

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



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On Entering New Year

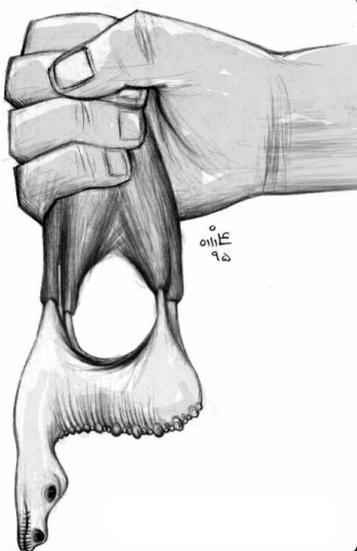
The world has stepped in a new year – 2017. It is that point of time in the year when the individuals and the nations should look at their previous year, highlight the main issues that they faced and make a plan to challenge those issues in the next year. It is the time when promises have to be made and commitments have to be strengthened. However, the most important factor is to keep in mind that promises and commitments alone would never change the fate of the individuals or the nations. For true change everyone has to strive to convert the promises into actions and the commitments into endeavors and then expect results from them. It can be observed that the strong individuals and nations stick to their commitments and then make efforts to chalk out tangible ways of achieving their goals, while the weaker ones are more inclined towards treating their promises as promises and soon forget them or even divert away from them. This ensures that they keep on remaining weaker or even excel in that regard. Nevertheless, improvements and developments are never made in the castles that are built in the air. They have to be made through untiring determinations and selfless exertions.

Afghanistan has been one of the countries wherein the leaders and authorities have not been able to turn their promises into realities. It is also the reason that different social and political problems have persisted within Afghan society. The example of the current government can be taken in this regard. On its starting days, National Unity Government (NUG) was quick enough to making myriads of promises. There were some optimism that could be seen within the people as they had seen change of government after so many years. Nevertheless, NUG was also quick in disremembering its promises. Therefore, many issues that prevailed at that time are now threatening Afghan society to a great extent. This has also led to a situation wherein people have lost their confidence on the performance of the government and the government has lost its legitimacy. Recent survey by The Asia Foundation revealed that in 2016 Afghans have been more fearful for their security, more dissatisfied with the economy, and less confident in their government and the year 2016 marked the lowest level of optimism shown by Afghan people regarding the situation in country since the Survey began in 2004. The survey also highlighted certain key issues that deteriorated in 2016 which resulted in a sort of pessimism among the people which they showed in the survey. The peace talks with Taliban collapsed earlier in 2016 and there are no clear prospects of such talks. The pressure generated by the withdrawal of international forces also influenced the security situation. Therefore, Taliban were able to make new incursions and civilians suffered large casualties.

Moreover, the situation within the economic system was not satisfactory as well as slow job growth contributed to high rates of urban unemployment, while more than one-third of Afghans said that their household financial situation had grown worse in the year. Then many political issues also remained unresolved; rather, they were strengthened by widening gap within the ranks of the government itself.

The promise of electoral reform, a key issue ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections, remained stalled, and most Afghans said that they had no confidence in the Independent Elections Commission to do its job. Moreover, the governance issues kept on challenging the government administration and policy makers. Corruption kept on strengthening its position within Afghan socio-political fabric and justice and rule of law could not make sufficient improvement. Now, with such a scenario in hand, we are entering a new year. This year will have its own challenges and most probably security situation would be the most dominant among them. Charles Cleveland, a spokesperson for the Resolute Support (RS) mission in Afghanistan, warned a couple of days earlier that the war would intensify next fighting season as the Taliban had already started preparing for it. Thus security would still be the most dominating issue along with political and economic instability, corruption and absence of rule of law. To face these issues the government authorities and the Afghan people must make honest efforts and must not repeat only verbal insistence. Though the country is going through a tough time, there should be some level of optimism that needs to be shown by the people. The Asia Foundation report also showed some optimism in its survey report. It revealed that despite the worsening economic and security environment, the desire to emigrate fell to a record low 2016, a striking change from 2015, as large numbers of previous emigrants have returned from European countries where disincentives to immigration have been on the rise. More Afghans, particularly rural Afghan men, supported women's right to vote and women's right to work outside the home than ever before. Although corruption rates remained very high, the rate at which Afghans reported actual encounters with corruption, in the customs office or their provincial governor's office, decreased. Many Afghans showed satisfaction regarding development in education in their localities. Internet access continued to increase rapidly, and television viewership also rose.

