Women's Vulnerability to Sexual Harassment

Notwithstanding the establishment of democratic government after the downfall of the Taliban's regime, Afghan women have been vulnerable to injustice, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination. Women are still viewed as being created to satiate the carnal desires of men, which is really outrageous to the public.

A number of men view women from immoral lens and think about them sexually. Regardless of women's honor and dignity, notably underlined in Afghanistan's cultural values, they harass women in public and in working environment.

It is believed that many Afghan women do not have peace of mind when they walk in public. They fear that they would be harassed, humiliated, or discriminated in one way or another. Since social and political structures are designed in a patriarchal manner, Afghan families fear to send their girls to work. After all, when girls go to schools or universities, their families are concerned since they return.

One cannot deny the women's progress made in the post-Taliban Afghanistan, however, it is highly difficult to change the social and political structures of Afghanistan so that all could exercise their rights and freedoms regardless of their gender. That is to say, the patriarchal structure of Afghanistan in terms of culture, politics, and tradition hamper women's social activities.

There are mainly three kinds of perspective about women in Afghanistan: First, as the Afghan society is generally a traditional society, a number of people, view women from the glass of tribal code of conduct, which is based on parochial worldview. In tribal belts, women are hardly engaged in social activities. They are mostly subject to traditional culture of their areas and subdued to their families' elders, including fathers and husbands. The women who live in tribal areas usually don local head-to-toe covering called "burqa", which was rife during the Taliban's regime. The men who live in those areas are highly narrow-minded regarding women, in turn, talking about women's rights and freedoms are sensitive issues. They also prefer tribal code of conduct to national laws. Therefore, issues about men and women's love affairs will be resolved through tribal councils and women are punished in desert courts. In short, they show strong sensitivity towards the rights of women and institutions supporting women and their rights. Second, a number of people approach women with moderate attitude and seek not to discriminate women on the basis of their gender. Treating men and women equally, they try to support their daughters get education and exercise their rights and freedoms similar to their male counterparts. In addition to respecting moderate cultural values, they abide by national laws, which bestow equal rights and freedoms to all citizens. The third group exercises a secular mindset towards women's rights and freedoms. They are kind of iconoclasts and show no tendency to the country's cultural values and social norms. With this in mind, those women who are socialized in the aforementioned environments have implicitly accepted the unfair manners. Now the question is that who is mostly engaged in women's sexual harassment and which category of women is harassed more?

I believe, as I have observed, those men who have parochial mindset towards women and curtail the freedoms of their female family members are mostly engaged in sexual harassment. It is because they either think that women who always walk in public may not enjoy moral behaviors or simply harass women to restrict the room for their activities. Meanwhile, those women who dress in a more secular way are likely to be harassed more than anyone else. Mostly, Afghan men think that the women whose dresses hardly reconcile with Afghanistan's culture may enjoy a low morality. Similarly, fashionable and attractive women will be also more vulnerable to sexual harassment in the country.

The main problem is that the government is not able to implement the law. For example, a woman who is harassed sexually cannot call the police for two reasons. First, it will be ridiculous for the police to go a far distance to prevent a sexual harassment. They are not available at the due time, either. Second, since Afghanistan has no proper criteria for recruiting policemen, they are not trustable. It is claimed that policemen themselves have been involved in sexual harassment. Worst of all, some high-ranking officials are reportedly been engaged in sexual harassment. Putting them on trial and proving the case is next to impossible. Hence, the government has to take this issue serious and implement the law equally. Since everyone is equal in the eye of law, each perpetrator has to be brought to justice so that women could exercise their rights, freedoms, and dignity similar to men.
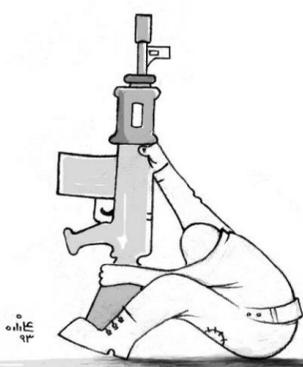
Taliban Still Dream Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

In recent months, the peace talks with the Taliban have severely affected all major national agendas including elections and other developmental priorities in the country. Peace negotiations with Taliban, without considering the political and social realities of the country, were overconfidently exaggerated possible and accessible. However, the optimistic and imaginative look at peace has impelled many politicians to take advantage of the peace talk opportunity to be involved in the process and unintentionally gets some deeper understanding from the current Taliban views and political tactic. From one hand, they try to gain its legitimacy in the international arena; on the other hand, they persist in dogmatic positions, killing and destruction in the country.

