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

Daily Outlook AFGHANISTAN
The Leading Independent Newspaper

November 05, 2016

Political Integration is Vital for Afghanistan

As insecurity has persisted in Afghanistan, it has given rise to many other issues as well. Or it has incapacitated the government and the people to divert their attentions towards some other major issues. One among these issues is the lack of social and political integration in the country. Much of energy both by national and international authorities have been served to make reconciliation process with Taliban a success but they have not given much heed to reintegrate the society, which is more important for a lasting peace in the country.

National Unity Government (NUG) was formed with the intentions to bring about a sort of integration within the political system but the events and happenings that have followed do not seem to have served that purpose. In fact, it has not been successful enough in bringing about real integration because it tried to make different stakeholders overlook the differences instead of discussing and solving them. Therefore, the differences have once again become prominent.

Recently, the statement by first Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum clearly spoke of the difference within the leadership regarding the issue of security and ethnicity. Earlier, there were evident differences among the authorities regarding the TUTAP project. It is important to see that these differences are not only between the Presidential office and office of the Chief Executive but some of these differences are on ethnic lines.

From the issue of election reforms to the reconciliation process with Taliban, almost all the members of NUG seem to have their own views and conditions. In such a scenario it is very difficult to create unity in the government and then among the people, which is very much important for the future of the country. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society and there has to be a comprehensive process of national reintegration so as to strengthen the roots of national harmony. However, that has been neglected by the authorities in Afghanistan and they have kept on chanting the slogan of reconciliation process.

Political stability and harmony are the most important factors for the integration of the nation. Nonetheless, achieving such a position is a far cry and the present attitude of Afghan government and its Western allies are further deterring the process. Currently, many crucial decisions that were made on behalf of the government, mostly did not have the consent of all the NUG members. Moreover, there are very serious questions about the current structure and its future. Initially it was decided that the setup would continue for two years and then there would be grand Jirga where the Chief Executive Officer would be given a position similar to a prime minister in a parliamentary system. However, the preparations were not properly made for such a process, neither the parliamentary elections are on the schedule. Few even fear that the government would not be able to convene the elections because of the differences and the lack of resources, or elections would be conducted in a fraudulent way.

For the reintegration of Afghan society it is necessary that all the major social and political groups within the Afghan society must start feeling a sense of attachment with the social, political and economic lives of the country.

The reintegration of the Afghan society is only possible through a separate process – it can neither be the outcome of a miracle nor the result of the reconciliation process alone as is mostly thought. At the present scenario, even it seems improbable that the reconciliation process may reach to any sort of viable agreement with Taliban, let alone the integration of the entire nation. For reintegration to happen it is necessary to bring about some very basic structural changes within the Afghan political setup. One of the most basic of them is a true democracy within the country that has the capacity to represent different ethnic and minority groups appropriately so that heterogeneous Afghan society must be integrated within a single whole. Different ethnic and minority groups will not be integrated within the society if they are kept away from participating within the affairs of the country and the most crucial decisions of the nation. Therefore, it can be said that the reintegration process is a two-fold process. Along with making these groups the part of the ongoing reconciliation process, there have to be important political amendments within a short span of time; otherwise, neither reintegration will take place nor will reconciliation produce any fruitful outcome.

In fact, the reintegration of Afghan society is a phenomenon that is much wider than the reconciliation process. For it to happen; there has to be consistent efforts and a true democratic system assisted with socio-economic stability and cultural integration.

However, it cannot be said that reconciliation process, which is narrower in scope, is totally ineffective on the Afghanistan's reintegration. Rather, at the moment, it is one of the factors that will have a very important influence on the future of reintegration process in Afghanistan but it is important that the process must be led keeping the same concept in mind. Integrating all the important factions of Afghan society within the ongoing reconciliation process will definitely result in a promising episode in the reintegration of Afghan society.

Gender Discrimination

By Hujjatullah Zia

Afghan women suffered under cultural restrictions and public traditions. They were left at the mercy of discriminations on the grounds of their sex and deemed an inferior creature. Their rights and dignity were violated in one way or another. Afghan women underwent mental and physical tortures and fell victim to "honor killings". Women were considered to live within the four walls. A woman who denied the subjugation of her husband was called "brazen" in our culture and this view still hold sway in rural areas.

