

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



June 14, 2016

Parliament Should Resolve Reform Deadlock

The national unity government and the parliament of Afghanistan is once again facing a major test of commitment as the parliament has reopened discussions over the presidential decree on electoral reforms. The decree needs to be approved by the parliament to pave the way for implementation of the electoral reforms and proceeding with the preparations for the upcoming parliamentary elections. It took a long time for the government to send the decree on structure, duties and authorities of the electoral commissions to the parliament after MPs refused to approve the similar decree on elections last year. So this time, it is crucial for the parliament and the government to have the law approved and the stalemate over the reforms process resolved. The failure to approve the presidential decree this time would complicate the reforms process and compound the challenges in the way of the upcoming parliamentary and provincial council elections.

The failure to approve the presidential decree on electoral reform last year was a major setback in the efforts to reform the electoral system and hold the parliamentary elections on time. The MPs argued that discussing the decree was against the law and that the constitution did not allow the house to modify the electoral laws. As a result of the failure, the parliamentary election was further delayed and the lawmakers continued to serve illegally and beyond their legal tenure. The lawmakers once again lack the commitment to back the decree and pave the way for the implementation of the electoral reforms and the parliamentary election. With the MPs in the lower house of the parliament divided over the new presidential decree over electoral reform, heated debates are expected in the house in the coming days and weeks.

The failure to deliver the electoral reforms has been a major failure for the national unity government since it took over two years ago. But, the parliament has also had a major role in the failure with the last year refusal of the presidential decree. Since last year, the government and the parliament should have made enough negotiations over how to smoothly approve the law on the electoral reforms and avoid another failure in the process. But the heated debates in the recent session of the parliament showed that nothing is done for persuading the lawmakers to approve the decree and allowing the reforms go ahead. The recent controversies over the presidential decree in the parliament showed that the government has done no efforts to convince the MPs to vote for the proposed reforms in the electoral laws.

On the other hand, the debates showed that the lawmakers still lack the sense of responsibility to notice the impacts of another setback on the reforms process and the upcoming elections.

A major problem with the parliament is that many of the lawmakers oppose the crucial decree because of other political motives and discontents they have with the government. With no doubt there are also many among the lawmakers who do not want the electoral reforms to succeed that would pave the way for the parliamentary election which would mean the MPs would be removed from office.

Anyway, apart from the government's systemic failures, the ball now is in the lawmakers' court. The parliament is going to play a role in the process of bringing reforms to the electoral system and holding the country's upcoming elections. The question now is what role the lawmakers are going to play. Are they going to contribute to the failures of the government in the process or approve the proposed decree and safeguard the whole process? Whatever the individual motives behind the lawmakers' actions, they need to realize that any shortcoming for their side would be a historic mistake in its part in the electoral reforms process and the prospect of the upcoming elections.

Afghanistan is awaiting two crucial international conferences this year. The international community expects progresses in the process of reforming the electoral system and paving the way for a sound and transparent election. Both the government and the parliament know well that the international community is not going to fund Afghanistan's future elections unless there are convincing progresses on the side of the Afghan government to carry out the crucial reforms. This is while the parliament of Afghanistan has lost legitimacy and credibility as the lawmakers are serving far beyond their legal terms. Any attempt to block the reforms by refusing to approve the presidential decree would further undermine credibility of the house.

The only way forward for the government and the parliament in the current stalemate is to work together and resolve the deadlock in the process. If the government and the parliament fail to conduct constructive engagement, another failure and further delay of the parliamentary elections would be inevitable.

Regrettably, the parliament has proved to be vulnerable to political wrangling in difficult times when the country needs the lawmakers to remain united and committed to resolve legal challenges in the country. The expectations from the parliament over the reform process are high and the lawmakers need to realize them and resolve the stalemate in the process of electoral reforms.



The Tug of War will Continue

By Hujatullah Zia

Succeeding Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was killed in a US drone strike in Balochistan last month, Mullah Haibatullah signaled to intensify Omari Operation through staging systematic attacks in Afghanistan. His invincible policy has prompted al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri to swear allegiance to him. "As leader of the al Qaeda organization for jihad, I extend my pledge of allegiance once again, the approach of Osama to invite the Muslim nation to support the Islamic Emirate," Zawahri is cited as saying.

