

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



October 11, 2018

Political Behaviour and Voting Pattern in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, throughout history, has held different types of democratic elections, from a Loya Jirga to choose the King in the 1700s, the 2010 Parliamentary Elections through which the Wolesi Jirga (Lower House) members were elected, to the 2014 Presidential Elections through which the new Afghan President was elected. However, the state of democracy and issue-based politics has fluctuated over the years. In 1949, a political liberalization movement resulted in relaxed media censorship, and the birth of opposition groups. According to analysts, the election in 1949, 'Liberal Parliament' was distinctly less controlled than ever before. A government crackdown in the early 1950s however, ended liberalization and more conservative politics emerged. Amidst occupation, and civil war, progress in the development of electoral systems stagnated, political parties were seen as dangerous, and decision-making within an Islamic Framework was favored.

In the last years, the 2001 Bonn Agreement paved the way for a new Constitution, new electoral law, and five elections. While these instances of reform and process represent electoral progress, there have also been innumerable complaints of insecurity, violence, intimidation, and fraud, which have raised doubts about the legitimacy and power of the current electoral system.

Thus, political participation and democratic culture in Afghanistan as a concept is one that is ridden with grievances and fears of isolation that fuels the struggle for central power by different ethnic groups. As a result, this struggle negatively affects electoral activities in the area of malpractices like thuggery, rigging and other political electoral violence, which is replete in party politics in Afghanistan. Democratic culture of any country to a large extent determines their political participation. A culture of democracy must reflect the norms and values that place a premium on the freedom of individuals.

Based on the historical background of democratic elections in Afghanistan, three main propositions on voting behavior are identified to have included Sociological Approach; party identification model and rational choice.

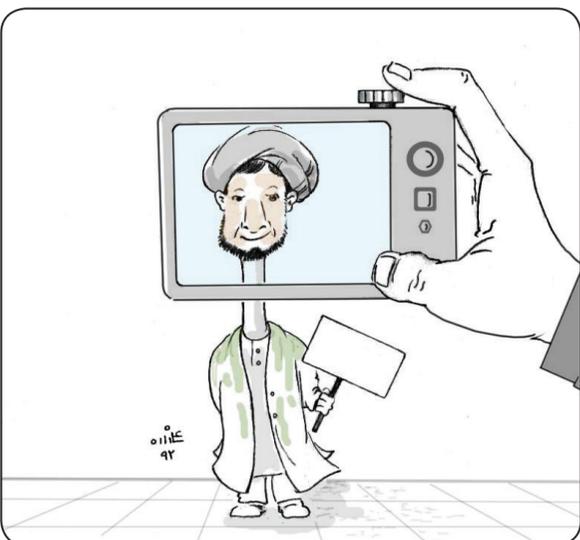
The sociological model emphasizes on voting behavior as a result of impact of social structure suggesting that social group membership influence voting behavior of the Afghans. This is visible in Afghan context where belonging to a religious group or ethnic group or certain geographical area determines voters' behavior in an election. Belonging to a particular social group automatically qualifies a candidate to receive votes of such members of that group. In particular, presidential and National Assembly elections in Afghanistan are understood along that line.

The party identification approach is a situation where partisanship is highly stable over time. Here, voters are less likely to make distinctions between their vote choice and partisan dispositions. This situation is also applicable within Afghanistan context where some sections of the population became attached to a given political party irrespective of the candidate as a result of their partisan position towards that particular party.

The rational choice approach lays much emphasis on voters' choice of their candidates in an election based on issues and policy design of the political parties. The choice here is rational. This situation, however, is not obtainable in Afghan system except to a smaller extent and even this one; is found among elites who chose their party or candidates due to the ethnic, religion, economic or political benefits they will gain from voting such candidates. But, common voter in Afghan democracy has no rationality in choice as they tend to vote according to sentiments.

The role played by ethnicity and religion in democratization process in Afghanistan is harmful to the system. Social scholars argue that, the tremendous effects of ethnic and religious crises faced by Afghanistan in the current phase of democratization are the outcome of the elite's manipulation of ethnic and religious identity. This has been associated with the problems of historical configuration of the country, the nature of political class and the manner in which they struggle. This has led to an exclusive nature of the politics of ethnic and religious identity among different groups in the country. This has affected the political behavior of the electorates to align themselves with ethnic and religious political parties. This in return affects voting pattern during any elections whether Presidential, National Assembly, or Local Councils elections.

