

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

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Head of AIHRC Needs to Tough Human Rights Violation Out

Violation of human rights and humanitarian law has been changed into a common practice in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the human rights discourse in post-Taliban Afghanistan, the rights and freedoms of Afghans are not safeguarded.

Constitutionally, both men and women should be able to exercise their rights and freedoms and the government has to protect them, but the public rights remain vulnerable. People's fundamental rights - i.e. their rights to life, liberty, and property - are trampled upon in one way or another.

Worst of all, humanitarian law is violated flagrantly across the country as a result of war, which has been called the main challenge before human rights by the newly appointed head of Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) Shaharзад Akbar. Recently, civilian casualties have increased in the wake of indiscriminate attacks by warring parties. The Taliban militants are the main violators of humanitarian law as they target non-combatants, including women and children, and torture captives in the worst possible way. Recently, a large number of civilians have been killed by roadside bombs, suicide attacks, and terrorist offensives carried out by the Taliban militant fighters in different provinces.

Shaharзад Akbar is most likely to have a hard time ahead to deal with the violation of human rights and humanitarian law and raise her voice louder in defending the rights of Afghan men, women, and children.

Akbar's predecessor Sima Samar was appointed as head of (AIHRC) in a highly difficult time as Afghans, mainly people in tribal belts, showed strong sensitivity towards human rights and had a very negative perception of human rights discourse. A large number of Afghans believed that human rights discourse had been the product of western states and transferred to Afghanistan to target religious values and cultural norms. However, Samar fought all the challenges without fear spreading awareness about human rights and raising her concern about human rights violation. Subsequently, Afghans, mainly youths, admired her relentless efforts in this regard and called her "school-builder woman" since she had many schools built to promote education. She also supported orphans through accommodating them in orphanages and providing them food and shelter.

Akbar has also shouldered the responsibility of protecting the public rights in a very sensitive time. Her chairmanship in AIHRC comes as peace talks have entered a crucial phase and the rights and freedoms of women are one of the controversial topics at the negotiating table. The Taliban seek to restrict women's rights and liberties stated in Afghan Constitution. They are unlikely to accept women would be actively engaged in social, political, and economic spheres as they are now. It is a known fact that the Taliban exercise parochial mindset towards women's social and political role and show tendency to patriarchy.

With this in mind, AIHRC has to push for the protection of women's rights and freedoms and deem it a "red line". It should raise its voice for engaging women in peace talks and urge the Taliban's interlocutors that peace talks will not be acceptable to Afghans if they put the rights of women at stake and undo the past achievements. AIHRC is the anchor for protecting women's rights at the peace table.

Meanwhile, AIHRC has to condemn the violation of humanitarian law by warring parties and urge them to observe the international humanitarian law through not targeting civilians as well as public infrastructures such as schools, universities, hospitals, etc.

As the head of AIHRC, Akbar has to fasten her belt to fight all the challenges and setbacks hampering the smooth exercise of human rights and humanitarian law. She has to be brave enough to condemn violation of human rights perpetrated by anyone - be it strongmen, government officials or Taliban militants. In short, she and her team have to advocate human rights in all cases and leave no room for human rights violation with impunity.

Since lack of law enforcement paved the ground for violation of human rights, the government has to implement the law and prosecute violators of human rights regardless of their social status and political positions. Law-enforcers should treat all citizens equal and play their executive role actively and responsibly.

Afghans fell victim to unmitigated war and should not fall victim to peace or peace talks with finding their rights at stake at the peace table. Both Afghan soldiers and civilians paid great sacrifices for the protection of their rights and freedoms and support for democracy. Hence, the sacrifices must not be dealt at the table overnight. Peace talks should lead to positive changes and ensure the free exercise of human rights and freedoms in a violence-free society.

The Fourth Step of Democracy in Afghanistan

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Today is the second day of electoral campaign and start of debates to run for the fourth presidential election in Afghanistan. Since 2001, there have been three presidential elections and this one will be fourth election which is going to take place after another 60 days. In fact, it is the fourth step towards sustainability of democracy in the country. All previous elections were very important but the 2019 presidential election seems to be more important because Afghanistan lies on a crossing road of democratic system and so-called Islamic Emirate system. Failure and success of this election is considered as death or life for the nascent democracy of Afghanistan. Therefore, the presidential election is a historic opportunity and everyone has to do his best to make it successful.