Now relying and further working on these optimistic aspects, Afghan people and government need to be practical enough to bring about tangible changes in Afghanistan in new year and make it really new.



Role of Elections in Democratization

By Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Elections have become a major factor in the stabilization and democratization of emerging democracies and post-conflict countries. Hundreds of developed countries achieved their economic prosperity and political stability through democratic elections. On the other hand, in emerging democracies and post-conflict societies, it has a great potential risk to plunge a country back into violent conflict, to undermine processes of stabilization and to discredit democratization. The presidential elections in Afghanistan in autumn 2009 are one of the recent examples for this risk.

Elections are not only a tool of democratic participation but also a severe contest for positions of leadership, power and access to resources.

However, we should not forget that there have been a number of (more or less) successful elections in post-conflict countries in the last decades, like those in Namibia, South Africa and Mozambique, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the DR Congo as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia on the Balkans.

There is no iron law according to which elections are doomed to fail in war-torn countries and emerging countries. Elections can play a significant role in stabilizing and democratizing them if handled properly.

So, we need to highlight those political, structural and institutional lessons learned by most practitioners to be crucial for giving elections a chance to succeed in emerging democracies and war-torn countries, despite the enormous challenges the environment in these countries poses. There is no reason to give up supporting these elections. But the international community, not least the Western countries, have to take a clearer stand on what kind of elections they are ready to support, and which not. This concerns in particular the existence of certain key elements, like independent Election Commissions and functioning Electoral Complaint Systems. Without these elements the electoral process is in great danger of being manipulated by those who hold power, and therefore lacks credibility in the eyes of the population. The risk of destabilization or even return to war and violence is high.

In the early 1990s, with the Cold War over, a wave of democratization swept Africa, the Balkans and other regions of the world. It was very much energized by the expectation that the transformation to democratic rule would be accomplished speedily and without too many complications – despite the experience of most European countries to the contrary. Their struggle for democracy had been long, painful and fraught with bloody setbacks.

Also, the stalemate of last presidential election in Afghanistan is one of the recent cases for such risks. Afghanistan's presidential election was marred by accusations of countless frauds. As a result U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry intervened and brought together the two candidates, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, to form what is now the National Unity Government (NUG), with Ghani serving as president and Abdullah as chief executive officer. The NUG is nothing more than a quick fix that undermines

the country's electoral institutions and processes. The fundamental reform of the Afghan electoral system prior to a new parliamentary election was a key part of the post-election power-sharing deal reached between President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah but no important steps has taken place to ensure the transparency and restore the confidence.

The government's cursory electoral reforms have still been limited to the replacement of election commissioners as none of key issues have been essentially resolved yet. For example, one of the major issues in need of reform has been voter registration. Afghan voters are currently not limited to voting in particular areas, meaning that they can use their 2001-issued voting cards in any polling station. Regardless of thousands of fake cards, there have been 3 major registrations since 2001, resulting in a total of 20 million election cards being distributed. In contrast, Afghanistan only has an estimated 12 million voters, making the number of cards in circulation a source of potential fraud. The other problem is that there has never been an accurate population census taken in Afghanistan. In spite of frequent outcry, the scheme of electronic ID card tactically has been deferred for the reason that it reveals that there is not a solitary ethnic group who form the absolute majority. People point the finger at the international community because they did not bring enough pressure on the government to hold the election on time.

The power-sharing agreement of the National Unity Government (NUG) was brokered by the international community, more particularly and predominantly the United States, United Nations and European Union so that is why they are also responsible for the implementation of the deal. They should have impelled the government to honour its commitments, especially those related to elections and electoral reforms. Given the dissatisfaction of people with the performance of both the Parliament and government, the fate of election should be ascertained and solid actions taken thereof. The postponement of election leads to more chaos and uncertainty, and erodes the public's trust in election, which on no account serves the national interests. Generally, the political management experience shows that only way to political and economic stability is transparent election system in a country. Heeding the imperatives and lessons learned by prosperous countries, of being key importance can contribute significantly to reducing these risks.

Yet, carried away by abstract, resounding rhetoric on the need for democracy and free and fair elections, politicians and leaders in the Western capitals as well as in international organizations often fail to be serious about implementing them. This is particularly true with regard to safeguarding the independence and integrity of Election Commissions and Electoral Complaints Systems. As a final point, the negative fallout of the abuses during the 2009 Afghanistan elections should be a good lesson for all, particularly, for those who undertake this critical responsibility.

