

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



March 14, 2016

Embracing Differences

It is one of the main attributes of a person that he is different from others. He is born in different conditions, brought up differently and he possesses a distinct way of thinking; therefore, he is bound to have a totally unique personality, unlike others around him. Though the level of the difference with others may be low or high but there always is certain difference.

The same can be found among different groups of people. Consequently, we can find different societies in the world with myriads of cultures and, all these cultures and subcultures have mores and values of their own and may be different from others or even contradict them. These facts embellish our world with variety and provide every individual and group a particular identity.

However, that is only a positive way of looking at the things. Unfortunately, the differences in personalities and groups have resulted in different sorts of tussles and misunderstanding and even wars. These have generated distinct interests and all the individuals and groups, in today's world, pursue those interest. Ill-fatedly, they do not hesitate to use violent means against others to satiate their own interests.

The societies that are comparatively open-minded and civilized have a better level of understanding among people with differences. While, the societies that are conservative and extremist, do not have such understanding and our society is one of the same. In our society the disparity in perspective and outlook between two persons or two groups of people means being each other's enemy. This sort of attitude has created a great deal of mistrust among the people.

In fact, every individual and group thinks that it knows all the truths in the universe and has all the positive qualities in the world; that it has been the most blessed and beloved group on the face of earth and that the developments that have taken place throughout the history are basically because of it - in fact, it thinks that the whole world and the incidents in the world revolve around it and it is the main character of the novel while all others are supporting characters or side-heroes.

This is a very narrow-minded attitude towards life and towards the variety in life. People, in our society, fail to understand themselves and their cultures in the perspective of their contexts. Every culture has its context and because of the same it may be different from others but not necessarily better or worse. Considering difference as something worse can only lead to conflicts and civil wars, and we need to understand this fact urgently.

We must know and recognize that whatever others think that can be truth as well. In fact, neither we have come from out of universe nor anyone else. Why is that we are not ready to trust anyone else's opinion and thoughts? Why is that we consider the truth as a chapter in our own book? And the same question applies to our opponents as well.

It is the same right that we and our opponents demand and that is the right to have opinion. Yes, it is correct that we can have that right but we must take care and understand the same right of our opponent. We both have to trust each other and realize that what the other person is saying is basically his opinion, not a sin or a crime. If there is no such trust then there is no need of sharing opinions and ideas and then there is no other way of deciding what the truth is. First, it is really necessary that there should be trust over each other's intentions and then we can start the discussion and arguments so as to find truth.

There should be discussions and discussions must be continued. However, the unfortunate fact is that there is no discussion at all. In fact, we have not yet learnt the manners of discussions. What we are doing is not discussion but striving earnestly to impose our opinions and ideas on others. We are, in fact, habitual of abusing each other and showing how illiterate and ignorant we are.

Discussion, in the real sense, is the practice of the wisdom and understanding of human thinking and mind. And it seems we lack wisdom and understanding, therefore, what we practice is nothing more than frustration. Unless, we overcome this frustration and invite wisdom and understanding with open arms and have healthy discussions with one another, we are not able to bring about positive changes in our personalities and in the long run in our habits and our society.

Let's trust one another and let's establish a healthy relation between us and our urge for truth and let's start healthy discussions with one another and reach to the truth - the actual truth, the one that can emancipate us from the darkness of ignorance and can bring us to light, show us what is right for us and what we have to do as the most superior creature on the planet or may be in the whole universe.



The Overlooked Task of Promoting Good Governance

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

Building an efficient administration in Afghanistan has been one of the key objectives of the international community in the country. Hundreds of millions of aid dollars have been spent in direct or indirect ways on various large-scale projects aimed at boosting good governance and enhancing efficiency and accountability of the Afghan public institutions. However, the efforts aimed at promoting good governance have yielded little outputs with Afghanistan remaining one of the top corrupt countries in the world and the country's public institutions being frustratingly unresponsive and unaccountable in delivering expected services to the public. With the war raging in the country, the prospects for the efforts to improve governance, enhance transparency and boost efficiency of the public sector is dimmer than ever.

Promotion of good governance was one of the key promises of the leaders of the national unity government during their presidential campaigns in 2014. After taking power, President Ashraf Ghani quickly moved to take some bold moves to curb corruption, boost transparency and improve overall governance in the country. However as expected, the plans has been lagging due to the deteriorating insecurity and political challenges and aftermaths of the controversial presidential election in 2014. Consequently, the much publicized reforms and initiatives of the national unity government started to wane with the protracted security challenges and the power struggle going on within the national unity government. The government's initial moves to start scrutinizing government procurement offices and tackling Kabul Bank's corruption case, the biggest financial scandal in the country, turned as marginal and solitary actions not producing the expected results.

The protracted war and insecurity has remained as the biggest hurdle to the efforts to boost good governance, fighting corruption and enhance efficiency of the public institutions. The focus on the war against the Taliban has to a large extent deviated attentions from the crucial task of improving the government's efficiency and accountability. The protracted insecurity has in fact overshadowed the campaign for boosting good governance and fighting corruption. The Afghan government has virtually been overwhelmed by the growing insurgency of the Taliban after the NATO alliance concluded its combat mission in the country. With all focus on the war and peace efforts, the issues of good governance and fighting corruption have turned into marginal issues for both the Afghan government and its supporters in the international community.

The ongoing war and violence across the country has its own impacts on the efforts to build an efficient establishment in Afghanistan. The insurgency wracks havoc across the country with continuing to ravage war and organize suicide and bombing attacks against government and public interests. The destructions left behind the day-to-day violence in the country have deeper and long-term effects on the social security, stability and order as well as economic prosperity of the citizens in affected areas. This in turn undermines the efforts to restore public confidence

over the efficiency and credibility of the state and its efforts to restore order and boost good governance by delivering services and security. The spread of violence across the country and into once secure areas have further led to disbeliefs among the public over the capabilities of the government to restore law and order and provide services to the public.