It is said that in the third round of Afghan intra peace talks in Qatar, Taliban demanded establishment of Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan but when they faced quick reactions and uneasiness by the meeting participants avoided to raise it directly with the details. Given this dogmatic position and unchangeable mentality from Taliban, some Afghan experts come to think that Afghanistan has only a military solution to impose the peace and political structure by force. Accordingly, the use of force has been prescribed by some political scholars in corrupt social and political environment. For example, Machiavelli a famous realistic political scholar believes that democracy is a like poison for corrupt society.

The second round of Afghan intra talks in Moscow, which caused the humiliation and failure of some politicians, was not only a positive step in the course of peace process but made the leaders of the Taliban feel overwhelming and victorious and became more active in the military arena. The escalation of military and suicide attacks in different parts of Afghanistan is either due to the Taliban's unrealistic sense of the political and security realities of Afghanistan or everything is steered by outsiders. As aforementioned, the issue of peace with the Taliban was so highlighted that affected everything, especially the electoral process. Some domestic and foreign politicians even hoped to sign a peace agreement before the election.

But the political reality in Afghanistan was not what some analysts believed. After a few rounds of talks, it became clear that the Taliban were never ready to enter into serious negotiations with the Afghan government. This group is pursuing peace talks only for their political intentions. On the one hand, the Taliban show themselves to the world's public opinion as a peaceful group that wants to negotiate and peacefully resolve the problems of Afghanistan; on the other hand, with delay tactic and intensification of violence and killings in Afghanistan, they want to win greater privileges or impose Islamic Emirate at the peace negotiating table.

Given the Taliban expression in the third round of peace talks, there are still big differences between the Taliban and the Afghan people demand. They cannot convince the people of Afghanistan to accept Islamic Emirate with just expressing few tolerant words, but avoid to accurately expressing their position about the conditional freedom of citizens, especially the women's right to education or the limitation. During the third round of peace talks, they avoided to provide detailed responses when they were asked about women's rights and freedom. From one hand, they accept women's rights and education; on the other hand, they limit everything within the boundary of Hanafi jurisprudence with the extreme interpretation they have from Islam.

undoubtedly, sitting around a single table with national and international people and getting ready for interviewing with foreign women journalists can be considered a minor change in the Taliban's approach, but these minor changes in situations where the Afghan people have spent about two decades in freedom and democracy is not considered satisfactory. Therefore, talking about a peace process which fulfill the demand and freedom of Afghan people are not a realistic optimism. Therefore, the government and the Afghan people should not postpone any national process including social, economic and political processes under the pretext of possible peace. With running the national process, including election in accordance with the calendar announced by the election commission, the government can also consider the peace and negotiation with the Taliban in accordance with the political conditions and political flexibility of Taliban leaders. Given the dogmatic mentality of Taliban any kinds of expediency is considered surrender to Taliban which will have irreparable consequences in the future.

Elections are a foreseeable and legal process. The election should have been held this spring, but the issues of peace with Taliban and shortcoming of IEC management delayed the process. Fortunately, the government is now making every effort to hold elections in accordance with the election commission's schedule. Recently, the chief executive officer, Abddullah Abdullah emphasized on timely election in the country. Linking the election to the peace issue will never be in the interest of the country and the people, and the elections and other national processes must be run properly and the path of development and democracy should be pursued with patience and political rationality.

Lastly, another major problem in peace talks is that a negotiation with Taliban is widespread under interference of foreign countries in the opposite direction of the general will of the people. Any process or decision which does not ensure the demand of Afghan people and just imposed upon the people by foreign countries will not be sustainable sooner or later its walls will collapse, and from under its soil and ash will flame a another fire and conflicts that would destroy all the past achievements.

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How an AI Utopia Would Work

By: Sami Mahroum

It is more than 500 years since Sir Thomas More found inspiration for the "Kingdom of Utopia" while strolling the streets of Antwerp. So, when I traveled there from Dubai in May to speak about artificial intelligence (AI), I couldn't help but draw parallels to Raphael Hythloday, the character in Utopia who regales sixteenth-century Englanders with tales of a better world.

