

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

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Ethnic Leaders as Barriers to Institutionalization of Democracy

These days the presidential election has become a hot topic in Afghanistan but the presence of people, who are supposed to be the real source of sovereignty, are less visible. Afghanistan is one of the multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-religious countries in the world whilst these diversities have been acting as barriers to state-building in many cases. In addition to plurality of ethnicity and religion, the weakness of communication infrastructure such as lack of connecting roads between different parts of the country, lack of qualitative educational system, and the continued interference of its neighbor have acted as a barrier to state-building in the country. The main question here is, what factors led to the continued role of ethnic leaders acting as a voting bank in the political power relations, especially in the presidential election? Do the ethnic leaders act as obstacles to institutionalization of democracy in the country.

To find the answers to these questions, there is need for a brief overview of recent history of democracy establishment in Afghanistan. In 2001 When the Taliban terrorist regime refused to cooperate with the United States in repatriation of Osama bin Laden, the United States and its allies toppled the Taliban regime and then many of its leaders escaped to Pakistan. At the Bonn Summit, the ethnic political leaders of Afghanistan and the representatives of the major countries affecting Afghanistan's politics reached an agreement to establish a new political system in the country that would combine Islam, the political tradition and the components of democracy. To this end, the constitution of Afghanistan was ratified in 2003, which has been substantially better and more effective comparing to the past basic laws of Afghanistan; but whatsoever challenged the implementation of constitution is existence of an unwritten political tradition that define the relations of ethnics with the political power.

According to the current constitution, the political system in Afghanistan is headed by the president and his two vice-presidents. Although the constitution is democratic, there is another unwritten rule alongside the constitution that states when a person is candidate for presidency, his deputies must be of the other ethnic groups, and even the position of these deputies are specified in the unwritten law. Despite the some shortcomings, the 2004, 2009, and 2014 presidential elections were held but the unwritten rule that defines the power relations among the ethnic groups, remained unchallenged. In all of the presidential and parliamentary elections, the absence of strong political parties and effective civil society led the ethnic leaders to enter into power relations as representation from demands of the people. While, in many cases, the demand of ethnic leaders have overridden the political will of people. For example, a tribal leader decides to establish a coalition, he usually ignore the democratic demands of the people.

In some cases, despite incumbency of governmental post, the ethnic leaders joined the political government opponents. What has inevitably disappointed people is alluring promises of governmental or non-governmental leaders. In the absence of a precise mechanism for accountability, the situation returns to the previous state when the elections are held. After election they do not owe people except those who have close relationship to the leaders of the party entitled to raise their demands. Because of successive dissatisfaction and frustrations from the political leaders, sometimes people themselves enter into political deal but due to lack of a transparent mechanism for legitimate demand of people it wrap up to an instant cash deal. When people see that they cannot achieve their democratic demands and, on the other hand, political parties are degraded to family tools of some so-called leaders. In such cases there is no more option except following the interests of ethnic leaders.

In democratic societies, the existence of political parties is considered imperative for the survival of democracy. Even in developed Western countries, if people are left on their own without political parties and powerful civil society then political anomalies and inefficiencies of state institutions will emerge; hence, if the political parties are defined on the basis of modern criteria, the ethnic leaders cannot take the place of the parties because people will follow a certain ideology that defines political, economic, and cultural issues. In Afghanistan, the lack of active political parties and civil society has ensured the survival of ethnic leaders as voting bank. On the other hand, holding elections in the absence of political parties powerful and dynamic civil society changed to an on the spot deal between the political elites and people.

The Ethnic leaders use the ethnicity as a golden opportunity and renewable resource without any accountability. In order to consolidate a modern political party on the basis of democratic criteria, it is necessary to develop an appropriate political culture, and this requires raising the general awareness of society members and improving the economic situation so that people may not be compelled to sell their political destiny versus little money. Meanwhile, there is need for an ethical and political commitment of the people with the fate of their society. People are repeatedly dissatisfied from political leaders, but during the election campaign they are easily deceived and forget about the past; in this way the past is frequently repeated.

Moreover, the ethnic leaders need to invent enemy so as to survive. In order to strengthen their political weight, they try to introduce other tribes as a common enemy to their respective tribe and this way they can define their political position by raising people's sentiments. As conclusion, it can be said that ethnic leaders and voting banks are some of obstacles to institutionalization of democracy in the country. Political parties and powerful civil society will emerge when the level of political consciousness and awareness of the people rise, and this will only be achieved through the inclusive education and media awareness.

