

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



March 16, 2016

Grip of Extremism in Society

The emergence of different schools of thought, especially secularism and extremism, has made religion a complicated issue. God-fearing individuals face a dilemma. Freedom of expression, guaranteed by the constitution, paves the way for the development of various isms and creeds. At present various principles and ideologies bombard the citizens. Such worldviews inevitably affect one's ethos and day to day practices.

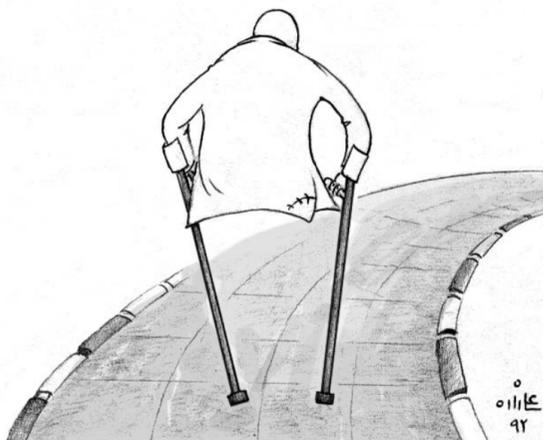
Both these social patterns need to be examined by thinking individuals. Secularism seeks to remove religion from public life, whereas extremism imposes its own beliefs on religious and social behavior. In 1851, George Jacob Holyoake, a British writer, coined the term "secularism" to describe his views on promoting a social order separated from religion, but without actively dismissing or criticizing religious beliefs. Holyoake, who was an agnostic, argued, "Secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it is way of thinking independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity; it advances alternative points of view. Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, and act forever. Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded on this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conducive to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life."

Secularism favors public life in society without the involvement of religions. In this school of thought, religion is totally marginalized and our social norms would be based on the public opinion rather than religious beliefs. In a secular country, religious discrimination does not victimize any citizen.

Secularism is not possible in religious Islamic societies. For instance, in Islamic societies, social norms, cultural values and penal codes are based on religious traditions. In an Islamic society the role of religion is visibly prominent; it is difficult to imagine an Islamic society without religion. It seems that when the matters of God and ethics are removed from schools, courtrooms, and congressional hallways, standards of personal morality fall. An acceptance of situational ethics does away with moral absolutes and advocates relativism, where there are no absolute limits, no absolute values and no hardened standards. On the other hand, a radical worldview greatly jeopardizes Islamic societies, leading to Talibanism and terrorism. We know that religious extremists impose their beliefs and mindsets on society. Whenever the cultural norms of a society do not match their stereotypical frames of mind, they resort to violence and bloodshed. The deadly actions of Taliban militants are examples for all to see. Taliban carry out acts of terror to persuade a society to accept what they believe. But do their actions bear the desired fruit?

People refuse to be brainwashed and are left disgusted by their bloody actions and reactionary mentality. Coercion cannot ever guide social conduct. Idea and belief cannot be pushed into the minds of citizens by force. These religious radicals stoop low to make people obey by murdering innocent individuals. Can a barbaric ideology force ordinary people to obey willingly? Fostering religious beliefs through violence and bloodshed is most ridiculous. The choice they offer is between death and blind obedience.

The murderous acts of Taliban militants originate in their dogmatism. Their religious mindset and interpretations are the logic behind their practices. They introduce religion as a set of harsh and violent beliefs, and act accordingly. Moreover, they consider their religious responsibility to impose obscurantist beliefs at the cost of the lives of fellow citizens. Unfortunately, Taliban militants have been brought up in a closed religious environment and are brainwashed during religious schooling. Children are trained in those secluded madrasahs from very early age, having no contact with other people. Seclusion is necessary to brainwash them. They are educated to hate the other sects. Of course, there are many schools of thoughts; and analysts are of the view that a system which removes religion from society or a school of thought, which goes to religious extreme, both, lead their followers astray. There are many other options. There is freedom of religion; one can choose not only to quench one's spiritual thirst but also to secure one's life and ensure prosperity. In other words, absence of religion or an overloaded of it is both perilous for our society. Therefore, both secularism and extremism threaten to bear undesirable fruit. Unfortunately, our society is stuck in the grip of extremism and, ordinary people lose their lives by the deadly terrorists acts carried out by the religious extremists. Taliban are used to cruelty, killing innocent civilians across the country. They limit the freedom of people, violate their rights and cause insecurity. Moreover, they have destabilized the society and turned out to be themselves, one of the most problematic issues. According to their ideology, those who do not follow them deserve death and they are the only right group in the world; that they alone follow correct religious principles. This is a social danger which has to be resolved by tolerant broad-mindedness.



