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

Daily Outlook Afghanistan
The Leading Independent Newspaper

January 13, 2019

Afghanistan's Electoral Fraud Costs

Afghan Wolesi Jirga election was expected to be more transparent, reliable and fairer than the previous elections to rebuild public trust to the electoral institutions. However, it changed to be one of the worst electoral mismanagement cases in the course of the history of the elections in Afghanistan.

There is no doubt Electoral integrity is a central building block for the quality of democracy in general, and for electoral freedom and fairness in particular because it ensures that voters will not consider elections suffering from obvious fraud as meaningful as electoral contests which do not show signs of such defects. These fraudulent practices, in turn, also influence voters' level of satisfaction with the way democracy works. Although intuitive in theory, the impact of electoral fraud on voters' attitudes has received scant comparative empirical attention to date. Understanding this relationship is of crucial importance considering that variations in SWD are consequential factors that undergird both the consolidation and the stability of democracies.

According to studies manifestations of electoral fraud affect individuals by constraining the electoral choices available and by adding a layer of arbitrariness between citizens' preferences and their translation into seats. We posit that electoral fraud in general acts as an additional filter hindering citizens from shaping policy outcomes, and is likely to affect perceptions of accountability and responsiveness. Under conditions of electoral fraud, electoral figures can no longer be considered reliable expressions of the general will but become by-products of electoral manipulation. Moreover, given that electoral fraud is said to undermine the functioning of democracy, general manifestations of electoral malpractice should negatively impact citizens' SWD.

Studies show that the relationship between electoral integrity and levels of SWD is conditioned by the results of the elections for two reasons. First, there is abundant evidence that, at the individual level, being on the winning side of an election is influential for political attitudes, such as SWD. As a result, winning in this context is mostly about voting for a party or person who forms the executive suggests that although perceptions of the fairness of decision-making processes impact citizens' acceptance of its outcome, this effect is substantially smaller than the perceived utility of the outcome. In the case of elections, winning has probably the highest possible utility and should therefore matter more than the degree of procedural fairness attached to them; For instance, research show that the negative linkage between SWD and corruption has been weaker among those who had voted for the winning party in the previous election, suggesting that winning could be more important than fair and impartial procedures.

Other accounts of the determinants of political legitimacy, however, stress the importance of procedural factors. Studies also show the importance of general governance (including corruption control, rule of law and government effectiveness) in citizens' assessment of the legitimacy of states. Empirical evidence is therefore mixed when it comes to the relationship between SWD, the importance of fair procedures, and the question of winning or losing an election.

Moreover, some contributions have established that institutions condition the relationship between election victory and SWD: winners of an election in majoritarian systems are more satisfied with democracy than winners in consensual systems while the inverse relationship holds for those who lose. Therefore, electoral fraud is a breach of procedural impartiality that will influence SWD negatively, but that winning an election could change the shape of this relationship and have a positive effect on SWD – irrespective of the degree of electoral misconduct.

In a nutshell, winning an election will also affect SWD irrespective of the quality of elections. Voters are interested in policy gains, regardless of whether these gains come at the price of electoral fraud. Therefore, while electoral fraud should negatively impact SWD in general, this relationship should weaken for those voters who vote for the winning party in fraudulent elections. Finally, Afghanistan must work on institutional reforms that might improve the effectiveness and sustainability of government monitoring efforts. And perhaps more practically, it must identify and operationalize innovative uses of technology to quickly gather information on corruption, waste, and abuse is a promising direction for research and for policy.

The Outcome of Kim-Xi's Visit

By: Hujjatullah Zia

The recent visit of Korean Leader Kim Jong-un to China to hold his fourth summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping signals a strong diplomatic tie between Beijing and Pyongyang. Kim's three trips to China last year, before and after his summits with his South Korean and US counterparts, strengthened mutual relations between Democratic People's Republic of Korea and China.

Kim's this year's visit to China carries much weight for three main reasons. For the one, Kim's this year's first overseas trip to China signals his commitment to continue his summit with Washington and Seoul for the denuclearization of Korean Peninsula, as he had stated in his New Year speech, and urge China to play its mediatory role. He also said he was willing to promote ties with the Republic of Korea and the United States and "sit down face-to-face" with Trump. Hence, Kim needs China to play its role in this regard, which has been proved highly fruitful so far.

