

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

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Afghanistan: Democracy and Political Participation

Public participation in Afghanistan requires that people be at the center of decision-making processes. Therefore, this is an important element of democracy because 'rule by the people' is the underlying and founding principle of democracy. Thus, involving people in making decisions that concern their lives is a distinguishing feature of democratic societies. Participatory democracy, therefore, requires active and meaningful engagement of Afghan citizens in public affairs. It is a principle universally accepted as requisite for a just society.

Thus, participation in public affairs is important in another respect. It builds people's abilities to hold authorities to account for the implementation of decisions and actions agreed upon. It is in this respect that the Constitution of Afghanistan on Human and Peoples' Rights recognizes the importance of participation in public affairs as an essential element of democracy.

The quest to promote participatory democracy and to make participation an important principle in the governance of public affairs has been an important theme in debates on governance in Afghanistan. Because of this, and in recognition of protracted struggles for democratic reforms, article 50 in Afghanistan's new constitution has included democracy and participation of the people among the values and principles of governance, which bind all state organs and institutions as well as state officials. In assessing the quality of democracy in Afghanistan, there are questions whether successive governments have consistently upheld the rule of law, allowed citizens to freely elect their leaders, and whether or not people have been making political choices without hindrance. Thus, transition to democracy implies progress in both opening up decision-making processes to active participation of the people, as well as enhancing the accountability of governments to their citizens. This transition involves developing a culture of constitutionalism and accountability to citizens.

Giving people freedom to make political choices, especially in elections, plays an important role in consolidating democracy. This freedom of choice enables them to put in place an accountable and responsive government whose mandate is renewed periodically – depending on the extent to which it has governed in line with the aspirations of the people. Thus, if the elected government applies the law without discrimination, citizens obey the law conscientiously. When the government however applies the law in an inconsistent manner, citizens tend to disconnect from the government. The distance between government and society widens in tandem with the failure of government to account to society and abide by the founding principle of democracy, rule by the people.

The 2004 constitution provides for a break from the past; it charts the path for a new beginning in many ways. It reduces presidential powers, creates a new structure of governance and provides specifically for a devolved system of government where people effectively participate in the governance of their devolved units. In spite of this promise for a new beginning, it did not take long for old habits to creep back. Political parties and alliances continued to form along the old lines of ethnicity and regions. And Parliament itself introduced weak laws to govern the transition to the new beginning.

This shows that the interplay of ethnicity and struggles over executive power has constrained people's participation and democratic transition in general. This interplay revolves around the capture and retention of the over-centralized executive or the presidency. The new constitution has addressed some of these challenges by establishing strong checks on the powers of the executive and by establishing two levels of government: national and local governments. However, the electoral system remains unaltered. The devolved system of government is likely to inherit the very challenges that the constitution is seeking to address, if implementation does not effectively reflect the spirit and letter of the constitution.

China's Rural Development – A Model for Afghanistan

By: Hujjatullah Zia

Chinese officials are making concerted efforts to build a moderately prosperous society through alleviating poverty and promoting the country's economy. All the Chinese enjoy the fruit of their country's development and live an affluent life. Protecting cultural sites and attracting foreign and domestic tourists are one of the main factors behind the economic development of China. Having a trip to Jincheng, in the southeast of Shanxi province, along with media delegation from South and Southeast Asia, I have been highly impressed by the historical sites and economic development of this city.

Jincheng, which is home to 2.33 million people, is known as an international garden city, a national landscape garden city and a city of intangible cultural heritage.

China has relocated a large number of households in some villages in Jincheng city and created jobs for them. For example, we visited Huangcheng village, which is home to 351 households and 917 people. The house-owner was relocated to a new home in the aftermath of the government's revitalization project. Previously, he, along with other villagers, lived in Royal Minister's Castle, which was changed into tourist scenic spot by the local government. Following the relocation project, the village could attract more tourists and a large number of the residents serve as tourist guides in the area. Since this city is very rich in coal, some residents also work in coal mine industries. Similarly, pharmaceutical factories are also a source of income for the residents of the village. In short, every resident is employed, every household is sheltered and holds shares and the per capita income is 50,000 yuan in this village.

