

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



May 26, 2015

The Fate of the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections

In recent weeks, concerns over the delays in reforms to the electoral commissions as well as the future parliamentary elections have been increasing. Many election monitoring organizations, political leaders, analysts and government officials have raised concerns over the National Unity Government's inability to start implementing reforms to the electoral commissions. With the delays in reforming the electoral bodies, now the fate of the future parliamentary elections is ambiguity with the affairs regarding the preparations for the elections completely in chaos. Since its formation, the National Unity Government has come a long way to complete the formation of the unity government and implement the power-sharing agreement which became the basis of the National Unity Government. However, one of the terms of the agreement is becoming the greatest point of failure for the unity government.

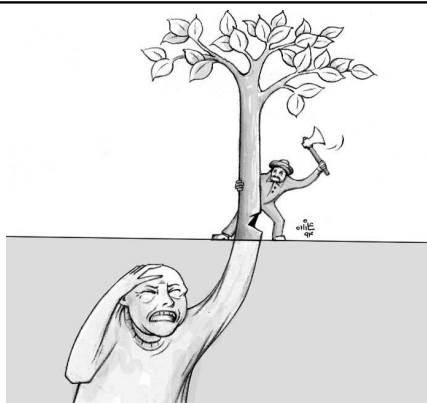
Last Thursday, talking at a conference of International Contact Group (ICG) in Kabul, President Ghani said that holding the upcoming parliamentary elections will be a major challenge for the government. He said that reforms to the electoral systems and bodies were a must, and that the government needed more time. His comments came at a time when government has failed to take concrete measures for compromising over the electoral reforms to allow the preparations go ahead for the parliamentary elections. The assurances for reforms while there is an obvious lack of political will from the leaders of the National Unity Government seem bizarre and superficial to those political elites, election monitoring institutions and the civil society organizations that closely monitor the affairs related to the electoral reforms. There could be dire consequences for the government's failure to bring about reforms to the electoral systems and procedures. The parliamentary elections were supposed to take place this year. It was, and is, to be a fair and sound process to avoid the catastrophic trend of the last year's presidential elections. However, there have been no actions for making the necessary arrangements for fixing the flaws that exist in the electoral bodies' structures as well as other election mechanisms. There is a consensus that the upcoming parliamentary elections could not be held without due electoral reforms. If this happens, it could mean political instabilities, unconstitutionality in the political system, disruptions in day-to-day governance and possibly a chaotic situation close to a potential crisis for the country, as happened during the protracted last year's presidential elections.

With a more potential failure over the handling of the parliamentary elections looming, now there are opposing and somehow bizarre comments and theories to the fate of the legislative system and the parliament if the government fails to hold the elections in near future. Some predict the mandate of the current houses of the parliament could be extended so to the state performs without heading to a stalemate. However, it is obvious for all that such an arrangement is unconstitutional, and such unconstitutional measures would only compound the fundamental challenges of the country. The fact is that it is quite possible that the legislative branch of the government would stall and leave the state without one of its main pillars. Any scenario because of the government's failure to hold elections in time is potentially dangerous and would bring the country again to unpredicted challenges and even crises.

The problems related to the delays in election reforms and holding timely parliamentary elections is emerging from now on. The international community has declined to commit for funding the election process due to the unity government's inability to undertake reforms to the electoral systems and procedures. The international Allies are exhausted with Afghanistan's inability to handle its electoral processes. If the election bodies do not receive the required funding for holding the elections, they would fail from the very beginning to start preparations for the elections. With no robust and timely preparations, the parliamentary elections would be doomed to another electoral failure for Afghanistan.

To say the unsaid, the deep desire for monopoly of power over the election systems and procedures is the main factor behind the unwillingness and lack of resolve and commitment of the top political leadership to hold a sound and flaw-less parliamentary elections. One of the key differences is whether who should lead the special commission for electoral reforms that would oversee the process. President Ashraf Ghani appointed female lawmaker Shukria Barezai, but her appointment was unacceptable for CEO Abdullah Abdullah. Since the stalemate, Ghani has failed so far to seek a consensus-building approach and come to a consensus with top political leaders and key government stakeholders. Many believe the President has strategic sight and approach over the current affairs of the country, and is a pragmatic leader with no delusions over the situations.

However, his inability, as the head of the state, to rightly fix things of national importance through consensus and political unity among Afghan political elites questions him as being a pragmatic and capable leader who should be able to fix the messes created by the last year presidential elections and the ongoing security challenges. The flawed leadership of the unity government is further compounded by lack of political opposition to the government. All potential major opposition groups are included in the current unity government leaving the system without a constructive and powerful opposition front. Former president Hamid Karzai had been facing the heaviest criticisms from the opposition groups, and due to such mechanisms of politics the government used to act more responsibly. If Afghanistan's political elite further keep silence over the government's handling of the electoral reforms and the parliamentary elections, there would be no sense of responsibility and accountability from the government and particularly its top leadership. Perhaps it is time for the MPs, politicians as well as government officials to raise pressures for electoral reforms and preparations of the parliamentary elections.



