

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



May 05, 2018

"Media, Justice and the Rule of Law"

World Press Freedom Day was celebrated internationally on 3rd May with the intention to highlight the importance of free press in democratic societies and to censure the attempts that are directed towards restricting or controlling the press for political purposes. It was also celebrated to remember the efforts of different journalists for the development and growth of media and press, and pay tribute to those journalists who lost their lives performing their duties.

The day was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1993, after the recommendation of UNESCO's General Conference. Since then the day is celebrated each year with a particular theme. This year's theme for the Day was "Keeping Power in Check: Media, Justice and the Rule of Law." It was to highlight the worth of empowering legal environment wherein press freedom can be promoted. It also emphasized on the need of an independent judiciary that can ensure that such guarantees can be made.

The world is going through critical times and in such a scenario, it is important for media and press to highlight the issues that human beings face in an unbiased and critical way so that truth should be disseminated. Moreover, the government and other authorities should make sure that they do not create hurdle for the journalists to collect relevant information, as every journalist has the right to gather information and every individual has the right to receive correct information.

It is also vital to protect freedom of press from censorship and surveillance overreach, and ensure the safety for journalism, online and offline. And this demand is not just a vague demand. It is based on the international law. Journalists, according to the Declaration of Rights and Duties of the Journalists, must have free access to all information sources, and the right to freely inquire on all events conditioning public life. Therefore, secret of public or private affairs may be opposed only to journalists in exceptional cases and for clearly expressed motives. And, any factor hindering the journalists from having access to all information sources must be considered illegal and should be eliminated.

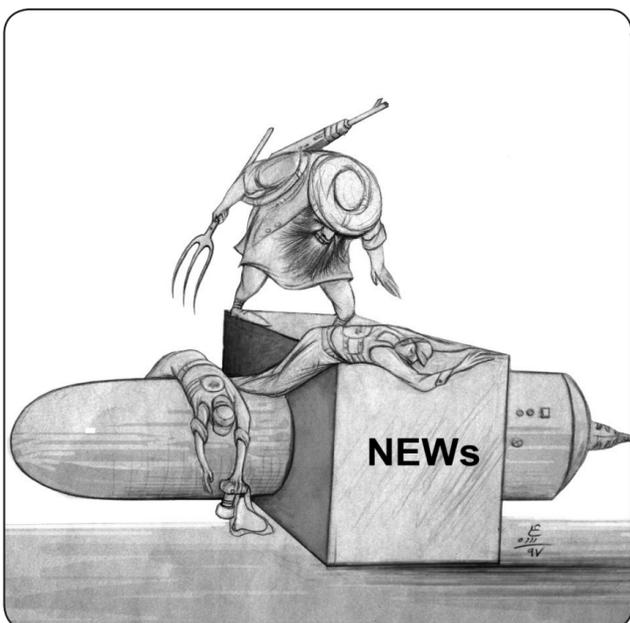
The claim of the rights of the press or journalists is not only advantageous for them but for the entire society. If press and journalists are free to do their job they can support in identifying the facts and figures within the society, which will portray a complete picture and also assist in finding out the deficiencies. Unless, people have the true picture of the socio-political conditions, it is very difficult to have awareness and be able to play a positive role within the society.

There is a sort of ill-intention behind imposing hindrances in the way of press freedom. There are certain factions within the society that do not intend that the people should know about their activities and their intentions; therefore, they make efforts to ban or hinder the media. By doing so they make sure that their evil deeds remain concealed and do not receive attention.

Sometimes, the governments, themselves, suggest or impose ban or restrictions on media. It is because of the fact that they do not like criticism on what they do. They fear that if press and media disclose their activities or the shortcomings in their policies and practices, the public opinion may turn against them and they may lose popular will or even legitimacy.

On some other occasions, certain strata in society, having the support of the government or the certain administrative units pressurize the press so that they do not go against their wills. They may have certain intentions or objectives that are only for their own personal benefits or may even involve illegal practice or the violation of the constitution; therefore, they through the government machinery impose bans and restrictions on the press so that their motives are not disclosed. Ill-fatedly, Afghanistan is also one of the countries that have not been giving enough heed to the freedom of the press and the rights of the journalists. The war and conflicts and the negligence of the relevant authorities have resulted in poor development in media sector and particularly in press. Moreover, different sorts of discrimination against the journalists have continued in different parts of the country. Afghan government, different organizations and groups both national and international must make sure that they strive to make efforts in bringing about real changes for the development of press in the country and must protect the rights of the journalists as they are not a party to the conflict and do not serve anyone's purpose.

Provided that the rights of the journalists are protected, it is important that the journalists must fulfill their responsibilities in the best possible manner. They are required to respect truth whatever be the consequence to themselves, because of the right of the public to know the truth; defend freedom of information, comment and criticism; and report only on facts of which they know the origin of; not to suppress essential information nor alter texts and documents and not to use

**To be or not to be; This is the question**

By Ali Reza Yasa

To be, or not to be," was the question raised by Shakespeare in Hamlet. His question fundamentally touched the very essence of the human philosophy of existence. For Hazaras, this was the question of everyone... every freedom fighter, every revolutionary, every deserving soul who sought the respect and dignity of human freedom. For Shakespeare, these were words in a play, but for us, this question is a matter of life and death. Just like Adorno as he writes in his book *Auschwitz*, we remain alive to witness what happened to our fellow countrymen, to continue our struggle, and to gain the rights of all those who were silenced and martyred.