Moreover, Maulvi Ahmad Rabbani, who heads a group of clerics, had not sworn allegiance to Mullah Mansour, also pledged loyalty to Haibatullah. He was quick to endorse Haibatullah. "Sheikh Hibatullah Akhuzada had no personal interest in becoming the Taliban emir, and only accepted the role after a decision by the Supreme Council and other elders. We, the fellow clerics, pledge our allegiance to him," Maulvi Ahmad Rabbani said in a statement on May 30.

It seems that Haibatullah, who is known for his harsh verdicts as a judge in Kandahar during Mullah Omar's regime, carries more weight among the Taliban fighters and ideologists than his predecessor Mullah Mansour. Contrary to many analysts' beliefs, he was appointed quickly without being opposed by the Taliban's heads. Since he is a fundamental cleric, al-Qaeda's leader will support him in terrorist acts and strengthen Omari Operation, mainly in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's allegiance to the Taliban has not been an unprecedented move in the history of Afghan insurgency as the two groups have routinely cooperated with each other in their attempt to target Afghan and foreign troops in the country. They operate under the same ideology and seek to carry out "jihad" against Afghan and US troops. In other words, both put the legitimacy of Afghan democratic government under question and, therefore, hold out to sit around the negotiating table - despite the fact that Afghan government called warring factions frequently to join peace process.

In many of my commentaries regarding peace talks, I never expressed hope over a fruitful talk with the Taliban elements. The Taliban played the game wisely especially during the Afghan former President Hamid Karzai, though, as a result, the head of Afghan High Peace Council, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, was assassinated on September 20, 2011, by two men posing as Taliban representatives. The suicide bomber claimed to be a Taliban commander and said he wanted to "discuss peace" with Professor Rabbani. Four other members of HPC also lost their lives in the blast. It was only the tip of the iceberg. A number of the Taliban dangerous prisoners were released under the term of peace talks, however, neither militancy was mitigated nor the generous acts of Karzai's administration helped peace process. Now, the question is that what mechanism should the govern-

ment adopt to bring in peace?

To consider the unmitigated militancy and rising civilian mortalities, staging heavy offensives against peacemakers, carrying out suicide attacks in crowded places regardless of women and children's life, what strategy will come to fruition? You will get the answer shortly.

To consider Pakistan's role concerning negotiation, Afghan-Pak relation has been unstable and left many ups and downs behind. Their verbal dispute reached climax after the deadly attack carried out by the Taliban in Shah Shaheed on August 07, 2015. Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf used serious tone about Pakistan following the incident. He said, "Pakistan still remains the venue and ground for gatherings from which mercenaries send us a message of war." He added that the time Pakistan Prime minister Nawaz Sharif said the enemies of Afghanistan are the enemies of Pakistan, "now the time has come for him to prove it."

Hence, the gap between Kabul and Islamabad will be hardly bridged, especially after the recent exchanges of fire between the Afghan-Pak police on the border. Similarly, the QCG, which consists of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US, has also met failure after the death of Mullah Mansour, which widened the rift.

As a backlash to the Taliban's heavy offensives, the US President Barack Obama has announced a broader role for American forces in Afghanistan and, based on the new plan, the current level of US forces will not change in Afghanistan. Obama also authorized the American troops to help their Afghan counterparts on the war fronts.

There are indications that the tug of war will continue in Afghanistan and the government will also respond in the same way as the insurgents. In another item, strengthening military strategy is the only solution to counter insurgency - the government also seems to have reached this conclusion. Therefore, it has increased attacks in recent months. The government's serious strategy towards the Taliban fighters is tangible to the public as six members of the Taliban prisoners were hanged last month under the President's decree.

Both Haibatullah and Zawahiri should notice that they are playing with fire. It is believed that Haibatullah will be destined to his predecessor's fate for his radical movement and being the next obstacle before the peace process as Mansour. Currently, the Taliban fighters lose their lives on a large scale as Afghan soldiers carry out heavy attacks - this will continue unless the Taliban laydown their arms and join the peace process. I suggested military deal more than a year ago and favor it against warring parties which refuse to hold talks.