The culture of "Pashtunwalai" still prevails in the villages. Based on this culture, women were chained within parochial mindsets and their human rights were trampled upon. Pashtunwalai is a tribal council in which tribal elders play the role of the state and judges.

The words of tribal elders were preferred not only to the state law but also to religious sharia. For instance, the desert court and flagellating or stoning women were finalized by tribal elders without regard to the country's law. In short, a strong patriarchal system, in which radical worldview is deeply embedded, ruled the villages and lingers up to now. In Pashtunwalai tradition, radical mentalities and personal narration of religious texts, regarding women, were imposed on religious sharia and implanted in the areas.

The culture, however, was eroded within reformist regimes, mainly during the Amanullah Khan's reformations, which was supported by the modern view of Mahmud Tarzi. King Amanullah Khan, who was deeply impressed by European development, sought to modernize the traditional society of Afghanistan overnight.

He intended to sow the seeds of secularism and break the chains of traditionalism from the feet of Afghan women. He banned burqa (a head-to-toe covering for women with meshes at the front) and declared wearing suit for men as a compulsion. The police were standing at the crossroads to execute the King's decree. He intended to empower women and protect her rights and dignity under modern view.

However, his sudden and fast movement encountered resistance from the public. The British Empire and some traditional individuals propagandized against his regime to spark off the public sensations. The fact is that an overnight modernization for a society, in which patriarchal system ruled for years, was not digestible and a public protest seemed normal. The rumors and propagandas of the opponents catalyzed the chaos and hatred against the regime.

The regime of the Taliban radicalized the traditions more than ever before. In another term, the restrictions on women were deepened and they were confined within more fundamental views. I remember vividly, when the women, who eloped with the men of their choice, were flagellated painfully in Ghazni province. Women were not allowed to go out of home without a male chaperon and beauty parlors were closed. In Taliban's view, women were supposed to live under the subjugation of men and they were not allowed to be involved in social, political and economic activities.

Meanwhile, they claimed to treat women based on Islamic sharia while their interpretation of religious texts was highly radical. So, women were discriminated on the basis of their sex. In post-Taliban Afghanistan, the rights and liberty of men and women were declared equal under the new Constitution and one is not to be discriminated on the grounds of his/her race, sex, beliefs, etc.

The United Nation's Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are held in respect within the new constitution, approved in 2014. It is also stated that, "Any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law." Constitutionally, men and women are entitled to enjoy their rights and freedoms and take active part in social, political and economic arena.

There seem gradual changes in urban culture and in public attitude towards women. In addition, women were freed from the clutches of radical traditions, to some extent, in cities and play key role in political and cultural fields. However, women still encounter challenges and their social activities are hampered by traditional restrictions. Women are still left at the mercy of Pashtunwalai, mainly in the Taliban dominated areas. Desert courts and stoning women in tribal belts are reported once in a while.

Contrary to the constitution, women are discriminated in social life. Reportedly, women suffer from domestic and social violence and their freedoms are curtailed to a great extent. After all, the Taliban insurgents menace the life of Afghan women and disregard their human rights. Female politicians, including MPs, live a fearful life and some girls and women lose their lives in terrorist attacks.

Thus, Afghanistan is not yet a safe place for girls and women. To alleviate the pain and sufferings of Afghan women and protect their rights, the government will have to implement the law strictly and does not allow one to violate their rights with impunity. Similarly, there is a need for cultural activities to spread awareness and the clergy are to enlighten the rights and dignity of women, based on Islamic tenets and open approach, to the public. It is hoped that Afghan women will no more fall victim to gender discriminations.

Hujjattullah Zia is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at zia_hujjat@yahoo.com

How Much Europe Do Europeans Need?

By Joschka Fischer

In his final address to the European Parliament in 1995, then-French President François Mitterrand, whose failing health was evident to all, found the following indelible words to characterize Europe's great scourge: "Le nationalisme, c'est la guerre!"