Is There a Ground for Peace Talks?

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

As the Afghan Government trying to pursue the Taliban to join the peace process, there are widespread skepticisms among the public towards the peace negotiations with the Taliban. Based on a recent survey carried out by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), over 70 percent of respondents in 15 provinces are pessimistic to the efforts to negotiate with the Taliban and consider it a failed endeavor. According to the survey, most people are also concerned about possible compromises of human rights, women's rights and the Afghan constitution. This is while the terms and boundaries of negotiations and a possible peace deal between the two sides are of the vaguest aspects of the peace talks.

There is no clear objective from the peace efforts and a possible deal with the militant groups. It is still unclear whether on what costs the Afghan government will seek a peace deal with the militants. The Afghan officials have stated time and again that the country's constitution and women rights would not be undermined in negotiations. Ironically, the Taliban have always maintained a strict stance over the terms of possible peace negotiations. There seem to be a huge difference between the two sides.

The very first precondition of Taliban is complete withdrawal of foreign troops. Ahead of the establishment of the four-nation peace plan, and later refused to take part in the planned face-to-face talks. Although, Taliban also demanded removal of their leaders names from the UN blacklist and cessation of military operations against the group. While the Taliban have persistently demanded withdrawal of foreign troops before starting any peace negotiations, the presence of foreign forces has always been a red line for the US and the Afghan government. The United States and the Afghan government have made it clear that the foreign forces will stay in the country as part of the Resolute Support Mission to train, advise and assist Afghan security forces.

The Afghan government considers presence of foreign forces as vital for training and equipment of the Afghan security forces and as a leverage to put pressures on the military groups in the battlefield. The government hopes this would keep the military balance against the Taliban and prevent the militants to achieve further military gains that would leave them in a much stronger position in possible future peace negotiations. On the hand, there are firm beliefs that the Taliban will use a vacuum of international direct military support to Afghanistan to further expand the insurgency and weaken the government. The Taliban did use the same opportunity ahead of 2014

during the talks over the withdrawal of US-led foreign forces. They ignored passionate calls of former president Hamid Karzai to join the table of negotiations and waited for the drawdown of the US-led international forces to launch even more aggressive attacks.

Aside the rigid preconditions, the early stages of peace negotiations would be highly tricky. Even if the talks start, it would hit hurdles in the very first place. When the talks start, the two sides would seek to establish a ground for negotiations and specify what they are going to negotiate. It is hard to imagine the two sides agree on the terms of the negotiations and a possible peace deal at the end. There seem to be no room for compromises between the two sides whether to include issues like Afghanistan's political system, the constitution and regulating Sharia system in the agenda. The gap over the terms of the talks cannot be bridged in the early stage with the two sides unable to cross their respective established red lines.

Although, There are often talks among Afghan officials of considering political and financial concessions to the Taliban. There have been rumors in the past that some powers had been considering political concessions to the Taliban such as giving them ministerial posts and control of some provinces in the South. However, the Afghan government vehemently opposed the idea and called it a betrayal to the people of Afghanistan. Even if the Afghan government reach to the point to consider such concessions for the Taliban, it would be hard to imagine the government and the rest of the political class in Afghanistan would give the Taliban concessions that the militants expect to receive in exchange of denouncing violence. On the other hand, smaller concessions would not appease the Taliban. It would be naive to think the Taliban would abandon their fight for such political concessions that could be taken back some day when circumstance change.

The main aim of the talks perhaps is to make peace with the main Taliban group through some sort of power-sharing. However as stated above, it would be crucially difficult, but not impossible. The question hovering here is that there are any other scenarios for peace talks between the government and the militant groups? Well, another assumption is that some parties may be enticed by the political concessions that would be given to them. So based on this assumption, one of the objectives of the peace talks is to create some sort of divisions among the Taliban, which means practically splitting the group and weakening them on the battleground. This, however, would not be easy either. But it may worth testing.

