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Integration is Necessary for Reconciliation

The situation in Afghanistan seems to be getting serious again. Escalation in insecurity, political disorder and the upcoming elections have casted many doubts about the future. The expectations that there could be any sort of reconciliation with Taliban do not seem to be coming together and the National Unity Government (NUG) does not seem to have real unity. There are evident differences between the offices of the President and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Moreover, there are differences among the team members of the same office as well. This became evident in the controversy regarding the self-exile of first vice president, Gen. Dostum and his return to country. At the same time, his and Muhaqiq's, deputy CEO, involvement in the formation of National Coalition for Salvation of Afghanistan (NCSA), the Grand National Coalition (GNC) and dismissal of Muhaqiq from his position by Ghani are also an evident example of diverting ways of the member of NUG.

As a matter of fact, there are many other issues as well where there are marked differences among the members of NUG. From the issue of election reforms, postponement of parliamentary and district council elections and electoral division of Ghazni to the reconciliation process with Taliban, and now the differences regarding the preparations of presidential election, almost all the members seem to have their own views and conditions. In such a scenario, it is very difficult to create unity in the government and then among the people, which is very much important for the future of the country.

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society and there has to be a comprehensive process of national reintegration so as to strengthen the roots of national harmony. However, that has been neglected by the authorities in Afghanistan and they have kept on chanting the slogan of reconciliation process. Attending the issue of reconciliation without dealing with the problem of reintegration is like putting the cart before the horse.

Political stability and harmony are the most important factors for the integration of the nation. Nonetheless, achieving such a position is a far cry and the present attitude of Afghan government and its Western allies are further deterring the process. Currently, many crucial decisions that were made on behalf of the government, mostly did not have the consent of all the NUG members. Moreover, there are very serious questions about the current structure and its future. Initially it was decided that the NUG setup would continue for two years and then there would be grand Jirga where the CEO would be given a position similar to a prime minister in a parliamentary system. However, about four years have now passed, but there has never been such a move and now the next presidential election has been announced to be conducted in July 2019. And, there are fears that the government would not be able to convene the elections because of the differences and the lack of resources, or elections would be conducted in a fraudulent way.

For the reintegration of Afghan society, it is necessary that all the major social and political groups within the Afghan society must start feeling a sense of attachment with the social, political and economic lives of the country.

The reintegration of the Afghan society is only possible through a separate process – it can neither be the outcome of a miracle nor the result of the reconciliation process alone as is mostly thought. At the present scenario, even it seems improbable that the reconciliation process may reach to any sort of viable agreement with Taliban, let alone the integration of the entire nation. For reintegration to happen, it is necessary to bring about some very basic structural changes within the Afghan political setup. One of the most basic of them is a true democracy within the country that has the capacity to represent different ethnic and minority groups appropriately so that heterogeneous Afghan society must be integrated within a single whole. Different ethnic and minority groups will not be integrated within the society if they are kept away from participating within the affairs of the country and the most crucial decisions of the nation. Therefore, it can be said that the reintegration process is a two-fold process. Along with making these groups the part of the ongoing reconciliation process, there have to be important political amendments within a short span of time; otherwise, neither reintegration will take place nor will reconciliation produce any fruitful outcome.

In fact, the reintegration of Afghan society is a phenomenon that is much wider than the reconciliation process. For it to happen; there has to be consistent efforts and a true democratic system assisted with socio-economic stability and cultural integration. However, it cannot be said that reconciliation process, which is narrower in scope, is totally ineffective on the Afghanistan's reintegration. Rather, at the moment, it is one of the factors that will have a very important influence on the future of reintegration process in Afghanistan but it is important that the process must be led keeping the same concept in mind. Integrating all the important factions of Afghan society within the ongoing reconciliation process will definitely result in a promising episode in the reintegration of Afghan society.



