

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



May 24, 2017

Violence against Women Persists

The condition of women in Afghanistan does not seem to be improving though there have been many promises and commitments to change the scenario. As the country has been largely influenced by insecurity and instability, people in general and women in particular, have suffered to a great extent. They have been targeted both by parochial social thoughts and extremist religious beliefs. And, the issue is not only the violation of their rights and negation of their true status in society but also the growing violence against them. Unfortunately, there are no concrete measures planned or taken by the authorities to tackle the situation.

A recent news report highlighted that forty cases of violence against women have been registered in the past two months in eastern Nangarhar province, alone. This was stated by provincial women's affairs director Anisa Omrani at a monthly gathering on preventing violence against women. She revealed that 10 women were sent to the safe home and another four women, who were threatened after being released from jail over completion of jail terms, had also been sent to the safe homes; while the rest of the cases were being discussed with relevant relatives.

It is important to note here that these are only the cases that have come to light; whereas there are many other cases that never come to the light and they are buried in the dark corridors of ignorance and negligence. Moreover, this data pertains to Nangarhar province alone; if the data from all the provinces are collected, it will definitely show a very disheartening situation of women in the country.

Unfortunately, issues pertaining to women have been handled by the authorities in a hypocritical manner. They have been used to attract donor funding and treated on project-based manner. Some efforts are made only temporarily to show the donors that there are actions being taken but it is also ensured that the issues are not solved permanently; thus enabling the officials to keep on attracting donor funding. As a matter of fact, the magnitude of work that has been done regarding the rights of women in Afghanistan is much less than the funds and resources that have been utilized.

A cursory look at the condition of women in different parts of the country would reveal the whole story. Moreover, the incidents of violence and atrocities against women have kept on multiplying. Every now and then, there is an incident that shows the nature and frequency of violation of women rights and their subjugation by the male members of the society and the social norms and values.

There is a clear rise in incidents of violence against women. This is directly linked to the overall security situation. As the security situation in the country has deteriorated the weaker strata seem to be in trouble the most. There were no serious attention to their woes and now with rising insecurity, the authorities have more excuses for less attention to the issues of women. Women and many intellectuals believe that even if the security situation improves there will be serious challenges for women to earn a reputable position within Afghan society.

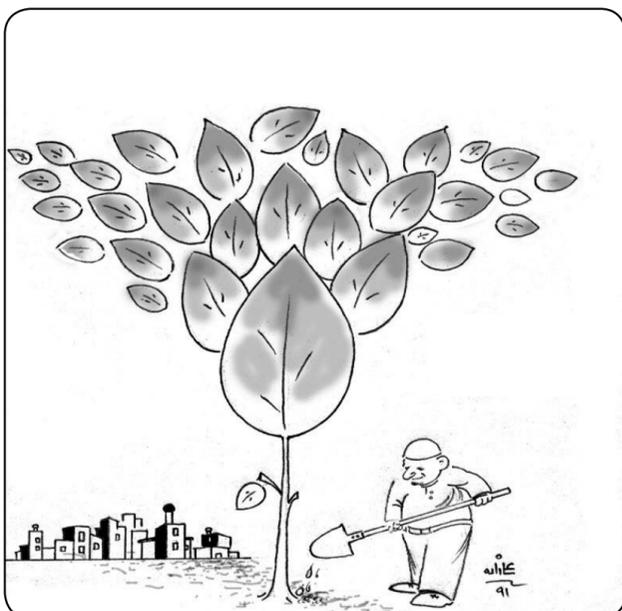
Even if there is a peace deal with Taliban, there are fears that Afghan government may sacrifice some of the achievements that are made regarding the heightened role and position of women. Taliban have never been in favor of active role of women in social and political lives and one of their conditions for peace talks would be limiting their role as much as possible. Keeping the Afghan society in mind, the authorities may accept such a condition.

Afghan social structure has been fervently dominated by religious extremism and tribal partiality. Most of the self-designed religious doctrines and tribal norms are against the women and discriminate their basic rights. Regrettably, these norms and principles have even gone to the extent of aggression and have tortured women physically - even in the public. They, in the name of dignity of women, have in reality dishonored them. Though they have been raising their voices every now and then but in the noise of male shrieks they seem to be negligible and get faded away. In fact, the male-chauvinistic ears are not ready to hear them though they feel their vibrations clearly.