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The Politics of Polio Eradication

By Jonathan Kennedy and Domna Michailidou

A few years ago, the global campaign to eradicate polio seemed to have stalled. After decades of eradication efforts, the virus remained stubbornly endemic in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria. Then, in 2013 and 2014, it was found to have returned to seven previously polio-free countries in Africa and the Middle East, prompting the World Health Organization to declare the disease's resurgence a "public-health emergency of international concern."

Despite this recidivism, the world today is closer than ever to eradicating polio. In 2015, there were just 74 new cases of the disease - 80% fewer than the previous year and the lowest annual total ever. And all of the cases were concentrated in just two countries, 54 in Pakistan and 20 in Afghanistan. Moreover, it has been eighteen months since the virus was last detected in Africa.

The reasons behind this remarkable turnaround are instructive, illustrating the challenges facing public-health workers and the best ways to overcome them.

The barriers to polio eradication are no longer medical; the disease does not occur where vaccination programs operate unhindered. During the past five years, polio cases have occurred almost exclusively in five conflict-affected countries: Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria. Because immunization programs are led by national governments and the WHO, which, as a specialized agency of the United Nations, works closely with incumbent regimes, it can be difficult to carry out vaccinations in areas where militants wage war against the state.

The fall in the number of polio cases largely resulted from improved access to such areas. In Nigeria and Pakistan, vaccination programs were able to proceed after troops asserted the state's control over conflict-affected territory.

Most polio cases occurred in northern and eastern Nigeria, where the terrorist group Boko Haram had killed and kidnapped immunization workers, disrupting vaccination programs and leaving more than a million children unprotected. After a regional military force pushed the group into sparsely populated mountains and forests, immunization workers were provided access to previously rebel-controlled areas.

In Pakistan, polio is concentrated in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in the northwest of the country, where the Taliban are strongest. In 2012, militant leaders in the region banned immunization programs over concerns that they were being used to gather intelligence for drone attacks by the United States. Consequently 1-3.5 million Pakistani children were not vaccinated.

That changed in the summer of 2014, when the Pakistan military brought large areas of the region under government control. In the space of a single year, the number of

polio cases fell from 306 to 54.

Using troops to assert control over conflict-affected areas is not the only way to improve access for polio workers, and in some cases it may not be the most effective. In Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria, the government was either unable or unwilling to assert authority over rebel-controlled territory. Instead, immunization workers adapted to the political reality and worked with militants to gain access to areas under their control.

The Afghan Taliban have cooperated with polio vaccination programs since the 1990s. In most cases, local-level leaders have welcomed immunization workers, seeing vaccination programs as a form of patronage that reinforces their authority. The few polio cases that have been detected have been either cross-border transmissions from Pakistan or have occurred in areas where intense conflict between the Taliban and the Afghan government has temporarily disrupted polio campaigns.

By contrast, in Somalia, the terrorist group al-Shabaab has historically forbidden polio workers from operating in areas under their control, viewing vaccination campaigns as part of a foreign campaign to impose a centralized government. One million children were unvaccinated between 2010 and 2013, when a polio outbreak occurred. Since then, immunization campaigns have improved their access to rebel-controlled areas by employing locally recruited staff to work within their own clans and negotiate access with local-level militant leaders.

In Syria, after the start of the uprising in 2011, the government prevented the WHO from operating in areas outside its control. Over three million children were not vaccinated for polio, leading to an outbreak in rebel-controlled regions in 2013. In response, an ad hoc coalition, including moderate opposition groups, Turkish authorities, and local NGOs carried out a series of vaccination campaigns and contained the outbreak. The coalition negotiated access with local rebel leaders, allowing them to choose volunteer vaccinators. Militant groups - even the so-called Islamic State - permitted immunization campaigns to operate in areas under their control.

The lesson is clear. Successful immunization campaigns must secure the support of de facto political leaders - whether of an internationally recognized state or of a vilified militant organization. As objectionable as working with groups like the Islamic State might be, it is important to remember that the main objective of efforts like the campaign to eradicate polio is to improve the health of people wherever they may live. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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