Second, Kim and Xi had reportedly discussed the expected second US-North Korea summit, the first was held in Singapore in which Kim and Trump pledged to work towards denuclearization and establish a longer-term stable peace mechanism. But little headway was made with the vaguely-worded agreement signed between the two sides for denuclearization as both sides argue over its interpretation.

Washington's package for Pyongyang is to be denuclearized once and for all. That is, US insists on CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization) which includes an end to uranium enrichment and reprocessing as well as ballistic missile and chemical and biological weapons. However, this "model of Libya" is not acceptable to Kim, who wants a gradual approach and demands US to lift its sanctions with each denuclearization move. In addition, "Kim is eager to remind the Trump administration that he does have diplomatic and economic options besides what Washington and Seoul can offer," Harry J. Kazianis, Director of Defense Studies at the US-based Center for the National Interest, is cited as saying.

Third, Kim seeks to strengthen strategic and economic ties between his country and China. In his annual key note, Kim reiterated the importance of "strategic communication and cooperation" with socialist nations, highlighting his last year's three visits to China. Subsequent to his conciliatory remarks last year, Kim broke the ice with DPRK's neighboring countries and kept China in the loop. As Kim pledged to shift the country's focus to economic development, China, which has championed reform and opening-up for four decades, will share its experience and the fruit of its economic reform with DPRK.

China is DPRK's key diplomatic ally and main source of trade and aid. The two sides established diplomatic relations in 1949. A year later, North Korea's then prime minister Kim Il-sung met chairman Mao Ze-dong. Since then, the mutual relations between China and DPRK passed many ups and downs. Marking 60 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries, North Korean's then leader Kim Jong-il and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao exchanged greetings and declared 2009 as the "year of China-DPRK friendship". The strained ties between the two sides were mended by Kim last year.

China has played a key role in resolving regional tension, including that of Korean Peninsula. As a result, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and ROK's President Moon Jae-in praised Beijing's role in denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and resolving inter-Korean crisis. In his New Year press Conference, Moon said China played a constructive role in supporting the inter-Korean summits as well as US-DPRK's summit.

The US-North Korean expected summit is highly significant and the negotiating sides have to hold meaningful talks so as to officially put an end to the Korean War and establish lasting peace and stability on the peninsula. It is believed that if Trump's administration persists on CVID without considering DPRK's demands, negotiations will be proved abortive. Lack of consensus will lead to horrible consequence as Kim warned in his speech that if the US misjudged Pyongyang's patience, maintained sanctions and demanded denuclearization unilaterally, he might seek a new path.

As both DPRK and ROK leaders – who have confirmed their trust in Beijing and appreciated its role – are willing to reach consensus over the denuclearization of the peninsula and promote mutual ties, the two heavyweight actors, China and the US, are recommended to play their role more instrumentally so as to end the inter-Korean crisis this year.

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Managing Minefields: Saudi/UAE Aid Puts Pakistan-Iran Relations on the Spot

By: James M. Dorsey

Pakistan is traversing minefields as it concludes agreements on investment, balance of payments support and delayed payment oil deliveries with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates worth USD$13 billion that are likely to fawn growing distrust in its relations with neighbouring Iran.

Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan expects to next month sign a memorandum of understanding with Saudi Arabia on a framework for US$ 10 billion in Saudi investments, primarily in oil refining, petrochemicals, renewable energy and mining. The signing would take place during a planned visit to Pakistan by Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The memorandum follows the kingdom's rewarding of Mr. Khan for his attendance of a foreign investors summit in Riyadh in October that was shunned by numerous CEOs of Western financial institutions, tech entrepreneurs and media moguls as well as senior Western government officials because of the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

Mr. Khan walked away from the summit with a US$3 billion deposit in Pakistan's central bank as balance of payments support and a promise to defer up to US$3 billion in payments for oil imports for a year.

The United Arab Emirates is expected to conclude similar agreements with Pakistan in the coming weeks.

Perhaps the most sensitive investment is likely to be a plan by Saudi national oil company Aramco to build a refinery in the Chinese-backed Baloch port of Gwadar close to both Pakistan's border with Iran and the Indian-backed Iranian 486-hectar port of Chabahar. Both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are monitoring progress in Chabahar with Argus eyes.

A potential Saudi investment in troubled Balochistan's Reko Diq copper and gold mine would further enhance the kingdom's foothold in the strategic province.

