

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



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Severe Cold and the Most Vulnerable

As the intensity of the cold weather has increased in different parts of the country, people are being influenced in different ways. Those who are poor and do not have the facilities of life are the most vulnerable. They do not have proper clothing, blankets to cover themselves and fuel to burn. Those who can arrange for some wood for themselves are able to resist against the extreme cold weather to a certain extent; otherwise, they have to undergo the consequences. In the process of this struggle, mostly the weather wins and many of the people get sick; few among them even die.

The situation is worse when there are people who have to fight severe cold without shelter. There are certain places in the country where the people do not have proper shelters and have to take refuge in caves, under the bridges or even in open air. There are many families in cold areas such as Bamyan who do not have any other shelter and are found in the caves on the historic mountain that contains Buddha's statue. Their condition is pathetic during the cold weather in Bamyan which is among the severest in the country. Most of them do not have proper nutrition and reliable sources of making themselves warm. Then, there are certain other groups of people who are also among the most vulnerable to be influenced by the weather; they are the drug addicts. Afghanistan is one of the countries that have been highly influenced by drug addiction. Millions are caught in this quagmire and more tragic is the fact that there are many women and even children among them.

Afghanistan is among the top producers of poppy; therefore, the influence over its own people is natural. Among these drug addicts the ones that do not have shelter are the most defenseless. They have to live and sleep under the open sky or under different bridges. The capital Kabul in this regard showcases many incidences of the fact. There are many drug addicts in the city who live under the open sky or infamous bridges. Pul-e-Sokhta Bridge in PD 6 is one of the most dominant examples. Hundreds of addicts live under the bridge and their number seems to be increasing with each passing day. Now, there are some families as well among them, who can be seen with their children. There is a very tragic atmosphere both under the bridge and around it. The addicts are suffering from two miseries at the same time – addiction and the wrath of the weather. Recently, a news report revealed that on average two to four addicts die each day due to the severe cold currently gripping the capital. The addicts say that they do not have blankets to cover themselves and they live in a very bad condition. It has been observed that many of these addicts ultimately die but during the recent cold weather the number of deaths has increased. Unfortunately, there is no response from city administration to control the situation. The rise in the number of addicted under the bridge has also influenced the atmosphere of the neighborhood and its security as well.

In many cases, the addicts finding no other way, decide to steal things from the houses around the bridge so that they are able to satiate their addiction and manage covering for themselves.

The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) says that it is trying to address the problem; however, it is facing the budget constraints. Head of drug reduction department of MoPH said in a recent statement, "The budget that we have for treatment of addicts is not much and has not been approved yet. If the budget does not increase, in the next year we will face many problems. We will transfer this week a number of addicts from Pul-e-Sukhta to reduce the number of people dying every day." The government has, as a matter of fact, failed to respond to the situation properly. It has always resided to the tackle the problem on temporary basis and mostly displaced the addicts from the area as a response, which has only resulted further disturbance around the neighborhood. The preventive measures to stop the use of drugs should be two-fold. First, the measures must be carried out to discourage its spread and use; means the objective should be to stop producing new addicts. Strict legal measures must be carried out to discourage the smuggling of drugs and its business. The second phase of the preventive campaign should involve the treatment of the addicts and availability of pleasant environment to them so that they should avoid using drugs and return to positive living. The suggested measures can really play a role in discouraging the use of drugs; nevertheless, they are short-term. For a considerable reduction in the use of this menace, it is vital that better living conditions must be provided to the people. Better living conditions are also vital for providing people the capability to fight against severe cold weather. If the people have proper shelter, clothing, fuel and nutrition they will be able to fight against the wrath of the weather; otherwise, they will succumb to death.

Afghan-Pak Last Year's Relations

By Hujjatullah Zia

Afghan-Pak relations remained tense throughout 2016 and it is believed that ties between the two nations will continue to remain hostage to the Taliban if Kabul and Islamabad do not engage. The underlying mistrust between the two neighboring countries has squandered many opportunities of fostering an environment conducive to the peaceful settlement of the protracted conflict.