In summary, the Afghan democratic process is that of political behavior and voting pattern where electorates vote for political leaders on the ground of patrimonial and primordial attachment instead of those candidates that can improve their living condition and develop the country through good governance.



Afghanistan's Role in the Belt and Road Initiative (Part 1)

By: Hujjatullah Zia

Seeking to revitalize the Ancient Silk Road, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in late 2013 on his visit to Central Asia and Southeast Asia. The initiative calls for constructing a unified domestic and international market through building infrastructure, extending trade and enhancing cultural exchanges. More than 100 countries and international organizations have joined this initiative and 86 countries, including Afghanistan, have signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China so far.

It is self-evident that the megaproject of BRI carries much significance for Afghanistan, which intends to regain its historical position as an "Asian transit and trade roundabout" connecting South Asia to Central Asia and East Asia to West Asia. That is, Afghanistan is situated at the heart of Asia and its provinces of Bamyan, Balkh, Kabul, Herat and Kandahar formed some of the key Silk Road passages through which business, culture, religions and syncretic philosophies flowed to Eurasia. To promote transnational projects, Kabul government initiated the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) in 2005 the seventh meeting of which entitled "Deepening Connectivity and Expanding Trade through Investment in Infrastructure and Improving Synergy" was held in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, last year. Since October 2016, Afghan officials showed interest in joining the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project - in which more than \$60 billion has been invested so far - that can support Afghanistan to reinforce its trade across the region. Afghanistan also became a permanent member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2017. According to Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai, "Economic development process along the Silk Road will reshape the international development order that has been centered in our region and carried great significance for human development in the 21st century".

In the 12th Silk Road Mayors Forum, hosted by Kabul last year, Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani said that Afghan nation and state were determined to regain their country's former status as the "center of the Asian crossroads" despite the ongoing challenges and urged provincial mayors to network with their Silk Road counterparts. Mayors, diplomats, scholars and business leaders from the Silk Road countries discussed the civilization of the Silk Road era, regional cooperation and partnership and their shared interests in the forum. Hence, Afghan officials show keen interest in the BRI.

Speaking in the opening ceremony of 5th China-South Asia Expo in Kunming on June 14, Afghan second deputy Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Haji Muhammad Mohaqiq said that China is the

largest foreign investor in Afghanistan and praised China for its effective role in trade and investment in the country since 2001.

The year 2016 was very productive for China and Afghanistan for three main reasons: First, MoU on the BRI was signed between Kabul and Beijing; second, the first Chinese cargo train carrying goods valued at \$20 million arrived in the northern Afghan port city of Hairatan after about two weeks of journey via Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This 84-car train which traveled 3,000-kilometer rail line departed from Chinese port city of Haimen near Shanghai. Planning for a transit schedule of two trains per month, China will export textiles, electronic products and construction material to Afghanistan. Third, Kabul-Urumqi direct flight was resumed - after being closed at the end of 2012 - and there is a flight every once in a week from Kabul to Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, and vice versa cutting travel time between the two cities from 13 hours to 3 hours.

Within the past several years, China-Afghan officials floated the idea of opening up Wakhan Corridor, a barren panhandle of Badkshsh province in the far northeast of Afghanistan bordering China's Xinjiang region. This mountainous 2000-year-old caravan route - sandwiched between China, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan and acted as a buffer between the Russian Empire and British Empire in 19th century - is about 350 km long and 13-65 km wide. Nazif Shahrani points out in "The Kirgiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation of Closed Frontiers and War" that Wakhan Corridor was one of the key routes for merchants and traders between India, China and cities like Bactria and Bukhara in modern-day Afghanistan and Central Asia until the downfall of Mughal Empire in India. Despite the past political upheaval, Wakhan remained unscathed and a large portion of Wakhan residents are unaware of the Taliban's regime (1996 - 2001) and US invasion in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding this fact, Sino-Afghan trade passes through a third country and the initiative to open a direct border between Afghanistan and China yet to emerge. Opening Wakhan Corridor through building highway for direct bilateral trade between the two countries will be mutually beneficial for both sides. There are some railway track projects, which will contribute to regional connectivity, topping the priority list of Kabul government: Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, the power project for Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000), and 500 KW power transmission line of Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TUTAP).

Afghanistan has huge potential energy. It is estimated to have the potential for producing 223,000 MW of solar energy, 23,000 MW hydropower energy and 68,000 MW of wind energy.

