

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

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Reforming IEC Before Presidential Election

As the candidates have started registering their names for the upcoming presidential elections, the political environment in Afghanistan seems to be getting more excited. However, alongside this excitement, there are different sorts of worries as well. Most important of them is that the election should be able to bring a better change for Afghanistan, which is only possible through a fair and transparent election. However, looking at the present performance of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan, it is very difficult to expect something very positive. Particularly, the performance of the commission during and after the parliamentary election has left no doubt that the commission is facing serious problems regarding its capacity to conduct a fair, free and transparent election.

The initial result of parliamentary election was announced after a long delay. Even after it was announced, there were serious allegations of fraud and misuse of power by IEC. The results of Kabul election raised further doubts and ambiguities about the commission and even Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC). Both the organizations failed to satisfy the candidates, the observers and the people of their performance.

As a matter of fact, this year IEC will be faced with the challenge of conducting four elections: presidential election and district council election throughout Afghanistan, and parliamentary and district council elections in Ghazni. The situation is going to be very sensitive and demanding. The political and social polarization is evident ahead of the presidential election, while political and factional sensitivities are on the rise. Unfortunately, these sensitivities are based on identity and ethnicity. That is why the presidential election is going to be very sensitive, while IEC has lost its moral authority to manage it properly.

The parliamentary election also proved that no major work has taken place in the commission over the past few years though there has been huge spending. In fact, the work has only proceeded as a project. Even the digitization of the voting process did not achieve anything although it was an expensive choice to make. Opting for the same technology for the upcoming presidential election will also prove to be futile as its implementation is not only a technical issue but a political one. On the other hand, without a comprehensive computerized database available for all the voting population of Afghanistan, it is impossible to make the biometric system a success.

When, presidential election was delayed for a period of three months, the Afghan government and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) welcomed the delay in the opportunity to reform the IEC. Foreign and donor institutions, as well as the Afghan people, clearly understood that the commission, with its existing capacity and structure, would never be able to hold next year's presidential elections. Electoral commissions also recognize this. The Afghan government rejected all other speculations in delaying the upcoming presidential election, emphasizing only the capacity-building factor in electoral commissions.

However, after the delay in holding the presidential election, the efforts of the electoral commissions and the relevant institutions should be used to make use of this opportunity to use the necessary capacity building for electoral commissions. In addition to eliminating unskilled workers and attracting qualified people at the provincial and central level, this capacity building should also include structural capacity building at the IEC level.

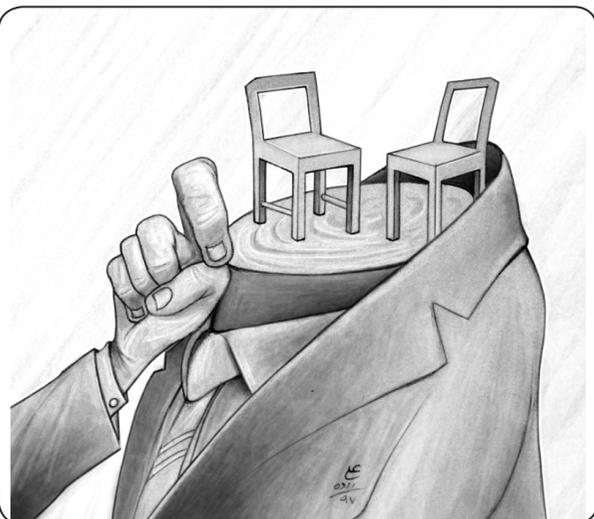
Reforms should not be limited to the capacity of the IEC's ordinary people. Therefore, there is a need for reform at the core of IEC, and these reforms should include the commission's leadership panel.

In addition, modifications to the duties and the manner of communication and coordination among the IEC offices are also necessary. These reforms should include not only the level of the center, but also the provinces. Otherwise, we will not be able to satisfy the electoral constituencies and the international community by making minor improvements.

Now that we are lucky enough to have a very objective election experience, and the government is also under pressure to hold elections, there should be efforts to make an acceptable election possible so that the people no longer experience distrust and post-election conflict, that marred the result in last presidential election and wasted valuable time of the nation.

To begin with, comprehensive and fundamental reforms in the electoral commissions are vital. At the same time, the independence of the commissions must also be ensured. Most preferably, there can be an interim government installed for conducting elections, since the past experiences have proved that the government may get involved in influencing the election commissions and the results of elections.