2016 commenced with a silver lining for both nations with the revival of talks between Kabul and Afghan Taliban. It also marked the first time the Taliban confirmed a visit to Islamabad by its negotiators. Things went downhill from there as harsh rhetoric was exchanged between officials for the unmitigated insurgency in Afghanistan just before talks were scheduled to begin in April. This followed a suicide attack on a security agency's office in the Afghan capital. Prospects for talks further worsened when the Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour was killed in a US drone strike in Baluchistan in May as Pakistan condemned the incident and called it violation of its territory. Additionally, Islamabad's role regarding peace talks was not acceptable for Kabul and the escalated militancy in Afghanistan aroused a sense of mistrust between the Afghan-Pak officials for being orchestrated in the Taliban's safe haven located in Pakistan – according to Afghan's authorities. The relations further tensed when the two countries clashed over the construction of a gate at Torkham. Ensuing skirmishes resulted in casualties on both sides. The border remained closed for five days and all trade was suspended. The relations further tensed following Ashraf Ghani's tirade against Pakistan and his negative answer to its financial aid at the Heart of Asia Conference in the northern Indian city of Amritsar. Ghani said that Taliban insurgency would not survive a month if it lost its sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, urging it to take on militant groups on its soil instead of giving Kabul financial aid. Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz countered the claim, calling the criticism "simplistic". Lauding the leadership of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, Aziz said Afghan security forces had firmly and bravely stood their ground in repelling militant and terrorist attacks. "We would do whatever we can to help achieve this objective." The Afghan government, he said, "has also signed peace agreement with Hizb-i-Islami Afghanistan. The implementation of this peace deal can serve as a model for talks with other insurgent groups in future." Following the death of Mullah Mansour, the Quadrilateral Co-ordination Group (QCG), consisting of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US to bring the Taliban to negotiating table, ended and insurgency continued in Afghanistan with the appointment of Mullah Haibutullah Akhundzada. Subsequently, Russia, China and Pakistan have formed a trilateral group over the instability about Afghanistan and lately had

its third round meeting – Afghanistan and the US, who are supposed to be the mainstays in Afghanistan's issue, are not included in the group. Kabul has disapproved of the group and called it interference in country's internal issue. Former politician and Jihadi figure Mohammad Ismail Khan warned, last week, that Afghanistan is likely to enter a new era of conflict unless government reviews its regional policies, referring to the trilateral meeting. He said that leaders of the National Unity Government (NUG) have failed to tackle the problems in the country, adding that government's ineffective policies have led to the creation of a new front between Russia, Iran and China against Afghanistan. "While uncertainties continue to prevail in the country, those who are within the government also do not have the right policy, therefore we see that the region starts staging against us. We also face weaknesses on the warfront and this takes Afghanistan toward a crisis" he is cited as saying. He further warned that if action is not taken, Afghanistan could change into a second Syria calling the Taliban-Russian relation a new crisis and devastating for Afghanistan. It comes as Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, has said that Moscow does not have plans regarding Afghanistan's peace process stating that Russia was not asked to do anything. Considering the aforementioned facts, the Afghan-Pak relations hit rock bottom within the last year and the gap between the two countries has widened to a great extent. In other words, the mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad has been lingering up to 2017 and therefore, no effective step was taken to broker the peace stalemate. The Taliban fighters continued their militancy in Afghanistan under the Omari Operation and inflicted heavy casualties upon Afghan nation. SIGAR reported in October 2016 that more than 5,500 Afghan forces were killed in the first eight months of 2016 while around 10,000 were wounded. UNAMA said that more than 3,000 civilians have been killed last year. However, the Taliban militants also underwent large casualties. As a result, counter-insurgency operations conducted by Afghan police and military forces around the country had, reportedly, left more than 18,500 fighters dead and wounded 12,000 more. Overall, 2016 was a bloody year for Afghanistan. Pakistan did not remain immune to terrorist attacks and suicide bombings either.

As a result, at least 70 people were killed and over 100 others wounded in a suicide bombing on August 8, 2016 at the emergency ward of Quetta's Civil Hospital, where scores of people had gathered to mourn the death of Baluchistan Bar Association (BBA) president Bilal Anwar Kasi in a gun attack. In a nutshell, since both the countries are embroiled in militancy, they will have to bridge the gap and build trust through friendly practices and take high step regarding peace process.

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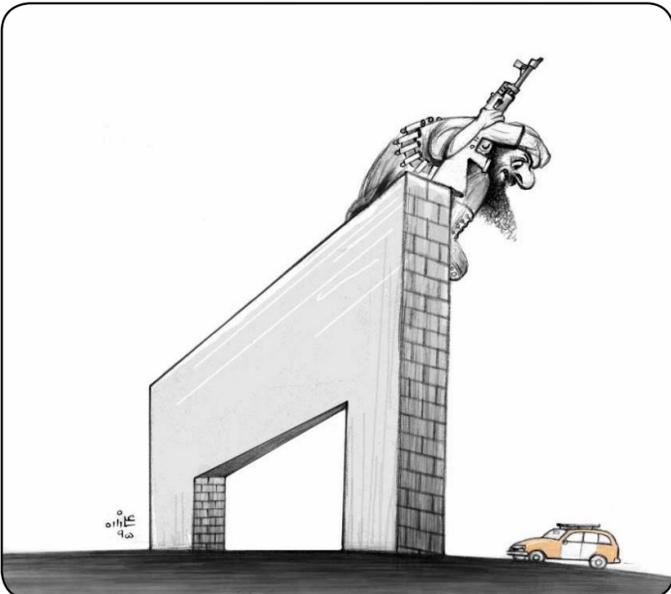
The Five Lessons of Populist Rule