Nonetheless, the efforts in this regard must never be given up and they should continue in every possible way.

With such a situation existing around, it is really difficult to see development in condition of women who have been undergoing discriminations since ages. Afghan authorities and all the Afghan people, both women and men, must strive to change the scenario as it would help the society as a whole as women are an essential part of it.

We need to accept that women form an integral part of society and have an imperative role to play. Their representation and participation in different walks of life can help society develop suitably. They cannot be kept on being discriminated and violated without letting up, because it is not only non-religious but at the same time atrocious because above all women are human beings. Unfortunately, this evident fact has not been realized by many in Afghan society.



Media - The Fourth Pillar of Democracy

By Abdul Hamid Arifi

Access to news and information is the individuals' fundamental right in a society. Citizens are entitled to have access to national and international news. Curtailing this right will be tantamount to depriving citizens of information and awareness. The most significant responsibility of the media and press is spreading awareness to citizens from political, social, cultural and economic aspects. The freedom of the press is a basic element of democracy in modern world.

Hence, no power, including the government, will be allowed to keep people in dark or distort the fact under the pretext of public interest or maintaining security and discipline. Freedom of the media and press means the freedom of expression regarding social facts, events and news as law has predicted, without being censored or submitted to officials in advance.

The Afghan Constitution states in article 24, "Freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of this constitution.

Every Afghan shall have the right, according to provisions of law, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities..."

Based on this article, the media and press are free in their statements in provision of the law. However, it is worth saying that such freedoms should not be misused and no one is allowed to highlight the negative aspect of issues or create public disorder under the aegis of this freedom. The responsibility of the media and press is enlightening the minds of the public and promoting the level of their awareness and knowledge.

Moreover, the media will have to play their role in strengthening national unity and constituting empathy, denying the false barriers and struggling for the promotion of human rights and dignity.

Ill-fatedly, some national media seek to highlight the sore points such as racial, religious and sectarian issues rather than paving the ground for unity and brotherhood or underlining the spirit of tolerance among the people. It is self-explanatory that involving in such issues will benefit no one and will be destructive and misleading.

Therefore, the political pundits, the elite and think-tanks will have to struggle for national solidarity - with consideration to the country's facts and situation - and uphold the constitutional values.

A number of invaluable issues have been mentioned in the Constitution's preamble such as: realizing the previous injustices, miseries and innumerable disasters; appreciating the sacrifices, historical struggles, jihad and just resistance

of all the peoples of Afghanistan; admiring the supreme position of the martyrs of the country's freedom; strengthening national unity; safeguarding independence, national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country; establishing an order based on the peoples' will and democracy; forming a civil society void of oppression, atrocity, discrimination as well as violence, based on rule of law, social justice; protecting integrity and human rights; attaining peoples' freedoms and fundamental rights; and strengthening political, social, and economic as well as defense institutions.

The limitation of freedom of press has been determined in the laws of the countries and the responsibilities of all freedom-owners will be written and approved in a way that violators will be prosecuted.

In Afghanistan, too, the frame of the media's activities have been determined in the law of public media - this ensures the freedom of the media and press and saves them from violence. This law underlines the responsibilities and limitation of the media and points out the criteria.

The main objectives of this law is considered to be: promoting and protecting the right to freedom of thought and expression; upholding the journalists' rights and smoothing the path for their activities; developing free, independent and pluralistic mass media; providing a safe ground for expressing thoughts and feelings through statement, writing, drawing, recording, filming, illustrating and other educational, literal, artistic instruments.

The further objective is observing the principle of freedom of expression and press, written in the International Covenant on Human Rights, with taking Islam religion into consideration, for a sound progress of the media.

This law states in article 4 that everyone has the right to thought and expression. Demanding, obtaining and transferring information and ideas without the interference and restriction from the government officials are also parts of freedom of expressions.

The government will support the freedom of mass media. It adds that no legal entities or individuals can ban, censor or curtail the media or interfere in their issues in any other ways. So, since the rights and responsibilities of the mass media have been clearly stated in the law, media must comply with them and violation of this law will lead to legal prosecution.