Undoubtedly, we have very little time to change the rules and procedures of the election. Nevertheless, we all know that our problem was not in laws and procedures, but in the structure and manner in which electoral processes were managed. Therefore, our current conditions require substantial reforms in the structure and management of the election commissions.



Effective Governance in Challenging Environments

By: Moh. Sakhi Rezaie

The "Afghanistan as a Regional Hub" narrative has gained traction in recent years. Yet a very important question remains: How this would be realized? While statistics point to a country whose fortunes have improved, many Afghan citizens remain at the margins of socioeconomic development. There is a heightened focus among provinces and regions on translating promising statistics into better livelihoods for citizens. Citizens' discontent in provides a fresh reminder of the danger in touting impressive economic growth statistics while the majority of a country's population remains excluded from democratic governance processes and development. It is also widely believed that development failures and governance deficits lie "at the heart of Afghanistan's violent conflicts." Afghanistan will only achieve its full potential and live up to the Afghanistan as a regional hub narrative if it can strengthen its systems of governance; promote inclusive, equitable, and participatory development; and embed a culture of democracy and peace.

However, many challenges persist, and pockets of regression are evident. A growing youth bulge and the widespread marginalization of young people, enduring underdevelopment, and persistent inequalities are among the social and economic challenges that are negatively impacting efforts to improve governance. Terrorist groups and radicalized militias are controlling vast expanses of ungoverned territories, becoming astute service providers in competition with the state. In certain contexts, these non-state actors, heavily armed, are taking advantage of technology and globalization in their attempts to redefine the manner in which power is acquired, exercised, and maintained. All of them abuse religion by claiming it legitimizes new forms of brutal authoritarianism, as illustrated in Qandahar, Nangarhar, Ghazni, Sar e Pul, Badakhshan and other provinces. As a result, it has created major risks for governance and leadership at national and sub-national levels. In addition, many of these groups marshal local discontent with "bad politics" and take advantage of an absence of state authority due to weak institutions at the local level. Indeed, marginalization and exclusion form part of a long list of challenges to governance, peace, and stability in Afghanistan, which also includes mismanagement of natural resources; failure to adhere to the rule of law; violations of human rights; inequality and extreme poverty; youth unemployment; inadequate

reconstruction, development, and reconciliation; and shortcomings in disarmament and reintegration of ex-combatants back into their communities.

Recent reverses in peace and security across Afghanistan illustrate the persistent gaps that exist between the aspirational norms of democratic governance and their implementation. Yet, in the face of these setbacks, policy responses tend to focus on the violent symptoms of insecurity rather than addressing one of the primary root causes of these conflicts: poor governance. As a result, Afghanistan's mixed peace and security record can be seen in both the progress in economic growth and peace consolidation, and the enduring security risks that find their roots in multilayered democratic governance deficits.

To overcome this ambivalent record, Afghanistan needs a unified strategy to address the country's governance challenges and advance long-term peace and stability. Effective, inclusive, and accountable governance; visionary leadership; and solid democratic institutions are critical to ensuring Afghanistan reaches its potential in ever challenging environments. Thus, restoring and strengthening governance in fragile and conflict affected contexts calls for a new social contract built on accountability and inclusiveness—of institutions, politics, economic growth, natural resource management, and the delivery of public services. This new social contract, which is an essential prerequisite to Afghanistan's transformation, has the potential to facilitate the kind of socioeconomic development and responsive, inclusive politics that leads to an enabling environment for sustainable peace and stability. Such responsibility should include building capable, effective, and legitimate states, and ensuring the participation of all Afghan citizens in the endeavor to build this social contract.

A lack of implementation of norms and standards prevents the realization of the normative and institutional frameworks for promoting democracy and the rule of law in Afghanistan. In light of limited coordination, there are gaps between institutions and citizens, as well as political, resource, and capacity constraints. To effectively tackle these challenges the Afghan government shall take specific policy measures focusing on three main priorities: enhancing democracy, governance, and human rights; bridging the divide between governance standards and performance; and promoting effective governance from the ground up.

The Trump Administration's Farewell to Aims

By: Carl Bildt

Every now and then, a US political leader descends on Cairo to deliver an address outlining America's policy objectives in the ever-challenging Middle East. For example, in June 2005, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made waves with a speech that firmly put the promotion of freedom and democracy on the agenda.