"To be or not to be" has always been the greatest question of justice seekers from any corner of the world who have pooled their efforts and endured a lifetime of torture and affliction to stand against the tyranny of cruelty, be it Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Balqhi, Ibrahim Gow-sawar, Faiz Mohammad Kateb, or Baba Mazari. However, in the current unfavorable circumstances of blood and fire, the armies of death must not be victorious. The Taliban, ISIS, or even the retrogressive circle of wicked and corrupt, fascist politicians must know that if they spread the news of death and tyranny to snatch the pencils, books or precious smiles from the hopeful faces of our innocent children, they may suffer from their own stupidity. Our young generation is more determined than before, they are stronger than before, and will line up to say 'no' to tyranny and 'yes' to democracy and free and fair elections. Our new generation is a human chain which stands upright and strong, tall and proud, for peace, sustainable development, and a society of justice and equality.

In order for justice to prevail, and to have a society free from violence and injustice, active participation in elections is the ultimate logical way. The biggest and most prominent democracies of the world have suffered many shortfalls, insufficiencies and flaws. Even now, the elections in the vibrant, popular American democracy resulted in the election of Donald Trump who has told over 2,000 proven lies in just 355 days of his presidency.

However, the American public has not given up hope and has not given up on democracy. Instead, the American people have had stronger participation. The status of democracy in the U.S. is presumed to have achieved a position which leads the world, and was the result of many sacrifices, hardship, and a gigantic ocean of troubles toward democratization... facing huge ebbs and flows in the process.

Have they been able to solve the problems of minorities in over 200 years of democracy? Do they still face radical, white supremacists, who, like Hitler and fascism, spread a value of self-supremacy and segregation? Nonetheless, is it not the same society that has the

pride of giving birth to Martin Luther King Jr., Barack Obama, Maya Angelou, Mohammad Ali Clay, Malcolm X, and Michael Jackson, who belonged to a long-suppressed racial minority in U.S. history?

Why are Afghans so intolerant? Why is our society an intolerant society? Why do we so quickly want everything to be ideal? It's not that I support or legitimize the current situation as being unavoidable. It's that I believe that we have to work by the sweat of our brows, be patient, realistic, and never give up. If a tribal commander or a jihadi leader raises his concerns against the very principal of elections, I can understand, since elections, at a minimum, will illegitimize their leadership and sovereignty, and, in the long run, affects their hereditary succession of power. I am, however, shocked to see some farmer's children who have worked hard to get education and yet find elections useless. These are the people who have neither the background of being a jihadi nor do they have the background of being armed, a paratrooper, or militia. Why are these poor farmers' children so much against elections and the democratic system?

I, as a farmer's son, have faced hardships to receive an education and have changed my life through those efforts. I believe that if we want a situation in which to demonstrate our best skills, knowledge, and education... if we want to create an opportunity for development by having an impact in society... if we do not want the opportunities to be limited to the children of current leaders... our only solution is democracy.

I agree that our two elections had many problems. There was a high level of corruption, fraud, and misrepresentation of the results. However, the only solution to fight electoral corruption and fraud is also elections. Elections are not a social experience confined to one or two countries. They are a pathway toward justice celebrated in more than 95% of the civilized world and countries. If we had elections during all those years that we fought, we would have had a better system. And if we do not consider elections seriously now, twenty years later we will again have to come back and walk this path. And, in that sense, we will just have wasted twenty more years of our political lives similar to these past three decades of war.

May peace be upon your bleeding hearts and may our martyred young and old find eternal peace in the heavens and may their deaths not be in vain. Peace be upon you, the architects of our future... you, the strong wall of human chain who spread justice, freedom and equality.

Ali Reza Yasa is the founder and Chairman of Star Educational Society. He is the only instructor who has been teaching at Star for the past 20 years. He has an M.A. in Central Asian Studies from American University of Central Asia with a concentration in Anthropology. He also holds the Editor-in-Chief position of the *Interstellar Bulletin*, Star's weekly newspaper.

A potentially future-shaping day for the Middle East

By James M. Dorsey

With US President Donald J. Trump scheduled to announce whether he will uphold the international community's nuclear agreement on Iran and Iraqi elections slated for the same day, May 12 is gearing up to be a day that could shape the future of the Middle East.

May 12's significance lies in what it will mean for the immediate course of the debilitating rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran that has played out in proxy wars across the region and played politics with the differences that divide Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

Underlying the drama of May 12 is a more fundamental shift in the approach of both Saudi Sunni Muslim leaders and Iraqi Shiite and Sunni politicians towards the region's sectarian divide that may provide a first sign of light at the end of the Middle East's tunnel of violence, civil war, and ethnic and religious strife.