The Death of an Indian Hero in Kabul

By: Sujeet Sarkar

The horrific truck bombing at the green village on Jan 14, 2019 in Kabul ended the life of a young and bright international development professional Ms Shipra Sharma in the most brutal and menacing way. She was intelligent, dynamic and luminary in her own right. It was just 3 months that she stepped into Kabul in order to improve the standards of civil society often plagued by poor governance and lack of accountability. She was employed as the programme director of Afghanistan Institute for civil society. Early morning, I was typically into my mails and calls, when a friend from Kabul called me to inform that Shipra is injured. Having worked in Afghanistan, the first lead was enough for me to comprehend the rest. However, I was behaving differently this time. I called up multiple sources in Kabul hoping to see her in the list of injury, only. Finally at 11.00 AM, I was informed about the worst. My train of hope was brought to a screeching, abrupt halt and I was jolted back into the present with the harsh reality. I was numb and shattered. My throat was choking.

I shared many relationships with Shipra—a professor, a friend, and perhaps her worst critics. I had the privilege of teaching her at Aravali institute of management, Jodhpur as a guest lecturer. Later, it was brought to my notice that I was nick-named as “dangerous professor” because of my inability to tolerate even slightest of nuisance in the class. My interaction with students off class was very limited owing to my serious image. I lost touch with all my students, once I moved to Afghanistan in 2005. She was no exception, either. However after a decade, I connected with her again through linkedin. By then she had worked with almost half a dozen of development organisation, but that big development break was still elusive in her career. One of my industrialist friends was keen on setting up a foundation with South Asia outreach. I alerted her about the opening. She was intelligent and smart enough to crack it. From here on, I witnessed a remarkable transformation in her. She started designing one after another innovative development projects with admirable vision and immaculate execution. Notable among them was reviving a defunct leprosy hospital in Jharkhand and providing tech power to 200 women grassroots leader for employing digital advocacy and networking to espouse public cause in Bangladesh. She was fast emerging as a kind of leader, every young professional can be inspired by and look up to, a role model. Her management style included giving both authority and responsibility to her staff, and then she hold them accountable for results. She was never scared of calling a spade a spade even if that means disagreeing with Boss and even for that matter the board. I was privy to one such board meeting. This would often put her under tight spot. In a relatively short span of time, she set up the foundation with a pan India visibility along with an outreach to Bangladesh.

This was the time, when I was also exposed to her tacit sense of humor, which was a privilege for the selected few. In the meanwhile, I also realized that she holds three masters, including one from University of London. A PHD from LSE was her next dream. Whatever little, I knew about her, she hated status quo in anything. She also needed to be confronted with new set of challenges to keep her engaged in everything that she does. Soon she started hitting fatigue and was up for the next big challenge in the development sector. She applied for a big job in Afghanistan

and true to her established credential, cracked it by beating various international candidates, convincingly. She was not a silver tongue orator by any means, but would leave impression in any conversation with her deep thinking and critical analysis. Her leadership was more suited for big-ticket items in the international development sector. Having worked at the highest echelon of international development, I say it with great authority that she was a rare talent, given her age. The new job in Afghanistan was no different. She became immensely popular riding high on creativity and new thinking in little over three months. She epitomised the way in which high order principles and ethos can be brought to bear upon the seemingly intractable problems facing the civil society of Afghanistan. But Taliban had other plans to abort the process of Development and silence anyone who comes in between. She was the victim this time.

Before leaving for Afghanistan, she approached me for my approval. I am not the one to be scared by Taliban. However, I was apathetic this time as the situation is deteriorating fast in Afghanistan. She sensed my pessimistic mood faster than me. “Come on professor Sarkar you taught us that for development sector professional, there is no religion and even border. Reaching out to distressed and high conflict zone should be a top priority. You can't go back on your words now”, she enlightened me about my past lecture and subtly reminded me that I have also worked in conflict zones for over 15 years now. I convinced myself and gave her the nod. In my distant of dream, I didn't realize that I was literally approving her death warrant. I met her on Jan 12th when she stopped in Delhi en route to Kabul. All discussion centered on her job and how much she was enjoying the same. She was perhaps going through the best phase of her professional life. I never thought that her best phase would be so short-lived. It is particularly disturbing to note that humanitarian aid workers are increasingly becoming target of Taliban. Even by the Taliban's own crude metrics, the aid workers were generally spared, in the past. This winter all the laid barometer of Taliban are seen to be falling and the gap between the military, civilian and the humanitarian sector are blurring. For killing two unarmed professionals, the Taliban resorted to truck bombing. This was designed to create fear psychosis among development professionals in Kabul. However they fail to understand that even in her tragic death, Shipra would continue to inspire international development professionals more than ever to take up new challenges in Afghanistan. And Prof Sarkar wouldn't deter from advising people to work in Afghanistan either.