"For 60 years," Rice observed, "the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region ... and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people." And to those who would accuse the US of imposing democracy on the region, she responded, "In fact, the opposite is true. Democracy is never imposed. It is tyranny that must be imposed."

Needless to say, a number of regional leaders were distinctly uncomfortable with the speech, given that it came just two years after the US invasion of Iraq. But Rice was also following up on the 2002 Arab Human Development Report, which had highlighted the region's miserable conditions, and made a clear case for long-term structural reforms.

Four years later, it was a newly elected President Barack Obama's turn to head to Cairo. In his speech, Obama downplayed the promotion of democracy and emphasized the need for a more harmonious relationship between the US and the entire Muslim world, while also calling for a resolution to regional conflicts.

On the Israel-Palestine question, whereas Rice's speech had embraced a "vision of two democratic states living side by side in peace and security," Obama went further, describing the Palestinians' situation as "intolerable" and harshly criticizing Israel's settlement activities.

In Obama's view, the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict posed the second-largest danger to the region, after "violent extremism." Then came Iran's nuclear program and the threat of a regional arms race, followed by the absence of democracy, the lack of religious freedom, and economic underdevelopment. He envisioned "a world where Israelis and Palestinians are each secure in a state of their own ... and the rights of all God's children are respected." But it wasn't to be. Despite intense diplomatic efforts by US Secretary of State John Kerry during Obama's second term, a peace settlement could not be reached. In his farewell address in December 2016, Kerry put the blame squarely on Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

One can debate whether Rice or Obama's words played any role in the 2011 Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia and found a symbolic home in Cairo's Tahrir Square. But it is clear that those who took to the streets to demand democracy and representative government were genuinely hopeful for the future. Again, it wasn't to be. In almost all of the countries where people mobilized to demand political and economic reform, the result was counter-revolution, repression, and, in Syria's case, civil war.

Obama failed to avert the disaster in Syria. But, pursuing his previously stated priorities, he did help to prevent a devastating region-wide war by concluding the 2015 nuclear agreement with

Iran. That, in turn, opened the door for further engagement with Iran on all other issues of concern, including human rights.

This month, the current US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, traveled to Cairo to deliver his own speech. And he made clear that the Trump administration's approach to the region represents a stark departure from that of its predecessors.

Pompeo started by attacking Obama for having based his strategy on "fundamental misunderstandings" of history. He then declared that US policy would henceforth focus solely on destroying the two evils of the Middle East: "radical Islam" and "Iran's wave of regional destruction and global campaigns of terror."

Gone was any talk about democracy and reform. On the question of peace between Israel and Palestine, Pompeo limited himself to mentioning Trump's counterproductive decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. The speech made no mention of overcoming divisions, building bridges, and opening up the region for economic development, but it did offer plenty of implicit praise for dictators who have managed to deliver stability. In effect, America's approach to the region has come full circle: Pompeo espoused precisely the failed policy that Rice had repudiated in 2005.

On the key issue of Iran, the speech revealed the administration's policy to be a barren one of confrontation for its own sake. Iran, in Pompeo's telling, is the source of every problem in the region. Without profound political change there, he declared, "The nations of the Middle East will never enjoy security, achieve economic stability, or advance their dreams."

This is nonsense. The Iranian regime has nothing to do with the brutal repression in Egypt, the severe structural issues in Saudi Arabia, or the Israel-Palestine deadlock. Moreover, Iran is a sworn enemy of the Islamic State (ISIS), and has committed resources to that fight.

All told, the Pompeo Doctrine seems to amount to unlimited confrontation with Iran, strong support for stable authoritarian regimes, neglect of the Palestinian issue, and a complete disinterest in representative governance and reform. The Trump administration is not just ignoring the current escalation of tensions throughout the region; it is actively supporting it.

From a European perspective, this is profoundly worrying. Conflicts in the Middle East have far-reaching implications for our own security and stability. In the absence of US leadership, Europe needs its own policy for preserving the Iran nuclear deal and promoting a two-state solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The European Union has been both vocal and clear on these two points. But it must translate these priorities into a comprehensive vision of reform and reconciliation for the entire region. Unlike the speeches by Rice and Obama, Pompeo's address is unlikely to inspire anyone outside a small circle of regional authoritarians. With the US having abandoned moral leadership, it is up to Europe to show those yearning for democracy and reform that they are not alone.

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