

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

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**Marginalized Groups:
Political Inclusion as
A National Priority**

There is growing awareness that the inclusion of marginalized groups in post-conflict political settlements is important to ensure a sustainable exit from conflict. Increasing political inclusion is a cross cutting objective for the GoIRA. Democracy is more likely to develop and sustain when all segments of a society are free to participate and influence political outcomes without suffering bias or reprisal. However, in many new and emerging democracies, large portions of the population are excluded from politics based on their ethnicity, religion, age, disability, gender or sexual orientation. Afghanistan is not an exception in this respect and requires increasing the participation of marginalized groups so they can have a voice in the political process and achieve a greater level of equality, as understanding political participation is considered a fundamental means of addressing the social and economic inequities associated with marginalization.

Sikhs and Hindus as the most marginalized religious groups

Afghan Sikhs and Hindus religious groups have been politically and socially marginalized during the different periods of the history of Afghanistan. After the 1990s civil war in Afghanistan majority of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs left the country. Due to intense historical marginalization they never had a representative in the Wolesi Jirga, the Lower house, of the National Parliament of Afghanistan and only they had one representative in the upper House of the National Parliament.

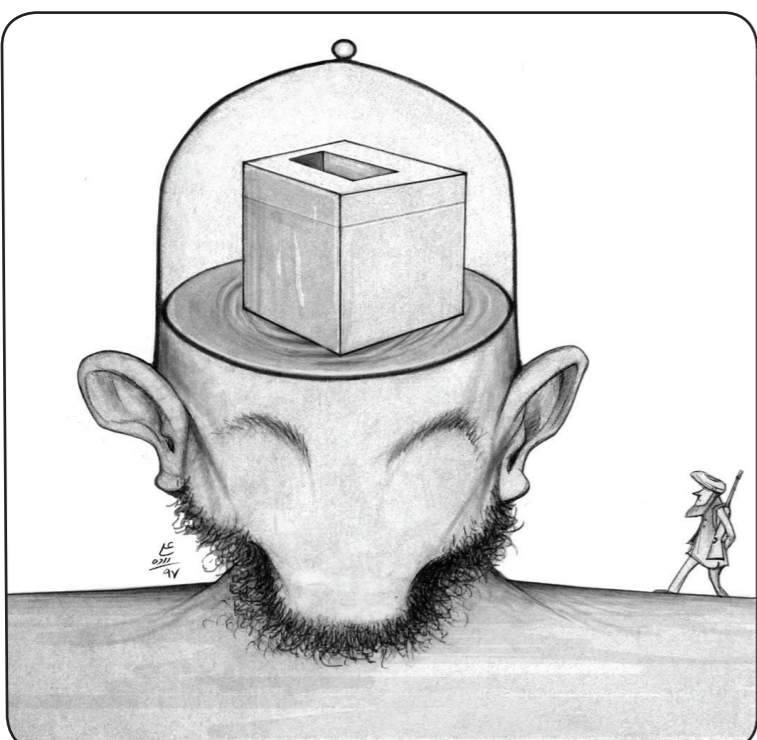
The Only Candidate

Avtar Singh Khalsa, who was killed along with at least 18 other people, mostly Hindus and Sikhs, on July 01, 2018 in a blast by a suicide bomber in the eastern city of Jalalabad, was the only Sikh and Hindu candidate for Afghanistan Parliamentary elections. Now Avtar Singh's son Narinder Singh is the sole candidate for the forthcoming Afghan Parliamentary elections. He is the only candidate from the seat reserved for a Sikh or Hindu in the Afghan legislature. His candidacy has become the center of attention across Afghanistan. His efforts are celebrated as a sign of the minority group's resilience and dedication to the country despite the harsh times.

Afghans including the Afghan government shall recognize that various segments of the population experience marginalization differently, and shall ensure democracy empowers all Afghan citizens. Understanding the nature and depth of marginalization is the first step toward combatting it in any society.

However, it is unlikely that any meaningful reforms in state-ethnic minority relations will take place without concerted agitation, mobilization and associational pressures by ethnic minority leaders and communities. The key lesson is the critical role which ethnic minority activists and associations can play in pressing the claims of their vulnerable communities before the court of domestic and international opinion. By his dogged advocacy they can succeed in mobilizing official and unofficial, as well as domestic and international, support for ethnic minority rights in the country. Indeed, the Afghan Hindu and Sikhs minority religious groups' case has become the paradigm of ethnic minority mobilization in Afghanistan.

Historically the Afghan Sikhs and Hindus have experienced different forms of marginalization in the country. As it is the first time that they have a candidate in the Afghan National Parliamentary elections, it is hoped that this move of the Afghan government, giving a reserved seat for a Sikh or Hindu in the Afghan legislature, to be the start of a new phase in the life of the Afghan Sikhs and Hindus and open a new chapter of opportunities and inclusion of the marginalized groups in the Afghan society.