A Positive Outlook on Peace Talks

By: Hujjatullah Zia

The US-Taliban peace talks have triggered a heated discussion in Afghanistan and the region with the fifth round of negotiations being held in Qatar between US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban representatives led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Showing fear and hope about the outcome, Afghans support direct talks between the Taliban and Kabul government. Although the Taliban have still turned down Kabul's peace offer, Ghani's administration has signaled its support to ongoing peace talks seeking to initiate consultative Loya Jirga (Grand National Assembly) to reach a national consensus about the peace process. Engaging the public representatives – from all walks of life including political parties, tribal elders, clerics, civil society activists, and women representatives – in the reconciliation process will be highly significant since political pundits have reiterated national consensus, which will be obtained in an inclusive, unified, and national assembly. With the upcoming Loya Jirga, the concerns of Afghan people, mainly that of women, will be allayed. That is to say, it will serve as a platform for people from all walks of life to reveal their concerns and play an active role in the peace process.

Generally speaking, Afghans believe that since the Taliban's fundamental ideology do not reconcile with democratic values and human rights discourse, included in the constitution of Afghanistan, they will resume their repressive approach that will necessarily deal a strong blow to the last 18 years of achievements.

Overall, Afghan people and political parties support peace talks but reiterate that peace talks will only come to fruition if they are held with Afghan government. Lifting ban on the names of the Taliban leaders has also been stressed for facilitating talks.

Removing the names of the Taliban leaders from UN blacklist is also in the agenda of the ongoing talks in Qatar, however, Afghan political figures say de-listing the names of the Taliban leaders should be raised by Afghan government. Some also argue that such a concession to the Taliban should not be given without ensuring peace from their side in return.

A survey jointly conducted by Ariana TV and NAI/SOMA (Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan) shows that more than 90 percent of the respondents deem that peace talks are more significant than presidential election. They said the government had to sign a peace accord with the Taliban before moving to presiden-

tial election.

The 17 years of conflict that led to heavy casualties, as the report released by UNAMA shows an increase in civilian casualties more than any other time, has been highly frustrating for Afghan people. Therefore, Afghans support peace talks to a great extent. But Afghans reiterate that the 17 years of achievements are the "red line" and should not be compromised at the table.

It is self-explanatory that Kabul government is one of the sides to agree on issues which are to be included in peace pact. For example, if Afghan government does not agree to release the Taliban's prisoners from its jails, no peace deal will be signed between the Taliban and their interlocutors. After all, it is ridiculous to see that an internationally recognized terrorist group such as the Taliban claims that Afghanistan's government, which had been formed through election and democratic process, is "not legitimate". Where did the legitimacy of the Taliban group come from? Isn't it the pot calling the kettle black?

Overall, with the recent progress regarding talks, Afghans are generally optimistic about the outcome. Dr. Zar Ali Maruf, a political analyst, noted the Qatar carried much weight for two reasons: First, US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad had engaged regional states in the peace process after holding his fourth round of talks with the Taliban in Qatar for six days. Meanwhile, he mentioned Khalilzad's meeting with President Ghani after the six-day talks and having the consultation of all peace stakeholders. Second, he referred to the participation of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in the ongoing Qatar talks as a great breakthrough.

He said that since Mullah Baradar was one of the founders of the Tahrir-e-Taliban and first high-level official after Mullah Haibatullah, his participation in the Qatar meeting facilitated peace. He also pointed out that Baradar's participation indicated the Taliban's seriousness in the talks.

Despite all the optimism, on the first day of the formal initiation of Qatar's talks, reports said that the Taliban had refused the proposal of US delegates for ceasefire.

The fact is that signing a package deal with the Taliban will come in some more meetings. It is clear that reaching a consensus without declaring ceasefire is not possible but the Taliban are likely to haggle over more concessions.

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The AI Road to Serfdom?

By: Robert Skidelsky

Surveys from round the world show that people want secure jobs. At the same time, they have always dreamed of a life free from toil. The "rise of the robots" has made the tension between these impulses palpable.