Shipra passed away leaving behind her 7 years old son. She was a force of positivity and brought so much happiness in any organization that she worked. She created a culture to work hard and be the best that you can be. She was born to work with excellence. At 36, she created such an indelible mark in sector of development.

With tearful eye, I bade final farewell to Shipra in her hometown Jodhpur, last Friday. Her death brought the Sun City together to mourn the loss of it's famous daughter.

Rest in peace Shipra! May you reap your rewards in heaven.

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How to Eat to Save the World

By: Modi Mwatsama and Howard Frumkin

There is not a country in the world that is not grappling with the serious health and environmental consequences of their people's diets. There has to be a better way to feed everyone well and sustainably.

As it stands, roughly 820 million people worldwide lack sufficient food, and many more – often in the same countries – consume unhealthy foods that lead to obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and other life-limiting conditions. The health risks of poor diets now outweigh the combined impact of alcohol, smoking, unsafe sex, and drug abuse.

On the environmental front, global food production is the single largest source of human pressure on the planet's resources, using 40% of the world's land and 70% of its freshwater. It also contributes substantially to rising greenhouse-gas emissions, loss of biodiversity, the emergence of ocean dead zones, and deforestation.

With the global population set to reach ten billion by 2050, the challenge of feeding the world in a healthy and sustainable way will only deepen. Meeting that challenge will require major, long-term systemic changes. A good place to start is the set of science-based guidelines recently released by the EAT-Lancet Commission on Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems, funded by Wellcome (with which both of us are affiliated).

In the proposed “win-win” diet, approximately one-third of calories would be acquired from whole grains and tubers; protein would come primarily from plant sources, though about a half-ounce of red meat per day would also be included; and about 17 ounces of fruits and vegetables would be consumed daily. On average, the diet would halve global consumption of red meat and sugar, and more than double the amount of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes, consumed worldwide today.

Of course, given the diversity of food systems around the world, not to mention the role of culture and tradition in shaping diets, specific components would need to be adapted to local needs and tastes. But, if the entire world adopted a version of this diet, up to 11.6 million premature food-related deaths could be prevented every year. The Commission's report sets out clear strategies for making that happen, with international organizations and national governments taking the lead in ensuring that healthy, sustainable diets are

available, attractive, and affordable for all. Implementing them will require, first and foremost, an overhaul of countries' agricultural sectors, to ensure that they are providing the diet's necessary components. Rather than basing decisions solely on production levels, farmers need to produce sufficiently diverse products and adopt sustainable practices. To that end, effective incentives will need to be created.

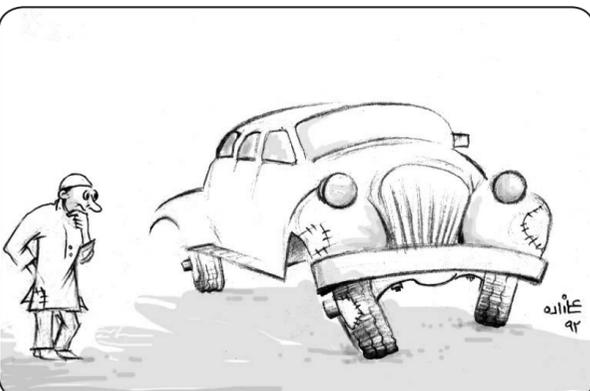
Moreover, in low-income countries, strengthening the infrastructure linking rural farming communities with urban centers would go a long way toward expanding access to fresh, healthy produce, while reducing waste associated with transportation. In fact, if one accounts for the entire supply chain, almost one-third of all food produced worldwide is being wasted. Given this, national waste-reduction programs will have to complement higher investment in infrastructure.

Likewise, in order to ensure long-term global food security, more resources must be directed toward the development of more nutritious, higher-yielding, and more resilient crops that can withstand temperature fluctuations, extreme weather, and pests. Whatever new seeds are developed must be made available and affordable for farmers worldwide. In the meantime, farmers in arid regions need better access to existing drought-tolerant crops, such as the high-protein legume cowpea, in order to protect soil and preserve moisture.

More generally, a sustainable diet requires the world to improve its stewardship of the planet. This means taking action not just to slow deforestation, but also to reforest degraded land, as well as to protect marine biodiversity and prevent the expansion of agricultural land.

The EAT-Lancet Commission's report does not have all the answers. More work is needed, for example, to determine how best to transform food production in low-resource settings. But the evidence-based strategy the report advocates provides a useful framework for all stakeholders – including governments, producers, and citizens – to cooperate in transforming unsustainable food systems and ensuring a healthy diet for all.

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