**Afghanistan's Role in the Belt and Road Initiative (Part 2)**

By: Hujjatullah Zia

Road of Dialogue:

Cultural contacts and people-to-people exchanges are likely to be the lasting legacy of the ancient Silk Road; therefore, it has been termed as the "Road of Dialogue" in the UNESCO Plan. To have a successful negotiation, traders had to learn the languages and traditions of the countries they traveled through. A number of travelers are believed to venture onto the Silk Road to have cultural interaction and intellectual exchanges. The dissemination of arts, science, literature, crafts, and technologies is the main reason behind the development and influences of languages, religions and cultures. For instance, the technique of making paper and development of printing press technology were one of the most technical advances propagated nationwide by the Silk Road. In terms of religion, Hinduism and Islam were introduced to Indonesia and Malaysia and Buddhism entered China by Silk Road traders. Buddhism art, shrines and sculptures are being found in Afghan provinces of Bamyan and Logar and Chinese provinces of Sichuan and Gansu. Giant Buddha and Mount Emei Temple in Leshan City, Sichuan province, where I visited few months back, clearly show the arts of Buddhism. I also had a recent visit to Mogao Caves - home to some of the biggest and most complete ancient works of Buddhism in the world - in Gansu province, named the sister city of Bamyan.

Cultural and people-to-people exchanges, reiterated by Chinese officials, are highly significant in modern era. Since we live in "the global village", all nations need to have not only material exchanges but also cultural and intellectual interaction. So, the BRI will strengthen regional and global exchanges and bring peoples of different races, religions and ethnicities closer to one another.

Both China and Afghanistan have 5,000-year-old history with rich culture. To strengthen the spirit of brotherhood, the two nations need to deepen cultural interaction and heart-to-heart exchanges. Besides facilitating trade, the Silk Road will pave the way for seeking common grounds among nations, including the two neighboring countries China and Afghanistan. Further sharing, exchanges, and integration between Sino-Afghan nations will, in addition to cementing trade connections, promote mutual understanding and trust and enhance friendly relations.

Challenges:

Despite the strong bilateral ties between China and Afghanistan in terms of trade and investment, there are two major setbacks which interrupt the flow of trade:

(1) Insecurity: The Sino-Afghan close economic ties require a peaceful Afghanistan. But the protracted war in Afghanistan will wreak havoc on the country's economy and impede trade and investment. For instance, Beijing-based China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC), leading a state-backed consortium, won the rights in 2007 to extract copper from Mes Aynak - one of the world's largest untapped deposits and a 5,000-year-old archeological site in Afghan province of Logar containing an estimated 12.5 million tons of copper. The company bid over three billion dollars and promised to provide roads, railway and 400-mega-watt electricity plant for the district, where the mine is located. However, Chinese engineers stalled their work following a series of rocket attacks in 2012 and 2013. Meanwhile, land mines left by the Soviet Union in 1980s and planted by the Taliban fighters pose further threat. In short, instability is one of the main roadblocks to trade and investment in Afghanistan to be reckoned with.

It is self-explanatory that Afghan nation has paid great sacrifice and Afghan soldiers are fighting in the frontline to put an end to the ongoing conflict. Although the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014 left Afghan soldiers in the lurch, it could not weaken the strong-willed soldiers' resolve in their mission. In spite of heavy casualties to

the contrary, Afghan military forces could play an essential role in counter-insurgency.

Simultaneously, Kabul government established High Peace Council (HPC) in 2010 to persuade the Taliban to stop violence and resolve the issue through negotiation. Afghan President has constantly called warring parties, mainly the Taliban, to join peace process, which was refused by the Taliban's leadership. Furthermore, the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) comprises Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and the United States set up in January 2016 to find a political solution to the Afghan conflict, but it yet to bear the desired result.

Afghan officials have always viewed China as a close friend due to its concerted efforts to broker peace talks and maintain neighborly relations. The goodwill and constructive role of China regarding Afghanistan is undeniable. For instance, Beijing hosted the first China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue on 26 December 2017 with a view to strengthening trilateral trust, deepening cooperation based on the Five Principles of peaceful coexistence and advocating Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace talks. This dialogue was held with the efforts of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who made trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan to arrange the dialogue.

The fact is that Kabul government is not able to deal with terrorism by itself, in turn, it welcomes the positive role of all states, mainly its historical neighbor China. To maintain regional peace and stability, Kabul urges the entire region to play its role in combating terrorism and support Afghanistan in this regard - this will be the only panacea for the ongoing challenges not only in Afghanistan but across the region.