We had a lot of issues and challenges in past elections but they played essential role in consolidating political system and democracy in the country. Regardless of its quality, merely holding elections and paying importance to votes of people are constructive. Now, the fourth presidential election is more sensitive and more important than any other election in the past. Today, we put the first step towards the fourth round of presidential elections while enemy of democracy has revived more than ever. Taliban extremists group and other terrorists groups activated more than ever. They are overtly opposed to any political system which is based on people's votes.

Meanwhile, there are other factors such as peace process, withdrawal of foreign troops and farther intensification of the war during election are considered as serious threats to the Afghan political system and election process. For this reason, the fourth presidential election of 2019 considered a historic step to overcome the current crisis. If this step is failed under any pretext, Afghanistan will probably once again face another historic break and democracy will fail in its history. On the other side, if the upcoming presidential election successfully passes this milestone, then no power will be able to prevent the progression and institutionalization of democracy in the country.

Out of above mentioned factors, the security issue seems to be more objective barrier in barring implementation of upcoming election and election campaign in the country. In addition to preventing the inclusiveness of campaigns from different parts of the country, it will prevent the participation of people in insecure areas that are involved in war during the election. A number of presidential candidates and election tickets say it is not possible to hold election campaigns gatherings in all provinces of the country due to increasing insecurities. Although the country's defense and security organs have informed of maintaining security, there concern is over maintaining of better security during the elections campaigns. They believe that the country's security organs should maintain security of voting centers as well as highways.

According to government security officials and Independent Elec-

tion Commission's (IEC) officials, there is no problem in starting the electoral campaign and holding election on the specified day. The government has provided each candidate with bullet-proof vehicles and security guards to ensure their security during the campaign period. Meanwhile, the electoral teams have already prepared facilities required for election campaign process. According a report, most of the central and provincial offices of these candidates were ready and even indirectly started campaign and team building but hereafter their campaigns will intensify through those offices.

Thus, the ministry of interior has informed of a comprehensive security plan which covers security of all election campaign ceremonies. "When election campaigns get started, security of presidential candidates and their election campaign ceremonies will be maintained in accordance to a particular security plan," said Nasrat Rahimi, a spokesperson to the ministry of interior. He added that extra police forces would be deployed in areas for maintaining security of presidential election campaigns.

Anyway, other concern which is repeatedly expressed is the matter of unsound campaigns which rose by raising ceiling of campaign expenses for each candidate. The experience of past elections shows that candidates will use from every option, including money, power and buying people's vote. According to Yusuf Rashid, the executive director of FIFA, the permissible use of 442 million AFN for each candidate in election campaigns has raised the concern of buying and selling of the votes. Rashid believes if the spending ceiling were lower for candidates, it was likely that they could not change people's vote by power of money.

In response to the abovementioned concerns, the IEC has said the specified amount is appropriate and reasonable for every candidate because in 2014 election most of the candidates spent more than the allowed amount of money. The total expenses of each election campaign set only 10 million AFN but everyone exceeded the limit. Therefore, it was logical to increase the ceiling of expenses. In addition, the use of public facilities is seriously prohibited in electoral campaigns, unless the same use is allowed for all candidates.

Simultaneously, the Electoral Complaints Commission has announced readiness to file complaints about violations and offenses during the electoral campaign, as well as appeals to these complaints. According to the commission, complainants can file their complaints both at the headquarters and in the provincial offices of the ECC. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) said that 9 million and 678 thousand and 283 people had registered for the election. According to the commission, these figures are not final and need to more purifications.

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How Europe's Populists Lost The EU Game of Thrones

By: Sławomir Sierakowski

The conventional wisdom about European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen's confirmation by the European Parliament this month is that Central and Eastern European populists pushed her over the line. That is wrong. Had such parties actually backed her, von der Leyen's margin of victory would have been much larger, considering the support she had from the center-right European People's Party (EPP) and the liberals in the EU parliament.