The deteriorating security across the country has already started unraveling the achievements made during the last over a decade of efforts backed by the international community. The brief takeover of Kunduz city by the Taliban last year came as a blow to the government's many years of efforts to establish government institutions and make them operational in the province. On the other hand, the endemic corruption has remained untamed with Afghanistan once again ranking as one of the top three most corrupt countries in the world. This is while probes have revealed that there are hundreds of ghost schools with no staff and students in insecure provinces, draining public funding donated by the international community. This exposes a major efficiency gap in the governance in Afghanistan which needs to be dealt with urgently. A recent study by a world transparency advocacy group suggested that the efforts of the national unity government have failed to decrease corruption. The report came as a surprise as the government of President Ghani had taken some tough measures aimed at curbing corruption in the country.

Better governance require improved services, efficient public agencies, more investments and economic developments in the country and, in all, improvement of standards of services and overall social prosperity. Only then the public will start trusting government and public institutions and oppose non-state actors for instance the insurgent groups and help the government to fight corruption and extend central state's control. The government needs to redouble efforts and start taking long-term measures aimed at improving economic well-being of the public as a prerequisite for boosting the public's confidence to the state and public institutions.

The structure of the unity government and the post-presidential election politics has been one of the key obstacles preventing the government to make reforms and bring changes in various public and government sectors. The rivalries among political circles within the government have hampered the initiatives of the national unity government aimed at curbing corruption and improving governance in the country. This, on the other hand, has further weakened political will among the leaders of the national unity government to stay focused on promoting good governance and fighting corruption. Despite initial motives in the new administration, there is now some sort of visible fatigue and lack of resolve among the leaders of the national unity government to stick to their pledges on fighting corruption and boosting governance. The government needs to overcome differences in views and, instead of solitary and arbitrary measures, set a long-term approach for boosting good governance in the country. The government needs to institutionalize the campaign for good governance and the fight against corruption.

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Trade in a Time of Protectionism

By Ranil Wickremesinghe

As China's economy slows and growth in the developed world remains anemic, governments across Asia are working to keep their economies on an upward trajectory. In Sri Lanka, where I am Prime Minister, the challenge is to find a way to accelerate our already steady economic growth. One thing is clear: We cannot expect the rest of the world to welcome our economic ambitions the way it once opened its arms to China's rapid rise as an economic power or - in earlier decades - cheered on the growth of Japan and the so-called Asian Tigers, including South Korea.

Today, we Asians are witnessing, on an almost daily basis, fierce political assaults on the tools and policies that have helped lift hundreds of millions of our citizens out of poverty. Indeed, this year, free trade appears to be the scapegoat of choice among the world's assorted populists and demagogues.

In the United States' presidential election campaign, for example, the leading candidates in both the Republican and Democratic primaries have questioned the wisdom of seeking greater openness in world trade. In the United Kingdom, euroskeptics campaigning for the country to leave the European Union denigrate the benefits of the single European market. Elsewhere in Europe, populists are demanding that the drawbridges of trade be raised. Open trade is under attack even in parts of Asia. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had to drag some of his country's special-interest groups kicking and screaming into the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Similarly, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been unable to convince state governors to lower trade barriers within the country. And in Sri Lanka, the "economic and technology agreement" that my government recently planned to sign with India, in order to bring about greater economic integration, has come under ferocious political attack.

For the most part, however, Asia's political leaders retain a very positive view of the benefits of open trade. After all, much of the past four decades of robust growth can be attributed to the fact that world markets were receptive to Asian goods. All we needed to do to get our economies growing, it seemed, was to identify our comparative advantage, produce quality goods at competitive prices, and then export as much as we could.

For decades, this model worked extraordinarily well, and China, Japan, South Korea, and the countries of Southeast Asia benefited greatly from it. Even today, with world trade in the doldrums,

regional trade remains a key component of these countries' growth strategies. In South Asia, however, we have been much slower to take advantage of the opportunities that can arise from more open trade - with regrettable consequences: The region is home to 44% of the world's poorest people.

We have an obligation to try to use trade to lift our people out of poverty. But with free trade rapidly becoming a global bugbear, the window for generating growth by tapping into world markets appears to be closing quickly. If trade is to become a key driver of growth in Sri Lanka or elsewhere in the region, we will most likely have to generate it ourselves - by transforming South Asia from one of the world's least economically integrated regions into one of its most integrated.

Today, intra-regional trade accounts for just 5% of South Asia's total trade, compared to 25% for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. This vast untapped potential presents the region with an opportunity for growth that does not rely on the strength of the world economy. Last year, the World Bank estimated that annual trade between India and Pakistan could jump from \$1 billion today to \$10 billion - if tariffs and other barriers were slashed to levels recommended by the World Trade Organization.

Tariffs and other needless restrictions hobble trade among all South Asian countries. These obstacles were supposed to be swept away with the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the largest of all the world's regional trading blocs, with close to two billion people. But SAARC's reliance on bilateral negotiations has slowed the process to a crawl, keeping the region much poorer than it needs to be. If SAARC is to succeed, a new multilateral mechanism for cooperation will be needed.

As climate change takes its toll, the stakes will only get higher. Our still largely agrarian countries, with much of their territory in low-lying coastal regions, are dangerously exposed to rising sea levels and violent weather. Receding Himalayan glaciers will disrupt the lives - and livelihoods - of some 600 million people in Pakistan, Nepal, and northern India.

The political obstacles to effective action will be stiff. Indeed, there is political opposition to greater regional economic integration in every SAARC country. But the scale of the challenges facing the region should impel all of SAARC's members toward greater cooperation.

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