By Slawomir Sierakowski

Jaroslav Kaczyński, Poland's de facto leader, has become, next to Donald Trump, an avatar of the populist threat to the Western democratic model. As we await Trump's inauguration as US president on January 20, it is worth pondering the first year of populist rule in Poland. The results have run contrary to expectations. The conventional view of what awaits the US (and possibly France and the Netherlands) in 2017 is an erratic ruler who enacts contradictory policies that primarily benefit the rich. The poor will lose, because populists have no hope of restoring manufacturing jobs, despite their promises. And massive inflows of migrants and refugees will continue, because populists have no plan to address the problem's root causes. In the end, populist governments, incapable of effective rule, will crumble and their leaders will either face impeachment or fail to win re-election. Kaczyński faced similar expectations. Liberal Poles thought that he would work for the benefit of the rich, create chaos, and quickly trip himself up – which is exactly what happened in 2005-2007, when Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party (PiS) last governed Poland. But the liberals were wrong. PiS has transformed itself from an ideological nullity into a party that has managed to introduce shocking changes with record speed and efficiency. Other countries currently anticipating populist rule should take note of its key hallmarks. No to neoliberalism. In 2005-2007, PiS implemented neoliberal economic policies (for example, eliminating the highest income-tax bracket and the estate tax); this time, it has enacted the largest social transfers in Poland's contemporary history. Parents receive a 500 zloty (\$120) monthly benefit for every child after their first, or for all children in poorer families (the average net monthly income is about 2,900 zloty, though more than two-thirds of Poles earn less). As a result, the poverty rate has declined by 20-40%, and by 70-90% among children. The list goes on: In 2016, the government introduced free medication for people over the age of 75. The minimum-wage now exceeds what trade unions had sought. The retirement age has been reduced from 67 for both men and women to 60 for women and 65 for men. The government also plans tax relief for low-income taxpayers. The restoration of "order." Independent institutions are the most important enemy of populism. Populist leaders are control freaks. For populists, it is liberal democracy that leads to chaos, which must be "put in order" by a "responsible government." Media pluralism leads to informational chaos. An independent judiciary means legal chaos. Independent public administration creates institutional chaos. And a robust civil society is a recipe for chronic bickering and conflict. But populists believe that such chaos does not emerge by itself. It is the work of perfidious foreign powers and their domestic puppets. To "make Poland great again," the nation's heroes must defeat its traitors, who are not equal contenders for power. Populist leaders are thus obliged to limit their opponents' rights. Indeed, their political ideal is not order, but rather the subordination of all independent bases of power that could challenge them: courts, media, business, cultural institutions, NGOs, and so forth.

Electoral dictatorship. Populists know how to win elections, but their conception of democracy extends no further. On the contrary, populists view minority rights, separation of government powers, and independent media – all staples of liberalism – as an attack on majority rule, and therefore on democracy itself. The political ideal that a populist government strives for is essentially an elected dictatorship. And recent US experience suggests that this can be a sustainable model. After all, everything depends on how those in power decide to organize elections, which can include redrawing voting districts or altering the rules governing campaign finance or political advertisements. Elections can be falsified imperceptibly. Might makes right. Populists have benefited from disseminating fake news, slandering their opponents, and promising miracles that mainstream media treat as normal campaign claims. But it is a mistake to think that truth is an effective weapon against post-truth. In a post-truth world, it is power, not fact-checking, that is decisive. Whoever is most ruthless and has the fewest scruples wins. Populists are both unseemly and ascendant. Trump's supporters, for example, have come to view lawdriness as evidence of credibility, whereas comity, truth, and reason are evidence of elitism. If people are worse off under liberal democracy, so much the worse for liberal democracy. Those who would resist populism must come to terms with the fact that truth is not enough. They must also display determination and ruthlessness, though without becoming the mirror image of their opponents. The current situation in Poland can serve as a useful example. After a year of retreating, the two largest opposition parties have begun to occupy the Sejm (Poland's parliament) to protest an illegal vote on the state budget. They are laying a trap for Kaczyński's government: back down or resort to violence. Either way, he loses. Nationalism is not dead. Unfortunately, what won't lose, in Poland and elsewhere, is nationalism – the only ideology that has survived in the post-ideological era. By appealing to nationalist sentiment, populists have gained support everywhere, regardless of the economic system or situation, because it is being fueled externally, namely by the influx of migrants and refugees. Mainstream politicians, especially on the left, currently have no effective message on the issue. Opposing migration contradicts their ideals, while supporting it means electoral defeat. But the choice should be clear. Either populism's opponents drastically change their rhetoric regarding migrants and refugees, or the populists will continue to rule. Migrants and refugees lose in either scenario, but in the second, so does liberal democracy. Such calculations are ugly – and, yes, corrosive of liberal values – but the populists, as we have seen, are capable of far nastier tradeoffs. After a year of populism in Poland, Kaczyński has succeeded in establishing control over two issues near and dear to voters: social transfers and immigration. As long as he controls these two bastions of voter sentiment, he is safe. Those who seek to oppose Trump – or France's Marine Le Pen in April's presidential election – can draw their own conclusions from that fact. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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