

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

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Poverty; a Lingered Disease

One will be taken aback by seeing the nomadic and homeless, sleeping at nights in open space of Pole Sokhta in Kabul City. They live in social isolation, without homes or shelter. Extreme poverty is their share of life. Pole Sokhta is the place for Afghan drug addicts. It is a bitter fact to be admitted that these vagrants are all on drugs. Most of them are of the younger generation who took refuge in neighboring countries due to Afghanistan's economic problems and during our decades of war. Upon returning to the country soon after the fall of Taliban's regime and the establishment of a democratic government, they did not have the national support-base to re-settle and prosper. Presently, they live in poor conditions bereft of very basic facilities of life.

Poverty is at its peak and has affected a large number of people across the country. There are large groups of beggars, of both genders, in Kabul city. Many other folk too, can hardly make ends meet in spite of laboring all day. There are some breadwinners who are hawking minor objects such as plastic bags, socks, sweaters, bracelets, cigarettes, phone cards, etc. from dawn to dusk just to earn a morsel of bread for their families. Meanwhile, there are gangs of workmen who collect early morning with their working tools, waiting to be engaged on a daily-wage. This work force is much larger than is the demand for their labor. Hence, it is beyond doubt that there is a direct connection between poverty and unemployment.

Regarding poverty, some are of the opinion that it is a result of man's laziness. Other sociologists believe that poverty is a structural defect in society. Perhaps there is a bit of truth in both points of view. In some cases, one's poverty originates in the fact that one chooses to live in a deprived and secluded areas where job opportunities do not exist. Thus, such a lifestyle will certainly have a negative impact on person's economic prospects. Generally, the chances of obtaining a job, is more promising if one is better educated. Skills are in demand. So the have-nots are deprived of education, skills and work-opportunities.

Lewis (1961), a famous sociologist, argues that the culture of poverty exists amongst many poor people. According to him, poverty is not the result of one's disqualification or inability rather it is the result of social and cultural atmosphere in which the poor children get socialized. This passes to the next generation and they will come their expectations of a better life is a dream. Ultimately, they will succumb to poverty and a low morale.

Charles Murray (1984), an American sociologist, extends the hypothesis of culture of poverty. According to him, the case of those who are involved in poverty due to adverse circumstances, such as widows, orphan children or the disabled falls in one category. He talks of a 'dependency culture' among the poor who rely on government's charity rather than going out to work. Murray argues that the affluence of welfare-oriented governments has created a subculture which subdues ambitions and the push towards self-help. Such welfare policies has uprooted the interest in work-ethics from some people. Whether this theory is acceptable or not is for the readers to judge. I am not going to pass judgment on this matter.

Let us examine the condition of some of our youths who suffer badly in Kabul. The odorous smell of Pole Sokhta disturbs passersby. It is nauseating. These vagrants have spoiled the environment and this is the filthiest part of the city. It is a safe haven for addicts and peddlers of drugs; a breeding place for crime. As a result, at night the vagrants, who are also addicted, wander the city searching for something to eat and it does not matter for them how and where it is obtained. Mostly, they try to steal from the stores or hotels, implore people for money or pick their pockets. To our chagrin, the government so far has not taken any visible steps in this civic matter. It is the responsibility of the government to help the citizens and do its best to decrease the poverty. In addition, the task of sanitation and cleanliness of cities also belong to government officials and they will have to prevent the citizens in any possible way from polluting the city. Otherwise if this trend further continues, it will certainly threaten people's lives.

One of the serious challenges in the country which has also turned into an international challenge is the issue of drug. It is said that one million people die per year around the world due to Afghanistan's drug production and smuggling. Meanwhile, it also draws our people towards addiction. Drug addiction leads to further poverty. There are rumors that Taliban militants are also fed through the income which is earned by drug and that is why they never take action in this matter. Narcotic drugs are forbidden in Islam. Hence, presently taking action against poppy cultivation is the urgent need of the country. It is a menace not only to our country but also to all neighboring countries. In other words, drugs threaten the life of our youths, cause poverty, energize terrorist and lead to the death of millions of people on one way or another. This issue is getting more serious than the issue of terrorism. It is a bitter pill for government to swallow.