Moreover, reduced sectarian tension lays bare the core struggle for regional power between Saudi Arabia by lifting the veil of religious dispute in which it was often shrouded. That struggle could intensify if Mr. Trump decides to increase pressure on Iran to compromise on issues like its ballistic missile program and regional proxies.

In a sign of the times, Iraqi politicians campaigning for the parliamentary election have been forging cross-sectarian alliances and wooing votes across the country irrespective of past history and religious allegiance.

Iraq's largest Sunni Islamist political group, the Iraqi Islamic Party, a driving force behind the Sunni protest movement in 2013 that was hijacked by the Islamic State, has built an alliance with Shiite Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Last week, Mr. Abadi became the first Shiite leader to campaign in a wholly Sunni Muslim part of Iraq when he travelled to Anbar province, 110 kilometres west of Baghdad.

"People must feel part of this country and like they are citizens of this country. At the end of the day, we must deliver to the people," Mr. Abadi said earlier, insisting that Iraq needs to forge an identity that is inclusive in terms of nationhood as well as religious and tribal affinity.

The effort to break down sectarian fault lines that have dominated Iraq since the 2003 US invasion that toppled the Sunni minority regime of Saddam Hussein paves the way to the election.

Shiite-led electoral groupings are hopeful that they will see record-breaking gains in Sunni areas. Sunni politicians who fled the country because of sectarian violence have returned to compete in the poll.

Putting deep-seated distrust definitively to bed is likely to be a lengthy process, but the initial building of bridges was helped by Saudi efforts to forge close diplomatic, economic and cultural ties with Iraq after refusing to engage with the Shiite-majority country for more than a decade.

Saudi government moves to improve relations with the kingdom's own long discriminated Shiite minority served, moreover, as evidence that Sunni Muslim attitudes may be changing.

Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's Iraqi charm offensive as well as his moves to turn a page with his own Shiites is as much an effort to project himself as a reformer as it is a bid to counter Iran and its regional influence.

Trends in Iraq and Saudi Arabia are in some ways mirror images of one another. Leaders in both countries are pushing nationalism rather than sectarianism.

The rapprochement between Iraq and Syria and the Saudi government's overtures to Shiites who populate its oil-rich Eastern Province "mark a turn away from the years of pervasive anti-Shia sentiment in both domestic and regional politics and toward a more assertive nationalism," said Gulf scholar Kristin Smith Diwan.

So far, Prince Mohammed's moves and overtures by Mr. Abadi and Iraqi politicians appear to be producing results. Iraqi Sunni Muslim leaders are reconciling themselves to the fact that the days of sectarian minority rule are over and that they will have to carve out a space for themselves in a political landscape that is dominated by fractured Shiite political forces.

Similarly, Saudi Shiite voices have welcomed Prince Mohammed's insistence in an interview with *The Atlantic* in which he acknowledged that Saudi Arabia was home to both Sunnis and Shiites and efforts to include Shiites in his top-down reforms.

"You will find a Shiite in the cabinet, you will find Shiites in government, the most important university in Saudi Arabia is headed by a Shiite. So we believe that we are a mix of Muslim schools and sects, Prince Mohammed said.

To be sure, Saudi overtures are built on the brutal crushing of Shiite protests in the Eastern Province and the destruction of large parts of the town of Awamiyah, that was home to Nimr al-Nimr, the opposition Shiite religious scholar who was executed in early 2016.

While they are designed to eliminate the adversarial tone in relations between the sects and increase social and economic opportunity, change does not involve giving Shiites a political say of their own as much as Sunnis are not being granted the option of political participation.

Yet, a growing number of Saudi Shiites, like many Iraqi Sunnis, are coming to grips with the fact that their best hope is to row with the oars that they have; in other words, in Saudi Arabia make the best of opportunities granted by an absolute monarch and in Iraq accept a minority role.

Taken together, the developments in Saudi Arabia and Iraq as well as in relations between the two countries not only help reduce sectarian tension but also challenge Shiite Iran's projection of itself as a revolutionary force that represents all Muslims rather than just a sect.

No doubt, both Saudi Arabia and Iraq have a long way to go in rebuilding confidence between sectarian communities and ensuring that minorities truly feel that they have a stake in their nation.

Nevertheless, efforts to reduce the sectarian sting take on added significance as Mr. Trump could fuel the fires of controversy, if not conflict, by walking away from the Iran nuclear agreement on May 12.

Depending on what Mr. Trump does, May 12 could prove to be a watershed in the history of the Middle East. If he walks away, the question is whether he simply caters to his domestic base by refusing to certify to the US Congress Iranian compliance with the agreement or seeks to escalate confrontation with the Islamic republic by re-imposing sanctions on Iran.

An Iraqi election on May 12 from which Sunni Muslims emerge with a sense of being part of Iraq's political process and future would be no less historic. How historic will depend on continued Shiite political efforts to give Sunni Muslims a stake. The same is true, for Prince Mohammed's reforms, including his inclusionary gestures towards Shiites as part of an absolute monarchy that adheres to what he terms 'moderate Islam.'

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