(2) Absence of direct roadway: Based on interviews I had with Afghan traders who attended the 5th China-South Asia Expo, in which Afghanistan participated as a theme country, the railroad connecting China and Afghanistan through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has two problems: First, it is too long and import-export via such a long route will not only take much time but also cost an arm and a leg. Second, the tankers shipping Chinese goods to Afghanistan return back without carrying goods from other side and importing goods from Afghanistan does not take place, which is against the win-win result. Since Afghanistan and China share land border, it is hoped that the two sides will found a direct railroad in the future so that both could enjoy the fruit of easy and cheap shipment.

Conclusion:

Generally speaking, the BRI put forward by Chinese President plays an instrumental role in global trade and transit. In addition to boosting connectivity and commercial activities, this megaproject will also enhance cultural contact and people-to-people interaction.

Afghanistan is one of the states which seeks to contribute to this significant project through aligning its economic activities in the frame of BRI so that it could participate in regional cooperation and regain its position as "center of the Asian crossroads". The geopolitical exclusiveness, historical relics, and cultural richness of Afghanistan are of great importance for the BRI to come to fruition. Thus, the role of Afghanistan should not be downplayed.

Although instability is an obstacle before economic development in Afghanistan, it will be resolved through regional and global participation in combating terrorism and supporting Afghan soldiers who are fighting in the frontline. Afghanistan's neighboring countries and international allies are expected to take more concrete steps in eliminating terrorism. The Sino-Afghan friendly relation will catalyze bilateral trade and contribute to regional cooperation. That is, Kabul government seeks to strengthen a friendly bond with the world in general and with China in particular and will play its role constructively in regional and global issues, including the BRI.

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Winning the War on Tuberculosis

By: Ibrahim Assane Mayaki

The world is finally waking up to the threat posed by one of the most overlooked diseases of our time. Last month, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) hosted the first-ever high-level meeting on tuberculosis (TB) to explore options for international eradication efforts. But, as welcome as this new global focus is, the fact remains that the road to beating TB begins in Africa.

Simply put, TB remains one of the deadliest epidemics in Africa today, and one-quarter of all TB deaths worldwide occur there. In 2016, some 417,000 people on the continent succumbed to the disease. Recent outbreaks of multidrug-resistant TB and extensively drug-resistant TB in South Africa, Mozambique, and Ghana could push the annual death toll even higher. These pockets of the bacterium, now completely immune to antimicrobial treatment, mean that the challenge of global eradication has become even more daunting.

Part of the reason for TB's persistence is the vulnerability of the populations it infects. For starters, TB is among the leading killers of HIV-positive people, claiming some 40% of those who die from HIV. This poses dangers for non-HIV patients as well, especially those with suppressed immune systems, young children, and infants.

Eradication is also difficult because TB is a highly contagious airborne bacterium; people living and working in close quarters - such as miners, prisoners, migrants, and refugees - suffer the highest rates of infection. Finally, because TB prevalence is closely linked to poverty and social marginalization, reaching those most at risk is not always easy.

Infectious diseases have no borders, and as African countries deepen their trade ties and intra-Africa migration grows, the threat of regional pandemics will only increase. This makes it all the more critical that Africa begin developing a multi-sector, integrated approach to containing, controlling, and eventually eradicating public-health challenges like TB. To this end, one approach that African governments could emulate is the TB management strategy in place for the continent's mining sector, an inter-agency plan devised in 2014 by the Southern African Development Community. Although this so-called "harmonized" approach

applies to a commercial industry, its focus on coordinating with the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) - African Union states grouped for economic integration - could serve as a model for more effective collective action on TB containment.

But before a specific framework can be agreed upon, three issues require urgent attention. First, African health-care planners and disease specialists must set country, regional, and local containment targets. For example, setting goals for reductions in new TB infections would enable health officials to measure more accurately the impact of their strategies. Moreover, to end TB completely, Africa will need new and sustained financial commitments from the public and private sectors. And, finally, disease-control strategies must be designed to support the economic and health-care priorities of the RECs. At the moment, most state and regional health-care systems lack funding and human resources. African policymakers must therefore develop systems for prevention, diagnosis, and care that help governments share the disease burden and ensure that treatment protocols are consistent across regions.

To be sure, there are some positive trends in the fight against TB. Global infection rates are falling by about 2% annually, and even African countries hit by TB still managed a 4% decline in infections from 2013 to 2017. And, with organizations like the World Health Organization and the African Union beginning to produce roadmaps for TB eradication, it is clear that momentum is steadily building. Still, sustaining this progress in Africa will require significant regional coordination, not to mention a lot more money. Most vaccines and medications are currently too expensive for the majority of Africans. But even those lucky enough to obtain treatment - usually a six- to eight-month course of powerful antibiotics - still face a 20% chance of relapse.

The goal of eradicating TB is within reach; the recent gathering at the UNGA marked a critical turning point in the world's war on the disease. But even as commitments are made and declarations signed, we must remember that in Africa, the battle is far from over.

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