As home to the world's first Minister of AI, as well as museums, academies, and foundations dedicated to studying the future, Dubai is on its own Hythloday-esque voyage. Whereas Europe, in general, has grown increasingly anxious about technological threats to employment, the United Arab Emirates has enthusiastically embraced the labor-saving potential of AI and automation.

There are practical reasons for this. The ratio of indigenous-to-foreign labor in the Gulf states is highly imbalanced, ranging from a high of 67% in Saudi Arabia to a low of 11% in the UAE. And because the region's desert environment cannot support further population growth, the prospect of replacing people with machines has become increasingly attractive.

But there is also a deeper cultural difference between the two regions. Unlike Western Europe, the birthplace of both the Industrial Revolution and the "Protestant work ethic," Arab societies generally do not "live to work," but rather "work to live," placing a greater value on leisure time. Such attitudes are not particularly compatible with economic systems that require squeezing ever more productivity out of labor, but they are well suited for an age of AI and automation.

In the industrialized West, technological forces threaten social contracts that have long rested on the three pillars of capital, labor, and the state. For centuries, capital provided investment in machines, workers operated the machines to produce goods and services, and governments collected taxes, furnished public goods, and redistributed resources as needed. But this division of labor created a social system that is far more complicated than those of the Arab world and other non-industrialized economies.

For their part, Arab states have nationalized natural resources, managed major industries, traded internationally, and distributed surplus resources to society. Until recently, population growth and declining revenues from natural resources thus threatened the social contract. But with technologies that can produce and distribute most of the goods and services required by what is essentially a leisure society, the existing social contract could actually be enhanced, rather than disrupted.

Back in the West, the technological revolution appears to have widened the gap between capital owners and everyone else. While productivity has been increasing, labor's share of total income has shrunk. Apart from the capital owners, a leisure class of yuppies and heirs has also captured a sizable share of the surplus created by productivity-enhancing technologies. The biggest losers are those with low incomes and less education.

Yet, even here, focusing on AI's potential impact on the relationship between capital and employment is shortsighted. After all, populism has surged in many Western countries at a time of near-historic lows in unemployment. Arguably, the current discontent reflects a desire for a better quality of life, not more work. The French "yellow vest" protesters were initially responding to policies that would have raised the costs of their commutes; the Britons who voted to leave the European Union were hoping that contributions to the bloc would be redirected to public services at home. Most anti-globalization and anti-immigration rhetoric is born of an anxiety about crime, cultural change, and other quality-of-life issues, not jobs.

The problem is that, under the Western social contract, a desire for more leisure can translate into mutually incompatible demands. Voters want reduced working hours but higher incomes, and they expect governments to continue generating enough tax revenue to provide health care, pensions, and education. It is little wonder that Western politics has come to an impasse.

Fortunately, AI and data-driven innovation could offer a way forward. In what could be perceived as a kind of AI utopia, the paradox of a bigger state with a smaller budget could be reconciled, because the government would have the tools to expand public goods and services at a very small cost. The biggest hurdle would be cultural: As early as 1948, the German philosopher Joseph Pieper warned against the "proletarianization" of people and called for leisure to be the basis for culture. Westerners would have to abandon their obsession with the work ethic, as well as their deep-seated resentment toward "free riders." They would have to start differentiating between work that is necessary for a dignified existence, and work that is geared toward amassing wealth and achieving status. The former could potentially be all but eliminated.

With the right mindset, all societies could start to forge a new AI-driven social contract, wherein the state would capture a larger share of the return on assets, and distribute the surplus generated by AI and automation to residents. Publicly-owned machines would produce a wide range of goods and services, from generic drugs, food, clothes, and housing, to basic research, security, and transportation.

Some will view these outlays as unjustified market intervention; others will worry that the government might fail to meet public demand for various goods and services. But, again, such arguments are shortsighted. Given the pace of advances in AI and automation, state-owned production systems – operating nonstop – will have an almost unlimited supply capacity. The only limitation will be natural resources, a constraint that would continue to drive technological innovation in search of more sustainable management.

In an AI utopia, government intervention would be the norm, and private production the exception. The private sector would correct for government or collective failures, rather than the government correcting for market failures.

Imagine traveling forward in time to 2071, the UAE's centenary. A future Raphael Hythloday visiting Antwerp from Dubai would bear the following news: Where I live, the government owns and operates the machines that produce most necessary goods and services, allowing the people to spend their time on leisure, creative, and spiritual pursuits. All worries about employment and tax rates have been consigned to the past. That could be your world, too.

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