To be continued...

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Taliban Vows To Disrupt the Upcoming Election

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Last Monday, the Taliban militants broke their silence on the upcoming parliamentary elections, warning that they would seek to disrupt the vote 20 election. While in past elections, the Taliban immediately issued warnings that they would disrupt the contests and targeted voters and candidates. The new stance of Taliban is simultaneous as Washington has once again pressed Islamabad to force the Taliban leaders in Pakistan into entering in peace talks with the government Kabul. The US Central Command chief was quoted as asking Pakistan to de-link the Taliban leaders...

Meanwhile, the Taliban's warning came as US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad met Afghan leaders to discuss ways of ending the 17-year-old war in the country. The warning was issued just hours after Khalilzad met President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah. Khalilzad is on a 10-day swing through the region, now in Pakistan then the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to drum up support for US-Taliban negotiations.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's office said in a statement that Khalilzad met with the president and other top leaders to discuss "an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process." Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah also welcomed the visit by Afghanistan-born Khalilzad in televised remarks on Monday. "We believe if more attention is paid to the peace process, there will be a good chance of success." On the contrary, Zahid Hussain, a Pakistani defense analyst and author of two books on militancy in the region, earlier said the appointment of Khalilzad as a special adviser in Afghanistan could complicate his job. "He has been very critical of Pakistan in the past and his appointment will not help move things forward." Claiming that the elections are conspiracies of the west and the United States, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement on that the militants would pull no punches to disrupt the fake process. "The Islamic Emirate instructs all its Mujahidin to halt this American led process throughout the country by creating severe obstacles for it, while taking extensive and intensive care of civilian Afghan lives and their properties." "People who are trying to help in holding this process successfully should be targeted and no stone should be left unturned for the prevention and failure" of the election, Mujahid said. Elsewhere in the statement, Mujahid described the polls as a "malicious American conspiracy" against Afghanistan.

They also warn candidates that their actions are only empowering the American-led conspiracy. The Taliban tells candidates that "our creed, country" and "people" cannot "be served under the shadow of foreign occupying forces." "Instead, your nomination and success directly supports the vicious objectives of American invaders by legitimizing their bogus procedures and conspiracies, which is indeed supporting them in killing the pious Muslims and destroy-

ing the country by extending the ongoing war," the Taliban says. "Therefore you should refrain from participating in this process due to your Afghan identity and perception."

The Taliban exaggerates the amount of territory under its control, claiming that "more than half of the country" is currently under its command while it has "strong influence in the remaining areas." It is said that the group does currently contest or control more than half of the country, but much of this terrain isn't under its total dominion. The Taliban argues that given its broad territorial presence, the elections will be held "only in provincial centers," but erroneously adds that the "activities of election and complaints commission will be directly monitored by the American ambassador and the final lists of candidates will be prepared by him."

On the contrary, the government and election commission are trying hard to ensure people and political parties that everything will be good and a timely election with all standards will be held in a secure atmosphere. The deputy spokesman for the Ministry of Interior, Nusrat Rahimi, told reporters last week that "54 thousand defense and security forces are assigned to secure 5,100 polling centers which included 21,000 polling stations on Election Day."

The IEC officials also ensure the transparency of the upcoming election process. "Using the biometric system in the Election Day is imminent," Hafizullah Hashemi, a member of IEC said. There were many criticisms over the training process of electoral employees to use the biometric technology, but IEC officials emphasize that about 2000 people have been trained so far. "The transferring process of biometric devices has been started to Nooristan, Urozgan, Badkshsh, Faryab, Ghor and Paktia," Hashemi added. Overall, 22,000 biometric units received yet and has started sending them to provinces. The commission is installing local languages into the devices before sending them to provinces. The biometric units would be installed at more than 5,000 polling centers across the country on Election Day.

Overall, the government and election commission should farther consider all these threats before the election day reaches. They need to hold comprehensive dialogues with the political parties, civil society figures, tribal elders and other influential people to collect their viewpoints on how to protect the people and ensure holding a successful election. Otherwise, the Taliban warning could further raise the alarm about election security as more than 2,000 polling sites have already been shut because of violence. In fact, government and election commissions are on eve of a national and international exams; In order to pass it successfully there are needs for tens and thousands of security forces to be deployed and protect the election process and people throughout the country.

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