Pakistan's Warning to the Taliban

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

Pakistan has asked the Taliban to immediately halt their spring offensive in Afghanistan. According to Pakistani media reports, the government of Pakistan has delivered a message to the Taliban leadership that if the group fails to stop the fighting immediately, it would face serious response from the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Unnamed Pakistani official has said that the message has been sent through middlemen, and the Afghan government has also been notified on the issue. The news is coming at a time when Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are fighting against the bloody Taliban offensive resumed last month. The offensive has engulfed many Northern provinces as well as other areas across the country.

The capacity of the news is not fully clear yet. However, it suggests that the Pakistani government is starting to take some actions backing its pledge to help the Afghan government negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban leaders. The Pakistan has been recently employing the term "enemy of Afghanistan is Pakistan's enemy". During a visit to Afghanistan about two weeks ago, Pakistani Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif condemned Taliban spring offensive, saying that the group would have no choice but to enter peace negotiations with the government of Afghanistan. Still, there has been no sign of the shared efforts of the Pakistani and Afghan governments paying off yet as the fighting continues in the country.

Despite all the pledges and assurances of supporting the Afghan peace efforts, so far there have been no concrete actions from Pakistan in persuading the Taliban to denounce violence and enter peace negotiations with the Afghan government. Violence in Afghanistan has escalated and the Taliban have been in resurgence in different parts of country particularly in the North after the group started its annual spring offensive.

With the escalation of violence, hopes for resumption of peace talks with the Taliban have been declining and many turning skeptical of Pakistan's pledges for helping peace efforts in Afghanistan. For many in Afghanistan, the trend of developments has been discouraging as they remain skeptical of Pakistan's cooperation. Recently, the Afghan government has been under heavy criticisms from many top political figures for its move to sign a cooperative agreement with Pakistan for intelligence sharing. However, the Afghan government has been steadily trying to engage with Pakistan seeking the country's role for ending the long-lasting conflict in the country.

Many believe that the Taliban's military setback and failure of their spring offensive could expedite the peace efforts and convince the Pakistani government to take practical actions in helping resumption of peace negotiations between Afghanistan and the militant groups. Despite that the Taliban considerably expanded the war front to the Northern Afghanistan, the group has been unable to secure key areas or have considerable success out of the offensive. In fact, the

Taliban offensive is already considered a failure for the group as it has not met the group's expectations for sweeping victories on the ground. Taliban expected to have lightening gains from the spring offensive they launched this year.

But such a scenario did not happen, and it is unlikely for the group to be able to make remarkable victories in the months to come as the tip of their sword is broken. Many believe the Afghan army fights much efficiently and effectively despite the numerous constraints and challenges it is facing. The ANSF has prevented a last-ditch victory for the Taliban and will likely to easily keep the militants at bay in the weeks and months ahead. This is leading many stakeholders to conclude that a tangible ground victory for the Taliban is impossible, and that the group had better to engage in peace talks with the government of Afghanistan.

However, it is quite premature to view the hints from Pakistan as a green light for the country's full determination in seeking an end to the conflict in Afghanistan through persuading Taliban leaders into peace talks. However, any move that could help the process of peace negotiations with the Taliban should be welcome. It would be unrealistic if any party in Afghanistan and Pakistan expects a swift resolution of the conflict by Pakistan playing a role in the process. The nature of the Afghan conflict is not simply involving the Taliban, but, as President Ashraf Ghani has put it, it is also about the needless animosity between Afghan and Pakistani states.

Since a long time ago, there has been a shift of policy in Islamabad towards the Afghan conflict. The Pakistanis are convinced that peace can be restored in Pakistan only if there is peace and stability in the neighboring Afghanistan. Pakistani political elite and military establishment have realized that the country cannot end the militancy at home while it is being fed from a prolonged war in Afghanistan. Despite the shift of Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan in recent years, still, the diverging policies of the two governments in the past prevented the two countries from reaching a common ground on how to kick-start the peace process in Afghanistan. The two countries have a long history of distrusts in mutual relations. Now the two governments are resolutely seeking a common and shared ground over the issue, and this is a remarkable achievement for the countries. Kabul and Islamabad now need to translate the diplomatic efforts into action plans for reaching concrete gains in the peace process with the Taliban.