As always, the devil could be in the details of the Pakistani-Saudi investment agreement. Haroon Sharif, the chairman of Pakistan's Board of Investment, cautioned that foreign investment would require a "better law and order situation and ease-of-doing-business opportunities."

Pakistan's security situation has somewhat improved in the last year, but the country continues to risk blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international anti-money laundering and terrorism finance watchdog because of the Pakistani military's selective support of militants and close ties between militants and political parties, including Mr. Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

Adding an additional layer of complexity is the fact that funds from the kingdom have been flowing into the coffers of ultra-conservative anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian Sunni Muslim madrassahs or religious seminars in Balochistan. It was unclear whether the funds originated with the Saudi government or Saudi nationals of Baloch descent and members of the two million-strong Pakistani Diaspora in the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia sees the Pakistani region as a launching pad of a potential effort by the kingdom and/or the United States to destabilize the Islamic republic by stirring unrest among its ethnic minorities, including the Baluch. While Saudi Arabia has put the building blocks in place for possible covert action, it has to date given no indication that it intends to act on proposals to support irredentist action.

The flow of funds coincided with the publication in November 2017 of a study by the International Institute for Iranian Studies, formerly known as the Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies, a Saudi government-backed think tank, that argued that Chabahar posed "a direct threat to the Arab Gulf states" that called for "immediate counter measures."

Iran's Revolutionary Guards were the target of a rare suicide bombing in December in the port city that killed two people and wounded 40 others.

Iranian officials, including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Revolutionary Guards spokesman Brigadier General Ramadan Sharif suggested without providing evidence that Saudi Arabia was complicit in the attack.

The attack "underscores the anti-regime sentiment boiling under the surface in provinces such as Sistan and Baluchestan and Khuzestan, as well as security vulnerabilities in Chabahar and beyond," said Brian M. Perkins, a risk management consultant and former US Navy signals intelligence analyst.

Khuzestan is Iran's impoverished, oil-rich province that is home to the country's ethnic Arab community while Chabahar is located in the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan that boasts the country's highest unemployment rate.

Saudi thinking about stoking unrest strokes with that of President Donald J. Trump's national security advisor John Bolton, who before assuming office, publicly advocated destabilization of Iran.

Mr. Bolton, in a policy speech in Cairo, asserted this week that the United States had "joined the Iranian people in calling for freedom and accountability… America's economic sanctions against the (Iranian) regime are the strongest in history, and will keep getting tougher until Iran starts behaving like a normal country."

Mr. Bolton was referring to harsh US sanctions imposed after Mr. Trump last year withdrew the United States from a 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear program.

Desperately in need of financial support and investment, Pakistan's agreements with Saudi Arabia and the UAE come at a moment that "Pakistan-Iran relations are at a crossroads, according to Muhammad Akbar Notezai, Dawn newspaper's plugged in Balochistan correspondent.

A far cry from four years ago when the Pakistani parliament refused a Saudi request that Pakistani troops join the kingdom's ill-fated military intervention in Yemen, Iran now sees Pakistan as a Saudi ally in the kingdom's rivalry with Iran.

Similarly, Pakistan fears that Chabahar will allow India to bypass Pakistan in forging closer economic and political ties with Iran as well as Afghanistan and Central Asian nations. Pakistani analysts expect an estimated US$ 5 billion in Afghan trade to flow through Chabahar after India last month started handling the port's operations.

Pakistan is further concerned that Iran, in response to the Saudi funding that its sees as part of an anti-Iranian US-Saudi plot, could step up support for Baloch nationalists in a bid to raise the stakes for the South Asian nation.

Pakistan is also worried that deteriorating Pakistani-Iranian relations offers India an opportunity to subvert the US$45 billion plus China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crown jewel of the People's Republic's Belt and Road initiative.

In November, the nationalist Baloch Liberation Army claimed responsibility for an attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi, Pakistan's commercial and industrial heartland.

Writing in the Pakistan Security Report 2018, published by the Islamabad-based Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), Mr. Notezai noted that "to many in Pakistan, such concerns were materialized with the arrest of Kulbushan Jadhav, an Indian spy in Balochistan who had come through Iran. Ever since, Pakistani intelligence agencies have been on extra-alert on its border with Iran."

The journalist warned that "the more Pakistan slips into the Saudi orbit, the more its relations with Iran will worsen… If their borders remain troubled, anyone can fish in the troubled water. This is what is (already) happening in the border region."

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