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A Farewell to the Grim Year

By Hujjatullah Zia

Afghan nation has left a bloody year behind and sustained heavy casualties as a result of the Taliban's intensified attacks. The death of Omer's successor in late May, 2016, who was considered an obstacle before peace talks, did not break the stalemate and the escalated militancy continued. The war has reportedly caused more than 8,000 civilian casualties, including nearly 2,600 deaths, in the first nine months of 2016. Similarly, more than 5,500 Afghan forces were killed in the first eight months of 2016 while around 10,000 were wounded. The totals for the full year are likely to be much higher because the war intensified since August.

In addition, an unprecedented 551,000 people have fled their homes because of the intensified and expanded war. Afghan and US officials say more than 1 million Afghan refugees; including undocumented families in neighboring Pakistan and Iran have returned home in 2016, setting a record. When internally displaced people are counted in, more than 1.5 million Afghans have been on the move since January, according to UNAMA officials.

Currently, there is fear that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) will be a serious threat to Afghanistan. The ISIL group was involved in mysterious deaths and spilt the blood of ethnic minority groups on the grounds of their race, color and creed in 2016 and it is likely that this group has gained stronger foothold in the country and will stoke sectarian violence more than ever before. A number of the Taliban's splinter group was also believed to pledge allegiance to the ISIL, following the disputes over Mullah Mansour's appointment as Omer's successor.

The precursor group to ISIL, comprised mainly of disaffected Pakistani Taliban, first began making inroads into Afghanistan in 2014, announcing their arrival with the hanging of a dozen Taliban commanders in Nuristan Province. Of late, it is said that the ISIL group is widely involved in recruiting teenagers in Nangarhar to fight security forces in the eastern province. On the contrary, the Resolute Support (RS) mission in Afghanistan reports that the number of ISIL fighters decreased to 1,000 of which 700 are in Nangarhar province and the rest in Kunar province. It adds that the ISIL controlled 11 districts at the start of 2016 but are now active in only three districts. Brig. Gen. Wilson Shoffner, a spokesman for US forces in Afghanistan, said earlier that the ISIL group sought to strengthen their base in Nangarhar province. He reiterated, "They've largely been pushed back to the southern parts of Nangarhar province. That area is very, very rugged, it's

very mountainous, it's on the border with Pakistan, and that's where most of the Daesh in Nangarhar currently is."

Overall, the presence of ISIL fighters, who practice upon extremely radical ideology, has filled the air with a sense of fear and disappointment and seems to strengthen their foothold in the country. They intend to sow the seeds of mistrust and animosity among the Afghan nation or simply put pressure on the government through the acts of violence. Indeed, the venom spew forth by ISIL fighters will have a far-reaching impact on teenagers who reside tribal areas – the same policy was applied by the Taliban, especially during their regime and some locals embraced their radical mentality which was painted with the brush of religion. In a nutshell, the traditional tribes are vulnerable to the ISIL's deceptive ideology or will succumb to the force used by the group to impose their parochial mindset with the barrel of gun.

Although the ISIL group seems to be retreating in Iraq and Syria, its loyalists continue violence in Afghanistan. 2016 was a grim year and the National Unity Government (NUG) was in the grip of insurgency. The gleam of hope for peace eluded with the Taliban's Omari Operation and suffered in the worst possible way. In other words, warring factions narrowed the ground for democratic practices through carrying out indiscriminate attacks against combatants and non-combatants alike. With the mounting insurgency, a gap between state and nation emerged – which was compounded by political tensions among the officials.

The political conflicts went viral every once in a while by high-ranking officials – it deteriorated as the first vice president Abdul Rashid Dostum said that he had been marginalized from political issue and his role reduced.

Hence, the NUG was wrestling not only with insurgency but also with political tensions.

It is hoped that the tragic year, which left indescribable casualties behind, will be an eye-opener for the NUG. They have to cultivate unity and abolish the roots of terrorism. The heavy operations against ISIL fighters, carried out by the government along with US forces, were very fruitful but there is still a lot to be done so as to root them out in 2017. So, the NUG is hoped to strengthen democracy through protecting the rights and liberty of the nation and intensify military attacks against warring factions rather than zeroing in on peace talks – which have been constantly denied by the militant fighters. Prayerfully, the war-weary Afghan nation, will heave a sigh of relief in a civil society void of violence and carnage.

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