Estimates of job losses in the near future due to automation range from 9% to 47%, and jobs themselves are becoming ever more precarious. Yet automation also promises relief from most forms of enforced work, bringing closer to reality Aristotle's extraordinary prediction that all needed work would one day be carried out by "mechanical slaves," leaving humans free to live the "good life." So the age-old question arises again: are machines a threat to humans or a means of emancipating them? In principle, there need be no contradiction. Automating part of human labor should enable people to work less for more pay, as has been happening since the Industrial Revolution. Hours of work have fallen and real incomes have risen, even as the world's population increased sevenfold, thanks to the increased productivity of machine-enhanced labor. In rich countries, productivity – output per hour worked – is 25 times higher than it was in 1831. The world has become steadily wealthier with fewer man-hours of work needed to produce that wealth. Why should this benign process not continue? Where is the serpent in the garden? Most economists would say it is imaginary. People, like novice chess players, see only the first move, not the consequences of it. The first move is that workers in a particular sector are replaced by machines, like the Luddite weavers who lost their jobs to power looms in the nineteenth century. In David Ricardo's chilling phrase, they become "redundant."

But what happens next? The price of clothes falls, because more can be produced at the same cost. So people can buy more clothes, and a greater variety of clothes, as well as other items they could not have afforded before. Jobs are created to meet the shift in demand, replacing the original jobs lost, and if productivity growth continues, hours of work can fall as well.

Notice that, in this rosy scenario, no trade unions, minimum wages, job protections, or schemes of redistribution are needed to raise workers' real (inflation-adjusted) income. Rising wages are an automatic effect of the fall in the cost of goods. Provided there is no downward pressure on money wages from increased competition for work, the automatic effect of technological innovation is to raise the standard of living.

This is the famous argument of Friedrich Hayek against any attempt by governments or central banks to stabilize the price level. In any technologically progressive economy, prices should fall except in a few niche markets. Businessmen don't need low inflation to expand production. They need only the prospect of more sales. "Dearness" of goods is a sign of techno-

logical stagnation.

But our chess novice raises two important questions: "If automation is not confined to a single industry, but spreads to others, won't more and more jobs become redundant? And won't the increased competition for the remaining jobs force down pay, offsetting and even reversing the gains from cheapness?" Human beings, the economist replies, will not be replaced, but complemented. Automated systems, whether or not in robot form, will enhance, not destroy, the value of human work, just as a human plus a good computer can still beat the best computer at chess. Of course, humans will have to be "up-skilled." This will take time, and it will need to be continuous. But once up-skilling is in train, there is no reason to expect any net loss of jobs. And because the value of the jobs will have been enhanced, real incomes will continue to rise. Rather than fearing the machines, humans should relax and enjoy the ride to a glorious future.1

Besides, the economist will add, machines cannot replace many jobs requiring person-to-person contact, physical dexterity, or non-routine decision-making, at least not any time soon. So there will always be a place for humans in any future pattern of work.

Ignore for a moment, the horrendous costs involved in this wholesale re-direction of human work. The question is which jobs are most at risk in which sectors. According to MIT economist David Autor, automation will substitute for more routinized occupations and complement high-skill, non-routine jobs. Whereas the effects on low-skill jobs will remain relatively unaffected, medium-skill jobs will gradually disappear, while demand for high-skill jobs will rise. "Lovely jobs" at the top and "lousy jobs" at the bottom, as LSE economists Maarten Goos and Alan Manning described it. The frontier of technology stops at what is irreducibly human.

But a future patterned along the lines suggested by Autor has a disturbingly dystopian implication. It is easy to see why lovely human jobs will remain and become even more prized. Exceptional talent will always command a premium. But is it true that lousy jobs will be confined to those with minimal skills? How long will it take those headed for redundancy to up-skill sufficiently to complement the ever-improving machines? And, pending their up-skilling, won't they swell the competition for lousy jobs? How many generations will have to be sacrificed to fulfil the promise of automation? Science fiction has raced ahead of economic analysis to imagine a future in which a tiny minority of rich rentiers enjoy the almost unlimited services of a minimally-paid majority.

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