This system has always been rampant in Afghanistan that the poor get poorer and the rich get richer. Considering the lack of concern of Afghan government officials in this matter, analysts are of the view that this trend will continue for many years and people will not get rid of the triangle of tragedies which are drugs, terrorism and poverty.



Peace Talk with Hizb-e-Islami

By Hujjatullah Zia

The negotiation of peace with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar-led Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) has imbued the air with a sense of fear and mistrust. HIA bears a dark and bloody background in the history of Afghanistan, mainly during the civil war, and a large number of civilians are believed to have been sacrificed. The news about the return of HIA's fugitive leader to Afghanistan worries the nation and some political figures.

Hekmatyar is a man with radical context and practiced upon harsh ideology in Afghanistan, mainly regarding the rights of women and ethnic minority groups. He fought bloody war in the country. Currently, the vulnerable parts of society are of the view that their life and liberty will be at stake with the return of HIA's chief and his men. Women will be marginalized from social and political activities and their role will be restricted within four walls again despite the achievements they made in post-Taliban time. In other words, women fear that corrosive acid will be sprayed in their faces as members of Taliban did in Kandahar province. Women took the brunt of violence during the Taliban's radical regime and they are still the easy target for radical parties. Whenever social and political conditions are tended to harsh ideology, Afghan girls and women will be the first to give sacrifice. It will be highly dangerous if radicalism infiltrates government's machinery and changes into a potent force.

It should be noted that radicalism has no room in a democratic system. The burgeoning democracy seems to be susceptible to political changes. The ethnic minority groups, who suffered on the grounds of their race and color in Afghanistan's history, deem their rights exposed to transgression with the return of HIA party. So, nurturing ethnic and sexual chauvinism, harsh ideology and religious intolerance will threaten democracy in a society and curtail the freedom of the public.

The Hizb-e-Islami faction fought alongside the Taliban against NATO coalition forces and Afghan soldiers. This party has also inflicted heavy casualties upon the nation. Hezb-e-Islami committed numerous human rights violations during the Afghan civil war. It's said that members of the HIA group has probably killed more Afghans than Soviets. Hekmatyar was designated a terrorist by the US in February 2003 for his past support to Al-Qaeda. On February 19, 2003 it was announced that the US Government had information indicating that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has participated in and supported terrorist acts committed by al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Because of his terrorist activity, the United States designated Hekmatyar as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under the authority of Executive Order 13224. Despite the mentioned facts, in 2008, Hekmatyar apparently

opened the door to talks with the Government of Afghanistan, in part through a spring 2008 letter addressed to President Karzai. Some suggest that there may be some potential for drawing Hekmatyar away from the insurgent fight and into a constructive role. Others caution that his reputation for Islamic extremism and human rights abuses call into question the likelihood and advisability of any reconciliation with him.

Kabul reached out to Hekmatyar as early as 2008 in the hope of working out a peace deal. Meanwhile, Hekmatyar had a complicated relationship with the Taliban, voicing support for Mullah Mohammad Omar while coordinating attacks with the Taliban spiritual leader against foreign and Afghan forces. But at the same time, Hezb-e-Islami clashed with the Taliban, particularly in eastern Afghanistan, over territory. In July 2015, Hekmatyar called on his followers to support the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group in its fight against the Taliban. HIA, however, strongly opposed the proposed Bilateral Security Agreement with the United States. This party claimed responsibility for many suicide attacks carried out against US and Afghan forces in the country.

By March 2016, Afghanistan managed to bring HIA's leader to the negotiating table after he dropped demands that all foreign forces leave the country. Kabul must consider whether Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's offer to end a 15-year insurgency campaign in exchange for involvement in the government is a workable proposition. Any deal would come with a price, however. At this stage, Hezb-e-Islami is seeking to become a government partner by seeking positions in civil and security institutions.

Analysts are of the view that Hekmatyar's return to Afghanistan may create a social and political mayhem in the country. Making peace with him will not mitigate the current insurgency. Having a position in government's machinery, after murdering US and Afghan forces and noncombatants, rather than standing trial will not be acceptable for the public and is against the Afghanistan's Constitution. Afghanistan should respect the Constitution and the rights and freedom of the public, including men and women. Signing peace deal at the cost of democracy and citizens' fundamental rights will do more harm than good. Since Hekmatyar has been hosted across the border for years, it should be ensured that he will not work in favor of any other countries or parties. He will have to respect the Constitution, which include all the fundamental rights of citizens, and give up radical ideology. In brief, peace cannot be tailored in the narrow frame of radicalism and ethnic chauvinism rather it is supposed to be made on the basis of Constitution and with respect with people's rights and freedom.