True, populist MEPs from Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) Party and Hungary's Fidesz were firmly opposed to Frans Timmermans, a Dutch socialist who has loudly condemned both parties over their violations of EU norms and the rule of law. But nor did they want to strengthen French President Emmanuel Macron, who supported von der Leyen. The optimal outcome for Poland's de facto ruler, Jarosław Kaczyński, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was von der Leyen's confirmation by the smallest possible majority. Populist MEPs thus appear to have been instructed to say they were voting for her without actually doing so.

Had von der Leyen lost, it would have been ample payback to the rejection of the PiS candidate for deputy speaker of the European Parliament and former Prime Minister Beata Szydło's two failed bids to chair the Parliament's Employment Committee. Moreover, this was around the same time that Krzysztof Szczerski, also backed by PiS, lost his bid to become Deputy Secretary General of NATO. But, because von der Leyen made it through, the populists are boasting that she owes her job to them, as though they have some kind of tacit deal with the former German defense minister. That seems highly dubious, given that a deal between von der Leyen and PiS would have cost her the support of the socialists and liberals. But now that the populists have cast a shadow over her leadership, it is important to understand what they may want from her.

The first thing to recognize is that Central and Eastern Europe's populists - now including the Czech government - would prefer to pursue intergovernmental negotiations than to work through the European Commission. Though the Commission usually goes out of its way to back the EU's weaker members, populists, by definition, distrust institutions. They would rather install "the right people in the right positions," and then strike a deal with them. In the view of the Visegrád Four (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia), the weaker the Commission, the better. The V4 governments are convinced that they will always reach agreements with Germany - with which their countries have deep economic and historical ties - more easily than with the EU.

The Visegrád countries didn't even try to get their act together in the new parliament. Their approach to intra-EU relations is based

not on building alliances or developing long-term strategies, but on wielding the veto. And yet, while PiS has the largest parliamentary delegation, with 26 seats, it belongs to the marginal European Conservatives and Reformists group. Fidesz has 13 seats, but is part of the EPP; and the Czech populist party ANO has six MEPs, but sits in the Renew Europe group.

Then again, the V4 has always functioned as an ad hoc coalition without a common strategic vision. This time, it didn't even try to unite to block any of the leadership appointments. But the next test will come with budget negotiations, which is one area where the V4 has traditionally been able to form a plan and cooperate. Prior to an earlier budget negotiation, for example, Poland was able to secure Polish MEP Janusz Lewandowski's position as EU Budget and Financial Programming Commissioner.

The problem this time is that the Visegrád populists will not have any allies in key positions. That means they could soon face a problem: the disbursement of EU funds will be made conditional on a recipient government's respect for the rule of law. It isn't yet clear where von der Leyen stands on this issue. But it is worth remembering that conditionality is a German idea, and that Germany is the largest source of EU funds.

Moreover, the V4 itself is divided on the question of whether EU funds should come with more strings attached. Hungary and Poland are staunchly opposed to the idea, of course; but the Czechs and the Slovaks have remained quiet, for fear of being thrown out of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe or the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats. So, while the V4 governments might manage to negotiate jointly on local projects, the Czechs and Slovaks will probably stick closer to larger allies.

For Western Europeans, the fact that Eastern Europe got nothing in the leadership reshuffle is somewhat awkward. Most likely, the question of regional inclusion will be settled by making Laura Codruța Kövesi of Romania the head of the new European Public Prosecutor's Office. But this, too, would represent another blow against populists. Having made a name for herself as an anti-corruption crusader at home, Codruța Kövesi now has Macron's backing, following the withdrawal of a French candidate for the job.

Yet while von der Leyen is German, her victory is widely seen as a triumph for Macron. In the leadership negotiations, German Chancellor Angela Merkel couldn't play the "Eastern European card" and demand that Old Europe offer the newer members some concessions to avoid offending them. The countries to Germany's east have been offended for quite some time.

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