Nationalism and war were the defining experiences of Mitterrand's political career, and he was referring not only to the dreadful past – the first half of the twentieth century, with its two World Wars, dictatorships, and the Holocaust. He viewed nationalism as the greatest future threat to European peace, democracy, and security.

Although nationalist war was tearing apart Yugoslavia at the time, few of those who listened to Mitterrand in Strasbourg that day could have imagined that, 21 years later, nationalism would be experiencing a Europe-wide revival. But nationalist politicians whose declared goal is to destroy Europe's unity and peaceful integration have now won in major democratic elections and referenda.

The United Kingdom's decision in June to leave the European Union marked a momentary climax for resurgent nationalism, but one can also see it on the march in Hungary, Poland, and France, where Marine Le Pen and her far-right National Front have been gaining strength in the run-up to next year's presidential election. How could it have come to this, given Europe's first-hand experience with nationalism's destructive power in the twentieth century, when it caused millions of deaths and devastated the entire continent?

For starters, the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing global recession are widely, and justifiably, seen as a massive failure on the part of the "establishment." Anti-elite sentiment continues to erode intra-European solidarity and mutual trust, and the EU has become mired in a prolonged bout of slow growth and high unemployment.

Across the West, a general feeling of decline has taken hold, owing to the shift in global wealth and power toward Asia. The United States has withdrawn geopolitically, while Russia has revived its great-power ambitions to challenge Western hegemony and values. Worldwide, there is growing discontent with globalization, digitization, and free trade, accompanied by a slow shift toward protectionism. Europeans, in particular, seem to have forgotten that protectionism and nationalism are inextricably linked – one cannot be had without the other.

Finally, there is a generalized fear of the unknown, as many countries confront issues relating to inflows of foreigners – whether refugees or migrants – and internal changes brought about by the increasing economic and political empowerment of women and minorities. These developments, which have coincided with the larger-scale transformations and ruptures in Europe that began in 1989, have triggered fears that establishment political parties and democratic institutions have failed to address.

As always, when fear runs rampant in Europe, people seek salvation in nationalism, isolationism, ethnic homogeneity, and nostalgia – the "good old days," when supposedly all was well in the world. Never mind that the bloody, chaotic past was anything but perfect. Nationalist leaders and their supporters today are living in a "post-empirical" reality, where the truth and experience have no purchase.

All of this reflects a profound change in how Europeans see themselves. After two World Wars and during the Cold War, European integration was a no-brainer. But the shared understanding that unity delivers peace, prosperity, and democracy has been weakened over time by persistent crises, and it could now be lost completely unless it is reinforced by a forward-looking message.

It is absurd to think that Europe's historic nation-states are an answer to the globalized political, economic, and technological realities of the twenty-first century. If Europeans believe that, then they must be willing to pay the price for less integration, in the form of declining prospects and new dependencies. The most important global decisions in this century will not be made democratically in Europe, but unilaterally in China or elsewhere.

Europe's languages and cultures have a long history. But, lest we forget, its nation-states are a more recent development, especially outside of Western Europe. It would be a grave mistake to think that they represent Europe's "end of history." On the contrary, if the nation-state model wins out over integration, Europeans will pay a high price in this century. How European countries fare in the future is a question that can be answered only collectively, not on the basis of some individually defined national interest, as in the nineteenth century.

Moreover, with Russia, Turkey, the Middle East, and Africa nearby, Europe lives in a difficult and challenging neighborhood. It does not enjoy the American luxury of having its security guaranteed by geography. Rather, its safety and prosperity must constantly be defended through politics, which is necessarily a joint effort.

The central question for Europe's future is how much power the EU needs in order to guarantee peace and security for its citizens. That, too, can be addressed only collectively. What is already clear is that Europeans will need not just more Europe, but also a different and more powerful Europe.

(Courtesy Project Syndicate)

Joschka Fischer, Germany's foreign minister and vice chancellor from 1998 to 2005, was a leader of the German Green Party for almost 20 years.