Afghanistan needs to keep up military pressures against the Taliban. In the meantime, it should pro-actively seek Pakistan's cooperation for resumption of peace talks with the Taliban. Much has changed in Islamabad for the good of the peace efforts in Afghanistan, and the government of Afghanistan needs to continue building up the achievements it has gained through diplomatic efforts so far.

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Afghan Women Remains Vulnerable

By Hujjatullah Zia

Aspate of violence against Afghan women, documented between August 2014 and February 2015 by UNAMA, reveals women's high vulnerability to social and domestic harms. This report recorded a total of 148 acts of violence, which indicates that some of 110 women and girls were subjected to multiple acts and forms of violence that laceration and battery were the most prevalent forms. "One woman interviewed for this report died as a result of forced self-immolation following her filing of a formal complaint of violence against her." This report has found that 13 per cent of the alleged perpetrators were females such as mothers-in-law, sisters, sisters-in-law, etc.

This report has found out that: by the time women facing violence reached institutions or informal mechanisms to report abusive conduct, they were often physically and mentally traumatized, with little or no financial and emotional support. For instance, women will be coerced to abandon their husbands' home in case of filing complaints against them. Therefore, a large number of cases will remain unreported.

A number of women resort to self-immolation on the grounds of domestic violence. As a result, an Afghan woman in an attempt to commit suicide has burned herself in the western Herat province.

According to local media, a 25-year-old woman Shabnam - who suffers a critical health condition in the Herat provincial hospital - attempted to commit suicide under domestic pressures. She was said to deliberately put an end to her life as she was married without her consent two years back and was persistently maltreated by her in-laws.

To one's unmitigated chagrin, four suicide cases, three of them women, have been registered at the provincial hospital in Herat province over the past three weeks, indicating a shocking figure. Last year's record shows that 95 people, most of them women, committed suicide in the province.

The report released by the UNAMA points out that "two recent cases sparked public outrage and widespread condemnation across Afghanistan and internationally. These were the kidnapping and subsequent gang rape of four women in the Paghman district of Kabul in October 2014, and the killing of a woman by a mob near the Shah-e-du Shamshira shrine of Kabul city over allegations of burning a copy of the holy Quran in March 2015."

The susceptibility of Afghan women to cultural and social harms is beyond doubt. Within the traditional structures, their freedom is curtailed and they are barred from playing social role in the society. In other words, the patriarchal fabric threatens their social status. Men still treat them in condescending manner and deem women an inferior creature. The rights and dignity of Afghan women were violated throughout the

history. As a result, they were considered the mere pariah during the Taliban's regime. Women had no role to play in the society other than serving as a slave in their husbands' home.

These mortal wounds inflicted on their minds and hearts did not recover, rather insults are being added to the injury with each passing day. The militancy, social abuse and domestic maltreatments still take their tolls on women's physical and mental state. Their rights are being trampled upon frequently. They receive vitriol, fractious attitudes or severe punch or their heads are banged on wall for not making the favorite tea of their husbands or not swallowing their caustic words.

Whenever violence and frequent maltreatments outrage women, they resort to self-immolation as a last remedy for their mental trauma. It will be a hell for a battered woman to live her whole life with a bad-tempered partner under the same roof. In another item, the life will be really meaningless for a woman whose devoted efforts are undervalued or her rights and dignity are violated with no sense of guilt and she is relegated to the role of a servant at home. In such a case, she will either grin and bear it or commit suicide. I do remember when an unlucky bride committed suicide through imbibing corrosive acid as a result of her husband's fractious manner few years ago. Her death was not reported to the court; rather it was resolved through mediation - any attempt to resolve a dispute through mutual agreement and reconciliation between parties carried out by the elders.

Mediation is a normal practice for resolving family disputes. UNAMA has also found that the majority of addressed cases within the case sample "52 of 80", mainly cases of battery, laceration, abuse, humiliation and intimidation, were brought to mediation. Based on this report, the main reasons behind women's preference to mediation are the alleged corruption in judicial system, abuse of power and lack of professionalism.

Such mediations are done to women's high satisfaction, especially for being swift and economic. However, the decisions sometimes are taken in the absence of any standardized approach and oversight mechanism. "In some cases, mediators performed their role in full respect of their rights and dignity of both parties, especially women. However, this was not always the case."

After all, Afghan women do not show tendency towards divorce for not missing their children rather they intend to have their disputes resolved. Moreover, mediation does not touch women's reputation in traditional areas and it is a sound way to end their disputes. So, it should be standardized and monitored so as end the issue with justice.

Hope everyone finds fair and equal access to the judicial systems irrespective of their sex, color, race, etc. Hope, a police no more dares call a female plaintiff "prostitute" and abuse of power be ended soon.

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