There are 22 enterprises in Huangcheng village, with the total assets of 8 billion yuan and close to 6,000 employees. There are also three major industrial sectors such as coal, tourism and hi-tech industries, of which tourism, pharmaceutical and wind industries are the key transformation industries. The village is able to achieve the annual sales revenue of 2 billion yuan and pay taxes of 400 million yuan.

To view this province from the historical perspective, Shanxi is reputed as "the birthplace of the 5,000-year-old civilization" for nurturing countless number of ancient cultural human sites. With many cultural relics, Shanxi also has 452 state-level key cultural relics protection units, ranking first across China. In Shanxi, the Ancient City of Pingyao, Yungang Grottoes and Mount Wutai are popular both in China and outside. Likewise, 120 types of minerals are found in

Shanxi. To cut the long story short, Shanxi firmly implements the strategy of innovation-driven transformation and upgrading, deepens the reform and opening-up, step up the development of strategic emerging industries, promotes green and low-carbon utilization of coal, intensifies environmental protection and ecological construction, focuses on improving people's livelihood, and maintain social harmony and stability.

What is so important is that China intends not to leave a single village behind while implementing the poverty alleviation project, which will be accomplished in 2020.

To view the development of only one province in China, it can be a good lesson for its close neighbor Afghanistan to struggle for economic development and seek to build a violence-free and corruption-free society. To view Afghanistan, it has all the aforementioned potential resources which have remained untapped despite the abject poverty. Afghanistan also has rich mineral resources and human capitals to transform the country into an economically strong country.

Afghanistan's conflict is not the biggest challenge rather corruption and the presence of corrupt politicians in the government's body is believed to be the worst-case scenario. Conflict will be mitigated to a great extent if officials eliminate poverty from the government's machinery and put all their energy for the country's development.

Afghanistan has huge potential energy. It is estimated to have the potential for producing 223,000 MW of solar energy, 23,000 MW hydro-power energy and 68,000 MW of wind energy. Moreover, Mes Aynak is 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. But the government is yet to tap the natural and mineral resources of the country to contribute the domestic economy and lift people out of poverty.

Afghan government should also pay especial attention to rural development and create jobs for all urban and rural residents similar to that of China. Kabul government is also advised to have short-term, mid-term and long-term plans for poverty alleviation and economic development and explain their annual achievements to the public, it is what China is doing. With the transparency, the masses will trust the government and the responsibilities and efforts of each individual officials will be clear to the citizens. So, China can be a good example for all developing and under-developed countries for strengthening their economies.

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The End of Germany's Two-Party System

By: Sławomir Sierakowski

The German Social Democrats' (SPD) existential crisis can no longer be treated as a typical party crisis. The party captured a mere 9.7% of the vote in regional elections in Bavaria this month, and it is trailing both the populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the Greens in national opinion polls. With another important regional election fast approaching in Hesse, polls indicate that the SPD will lose still more support, albeit not as dramatically as in Bavaria.

The SPD and the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) have stood as the twin pillars of German politics since the end of World War II. But with the SPD declining, Germany is moving from a de facto two-party system to a multiparty system in which no single party plays a dominant role.

The German post-war consensus is collapsing in key areas – history (attitudes toward WWII), geopolitics (attitudes toward Russia), the economy (attitudes toward the auto industry), and ethics (attitudes toward refugees) – and this is reflected in the fracturing of the political scene. German voters have rejected the longstanding CDU/CSU-SPD "grand coalition." Whereas smaller parties once functioned as mere subsidiaries of either the SPD or the CDU/CSU, the bit players are now eclipsing the former stars.

