Meanwhile, in France, far-right National Front leader Marine Le Pen is currently ahead in the polls for the presidential election, which will be decided in two rounds in April and May. Le Pen has promised to hold a referendum on France's membership in the eurozone, despite warnings from the Bank of France that leaving the monetary union could increase the French national debt by €30 billion (\$31.8 billion) annually. She has also expressed a desire to dismantle such fundamental components of European integration as free movement for European citizens.

In the UK's Brexit referendum and the US presidential election, voters from large metropolitan areas overwhelmingly supported "Remain" and Hillary Clinton, respectively. We will likely see a similar pattern in the French election. But while older voters have fueled resurgent British and American nationalism, Le Pen owes much of her support to younger cohorts - a worrying sign of the extent to which key segments of the French electorate feel disenfranchised.

A Le Pen victory would undoubtedly destabilize Europe politically and economically. With the dangerous nationalist demons of Europe's past unleashed, the EU as we know it could easily disintegrate.

But those who believe in liberal democracy, the rule of law, and European integration still have time to mobilize around an alternative candidate - who would most likely prevail in the second-round run-off with Le Pen and, one hopes, bring about much-needed reforms and uphold France's proactive role in Europe.

In Germany's election later this year, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is unlikely to be able to mount a credible

bid for the Chancellery, despite any support that it receives from Russia. But the next chancellor - whether it is Martin Schulz of the Social Democrats (SPD) or still Angela Merkel - will have to lead a global coalition of the willing to defend what is left of the post-war order.

Such an effort should include Canada, Australia, and Western allies in Asia, but it must start by putting Europe's house back in order. Europeans recently celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Maastricht Treaty, which marked a seminal moment in the history of European integration.

As we have learned in the intervening years, the EU's powers are insufficient to address all of the challenges that now confront Europe. Germany must help to rectify this situation by offering a vision for a more confident and ambitious Europe - one that can overcome internal divisions, see to its own security, and sustainably manage migration.

If new movements emerge to counter the forces of nationalism and populism, this would not be a far-fetched scenario. And while former UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage, Wilders, Le Pen, and their peers continue to pose as plucky anti-establishment underdogs, this conceit is wearing thin, owing to their own success - and, in UKIP's case, to financial scandals.

If far-right nationalist leaders do come to power in some of the larger Western countries, they will soon discover that making populist promises is easier than keeping them - as Trump is now discovering amid the alarmingly chaotic start to his administration. Trump, the Brexiters, and their counterparts elsewhere have yet to prove that they can ensure broadly shared economic prosperity and defend global-governance systems by conducting themselves competently and professionally on the world stage.

It should be obvious that, in a globalized world where individual nation-states are increasingly impotent, no heady brew of populist nationalism can deliver the change that people are demanding. Fortunately, liberal democracy still offers a progressive alternative, and a victory by Merkel or Schulz in Germany, following the defeat of Le Pen in France, could herald the emergence of a global counter-offensive.

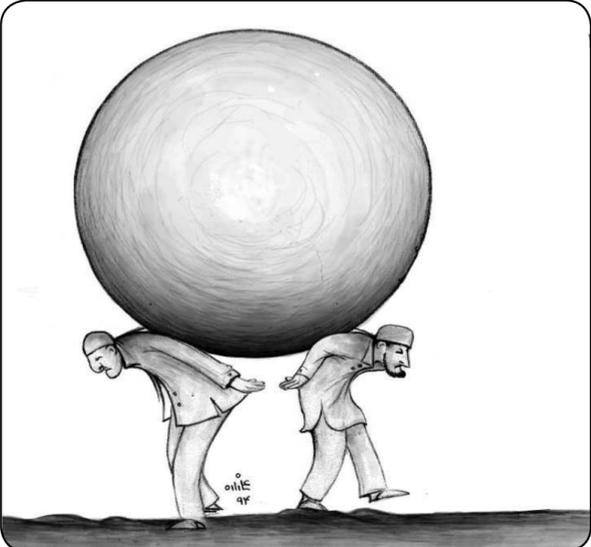
Meanwhile, new pro-European centrist movements have already sprung up across Europe, from Nowoczesna (Modern) in Poland to Ciudadanos (Citizens) in Spain.

These parties do not peddle lies, and they do not owe their success to Russian-sponsored propaganda bots or social-media trolls. Now that some populists have come to power, liberals have a responsibility to hold them to account and offer an alternative vision.

Belittling the people who voted for Brexit, Trump, and their European equivalents is not a sound strategy.

The new global demagogues must be judged by their deeds, and vanquished with truth, reason, and respect for democracy. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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