It is really important that the media and press should not misuse this freedom and respect the human rights, dignity, religious and sectarian beliefs, the sacred, and social values so as not to outrage the public conscience or dishonor any individuals, tribes, sects or social groups.

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Diversity - Bone of Contention or Bond of Affection?

By Hujjatullah Zia

Maintaining the bond of an intimate community is possible through practicing tolerance and the spirit of brotherhood. Tolerance seems to be the glue that holds the multi-ethnic nation of China together. People exercise their rights and freedoms in China without being discriminated on the grounds of their caste, color or creed. The Chinese deem themselves a single nation.

One of the main reasons behind a violence-free China is the tolerance of the public towards one another and acceptance of racial and religious diversity. In China, religious beliefs and personal faith are not involved in politics or social issues. Since it is feared that religious issues will turn controversial at schools, the government has not included religious tenets in the syllabus.

It is believed that the Chinese practice upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which states, "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status..." The UDHR further adds in article 3, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." Chinese government protects the fundamental rights of the citizens in the best way. It is most likely that there is no gap between state and nation.

The ethnic minority groups in China have been paid greater attention by the government. To view birth control, the ethnic minorities are allowed to have three children while others cannot have more than two - the minorities are treated with positive discrimination.

Recently, during my visit to Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region where many ethnic groups live, including Uyghur, Han, Kazakh, Hui, Kirgiz, Mongol, Tajik, Xibe, Full, Uzbek, Russian, Daur and Tatar who "are the indigenous peoples of Xinjiang." China officially recognizes 55 ethnic minority groups in addition to the Han majority.

China's official 55 minorities are located primarily in the south, west, and north of China. Only Tibet and Xinjiang have a majority population of official minorities, while all other provinces, municipalities and regions of China have a Han majority. The China's Constitution and laws guarantee equal rights to all ethnic groups in this county and help promote ethnic minority groups' economic and cultural development. One notable preferential treatment ethnic minorities enjoy is their exemption from the population growth control of the two-Child Policy, as it was mentioned above.

Ethnic minorities are represented in the National People's Congress as well as governments at the provincial and prefectural levels. Some ethnic minorities in China live in what

are described as ethnic autonomous areas. These "regional autonomies" guarantee ethnic minorities the freedom to use and develop their ethnic languages, and to maintain their own cultural and social customs.

In addition, the People's Republic of China government has provided preferential economic development and aid to areas where ethnic minorities live. Additionally, the Chinese government has allowed and encouraged the involvement of ethnic minority participation in the party. They are able to gain political positions, too.

Now to consider Afghanistan, intolerance and lack of racial and ethnic acceptance have led to violence and bloodshed. Warring parties, mainly the Taliban and self-styled Islamic State (IS) group, violate people's rights and freedoms for their backgrounds. Ethnic minority groups are highly vulnerable to violence. For instance, the IS fighters sought to stoke sectarianism via abducting and killing minority groups, including women and children within the couple of years.

Strong sensitivity to religious, moral and cultural diversity is likely to be a menace to political stability and individual and collective rights and liberties. A large number of people suffer for their religious, racial, sexual and linguistic diversity. The current situation in the region, including Afghanistan, suggests that dogmatic ideologies and warped minds will result in war and violence. Not only Afghanistan but the entire region will undergo the unmitigated pains and sufferings unless we view the world and the human beings from a wider lens rather than parochial mindset.

In fact, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and should be able to exercise their rights without fear. We have to treat one another on the basis of being human. Otherwise, there will be no end to our sufferings and no panacea for our bleeding wounds.

After all, human societies will be paragons of peace and stability for one another. For example, China and Afghanistan are multi-ethnic countries, with difference in proportions, and our country should learn the tolerance and acceptance of diversity.

Although it is a rule that applying a text in different contexts will not bear the same fruit, tolerance will always pave the ground for peace and stability. On the contrary, claiming racial and religious superiority will pose threat to a nation and society. It is believed that practicing upon Golden Rule which says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" will mitigate the anguish of the entire human societies. Unlike religious tenets, there is no ifs and buts in this rule and no room for interpreting it in one's own interests.

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