Hujjatullah Zia is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at zia_hujjat@yahoo.com

Bridging the Infrastructure Gap

By Dominic Barton

Every day, millions of people across the developed and developing world inch through gridlock or squeeze into packed subway cars to get to and from work. And that is likely to be only one of many frequent - if not daily - confrontations with infrastructure systems that are bursting at the seams. In advanced and emerging economies alike, roads and bridges need repair, water systems are aging or inadequate, and power grids are overburdened, leading to blackouts.

Too many countries have been underinvesting in infrastructure for decades, resulting in everyday inconveniences and, worse, creating roadblocks to economic growth. While a major infusion of funding is needed to address infrastructure gaps, finding the money is only part of the solution. Governments also need to reform infrastructure planning and oversight. The public can no longer afford to accept projects with costs that spiral out of control.

Infrastructure projects' unique ability to create jobs in the short term and boost productivity in the long term is well known to policymakers. Yet talk has rarely translated into action, despite the record-low interest rates of the past eight years.

The world needs to increase investment in transportation, power, water, and telecom systems from \$2.5 trillion a year to \$3.3 trillion every year through 2030 just to support projected economic growth, according to new estimates from the McKinsey Global Institute. But despite the obvious need for action, infrastructure investment has actually declined in 11 of the G20 economies since the 2008 global financial crisis.

The conventional wisdom is that fiscal concerns make it impossible to marshal enough public funding. In fact, there is substantial scope to increase public infrastructure investment, particularly while borrowing costs remain historically low. In some cases, funding can be found without raising taxes: governments can create revenue streams by instituting user charges, capturing increases in property value, or selling existing assets and recycling the proceeds. Public accounting standards also could allow infrastructure assets to be depreciated over their life cycle, rather than immediately adding their costs to fiscal deficits during construction.

Governments can also do much more to encourage private investment, starting by providing regulatory certainty and the ability to charge prices that produce an acceptable risk-adjusted return. Even more broadly, they can take steps to create a market that more efficiently connects institutional investors seeking stable, long-term returns and projects that need financing.

Given that these investors have some \$120 trillion in assets under management, the bottleneck is not a shortage of capital, but rather a dearth of well-prepared, bankable projects. One way to clear it would be to develop the regulatory and institutional groundwork needed to enable funding to flow more smoothly from institutional investors in advanced economies to projects in the emerging world, where huge populations still need access to essential infrastructure services.

Beyond financing, making the infrastructure sector more efficient represents an even bigger opportunity. Delays stretching into years, and cost overruns soaring into the billions of dollars, are a sadly familiar story in public works. And when bridges turn into boondoggles, the public grows more reluctant to invest.

Every dollar allocated to infrastructure needs to stretch much further. Part of that effort involves demanding better performance from the construction industry, where productivity growth has been flat for decades. There are some positive signs of innovation, from accelerated bridge building to pre-fabrication and modular construction techniques. But the sector as a whole needs a major push in terms of modernization, technology adoption, and standardization.

Governments must also transform the institutions and processes under their direct control. Our work with governments around the world has demonstrated that stronger governance and oversight of infrastructure projects can lower infrastructure costs by as much as 40%.

This starts with taking a systematic and data-driven approach to choosing the right projects. Top-performing countries such as Singapore and South Korea do not consider projects in isolation; they consider how each supports their policy objectives, and they weigh it against other projects that might yield better returns. As projects move down the pipeline toward realization, it is critical to tighten management of the delivery and execution stages. Accelerating environmental reviews, approval processes, and land acquisition can minimize the costs and delays that mount before ground is ever broken. Meeting best practices could unlock huge value: as it stands, the price tags for similar projects can vary by 50-100% from country to country. "Kicking the can down the road" is not a viable strategy for dealing with the world's infrastructure needs. It's up to us to avoid leaving a legacy of deferred costs and deteriorating fundamentals for the next generation. The money is available. Let's put it to use. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

Dominic Barton is the global managing director of McKinsey & Company.

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Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Hussain Yasa
Vice-Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari
Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com
Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019
www.outlookafghanistan.net

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