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Leading, not Leaving, Europe

By Gordon Brown

Can the United Kingdom ever reconcile itself to being part of Europe? If recent British newspaper headlines about the June 23 referendum on continued European Union membership are any guide, the answer appears to be a decisive "no."

Proponents of leaving the EU have campaigned on fear of runaway immigration and a cascade of purported dangers - whether delivered by boat or bomb - to the British way of life. Their opponents, who want the UK to remain part of Europe, highlight another fear: the loss of jobs that are dependent on European trade.

The nonstop sloganeering around these platforms has exposed conflicting worldviews. The rhetoric of the "Leave" supporters conjures up the spirit of Dunkirk in 1940 - a nation standing alone, impervious to invading armadas and armies, and always fiercely independent of Europe.

In theory, the "Remain" campaign stands for a different Britain: outward-looking, engaged, and internationally minded. But the Conservative Party is bitterly divided on the issue, and many of its most prominent spokesmen have wilted under fire from a hostile Euroskeptical media. As a result, they often seem to be advocating for a half-in, half-out relationship with Europe - for a Britain that is semi-detached, rather than fully engaged. A positive, principled, and progressive case for British membership in the EU has yet to be made.

Positive arguments are the sharpest arrows in the quiver of those who want Britain to remain in Europe. Meeting the needs and aspirations of the British people in the twenty-first century requires us to let go of the past, acknowledge that the present is defined by globalization, and recognize that the future is filled with opportunity. Our increased interdependence suggests the need for greater international cooperation and coordination, and that is precisely what the EU offers.

Because "Leave" voters view globalization as a liability, they look for protection and insulation, demanding that "control" be brought back home. One recent, but not necessarily representative, poll found that 43% of those certain to vote favored bringing control back to the UK by leaving the EU - even if they were to become financially worse off as a result. Only 23% did not.

A casual observer could be forgiven for thinking that forging a post-referendum national consensus on a European future is impossible. But there is a way forward. We must start by recognizing that in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world, each country needs to strike the right balance between the national autonomy that it desires and the international cooperation that it requires. Britain should not have to choose between two absolutes: total autonomy, which would under-

value the need to cooperate with our nearest neighbors, and complete integration into a European superstate, which would fail to recognize the continuing importance of national identities and decision-making.

Issue by issue, there is a way forward that will make both Britain and Europe more competitive, democratic, and accountable. If we can show that opportunity, fairness, safety, and security can be enhanced in Europe - and that we can be a proud leader of the EU's reform agenda - a British consensus might begin to emerge.

Take the economy. By balancing autonomy and cooperation, Britain could create 500,000 more jobs during the next decade. Because it has not adopted the euro, the UK has retained the autonomy to set interest rates; but integration into Europe's single market has yielded clear gains in terms of growth and employment. Similarly, if Britain were to lead efforts to establish a level playing field for digital, energy, and services - particularly financial services - it could ensure greater competitiveness for Europe as a whole.

Economic reforms are only the beginning. Britain can and should champion an agenda that confronts questions of energy efficiency (through an energy and environmental union), fair taxation (through a plan for dealing with tax havens), and security (through heightened cross-border intelligence gathering and policing against terrorism and illegal immigration).

The British blueprint for a reformed Europe should be bold and far-sighted, recognizing the social dimension to the single market and deepening pan-European collaboration in scientific research. By embracing the reality that we can achieve more through cooperation than isolation, such a blueprint could become the agenda for the UK Presidency of the EU in 2017 and usher in an era of greater cross-border engagement.

We could also use this moment of leadership to advocate for a more cooperative approach to international development and conflict resolution, including a modern European-led Marshall Plan for North Africa and the Middle East.

Britain has an opportunity to be at the forefront of shaping the next stage of Europe's development. For the last, post-imperial half-century, Britain has struggled to find a role that suits our sense of destiny. Through active engagement with Europe, we can show that we are more than one half of a special relationship with America, more than one twenty-eighth of the NATO alliance, and much more than just one member of an ever-growing EU. On June 23, we should demonstrate that Britain's future lies in leading Europe, not in leaving it. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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