Moreover, what was once "Red Munich" has now turned Green. Whereas cities had long been SPD strongholds, they are switching to the Greens and other smaller parties. Making matters worse for the SPD, the demographic profile of its core electorate amounts to a death sentence. Only 8% of SPD voters are under the age of 30, and a whopping 54% are over 60. By contrast, just 24% of Greens are over 60. And Die Linke, meanwhile, has become increasingly attractive both to younger new leftists and aging post-communists from the former East Germany.

Just as a two-party system ensures stability and predictability, so might its collapse contribute to radical social change. By definition, the fall of the establishment implies the rise of the anti-establishment, often in the form of populism. Since 2005, the SPD has participated as the minority partner in three grand-coalition governments. As a result, it has come to be associated with the status quo, even though it hasn't been able to claim direct credit for the previous governments' successes.

Something similar happened in Austria, where the Social Democratic Party ruled either alone or in conjunction with the Austrian People's Party between 1971 and 1999 (except for 1983-1986). Such long periods of grand-coalition rule allowed for the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria to present itself as an agent for change.

When a grand coalition is threatened, its members tend to panic. Those who toe the party line lose support, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel has. Others thus attempt to appropriate populist language – as CSU leader Horst Seehofer has done in recent months – while still others will try to associate themselves with new political platforms. Hence, Alexander Dobrindt of the CSU has promised a "conservative revolution," while Martin Schulz, the erstwhile leader

of the SPD, has promoted EU federation.

At any rate, when the constituent parts of a coalition start moving in different directions, things quickly fall apart. Still, it is worth noting that while the SPD and the CDU are currently losing support, their ideas remain popular. Their problem is not that they are devoid of ideas, but that they lack political credibility.

This credibility deficit has created a vacuum for other parties to fill. Thus, the Greens have made gains in Bavaria by supporting an open-door refugee policy that actually originated with the CDU/SPD. Likewise, the AfD has wrested the anti-refugee mantle away from the CSU and Seehofer, who went so far as to try to undermine Merkel's government from within while serving as Minister of the Interior. The common thread connecting all of the parties that performed well in the Bavarian election is that they ran politicians who are at least consistent in their views.

Unfortunately for Germany, multiparty systems are generally unstable and less predictable, which explains why every other European country – Latvia is a current example – constantly struggles to establish a governing coalition. Under such conditions, it is not uncommon for bizarre arrangements to arise, including coalitions between the far left and the far right, as we have seen in Greece, Italy, and Slovakia. Germany's best hope now is that its newly emerging multiparty system will impede the progress of the AfD, by nullifying its anti-establishment appeal. The AfD will take its place on the radical right as one party among many. Its support will remain in the 10-20% range, but it will not go any further than that. In fact, this has already happened in Bavaria, where the AfD garnered 10.2% of the vote this month, down from the 12.4% that it received in last year's federal election.

Another potential silver lining to a multiparty system is that it might lead to more political engagement. In the case of Bavaria, voter participation rose to 72.4% this election cycle, up from 63.6% five years ago. Looking ahead, Germany may now end up with rotating coalition governments comprising multiple parties. For example, one could imagine an arrangement between the CDU/CSU, the Free Democrats, and the Greens – the so-called Jamaica coalition. But this scenario would most likely produce political paralysis, because politicians from competing parties within the coalition would constantly undercut one another other while pandering to the popular will. Moreover, the chancellorship – traditionally very strong in Germany – will always be weaker in a patchwork government.

Most likely, the fall of the CDU/CSU-SPD duopoly will undermine German hegemony in Europe, even if no other country can replace Germany in that role. At the same time, the weakening of the SPD will diminish the socialist faction in the European Parliament, where a similar eclipse of two-party rule could be in the offing. Yet without the twin pillars of the European People's Party and the Party of European Socialists, the parliament will be incapable of making even insignificant decisions. As Germany and the SPD go, so goes Europe.

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