

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

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### Electoral Integrity: The Difficult but Possible Path Towards Fair and Free Elections

Regular elections by themselves cannot guarantee true democracy anywhere; however, they serve as one of the major indicators for measuring an effective democratic process. In other words, they provide the electorate with the opportunity to change a government which fails to deliver.

Indeed, elections can further democracy, development, human rights, and security, or undermine them, and for this reason alone, they (elections) should command attention. Considering the current social, security and development conditions in Afghanistan, elections can play a critical role to further deteriorate these issues or improve them. To ensure Afghan elections embody democracy, further development and promote security, they must be conducted with integrity.

Keeping in view the previous elections in Afghanistan, when it comes to flawed elections, the scale of (electoral) irregularities in Afghanistan is immense and more than in many other countries in the region and beyond. Therefore, one aspect of the Afghan elections that may everyone agrees with it is that poorly conducted elections have become the norm in Afghanistan, with the attendant "remarkable barriers on stability, regime legitimacy and good, democratic governance.

According to Democracy Index-2016 Afghanistan, among 51 other countries, comes under Authoritarian regime. Nonetheless, democracy experts underscore the significance of elections and why increasing the scope of electoral integrity has therefore become central to the concern for democratic consolidation in the country.

How to address challenges faced in conducting elections with integrity

It is the most difficult task the IEC is in charge in Afghanistan. We may take for granted that it is an easy job: a piece of cake, but it is not so. Thus, the more general, good lesson, of the successful elections is that: although relatively difficult, it is not impossible to conduct elections with integrity in nowhere including Afghanistan. What counts is that, there must be comprehensive planning, effective organization, focus, and resilience, relative autonomy of the IEC as well as its impartiality and integrity.

To conduct the forthcoming elections with integrity, Afghanistan shall overcome six major in preparing for and conducting the 2018 elections. These include how to strengthen the IEC, cleanse its negative image acquired over time and make it efficient and effective; how to deal with persistent, prevalent aspects of electoral fraud, including ballot paper and results sheet snatching, ballot stuffing, multiple voting, etc.; and making Election Day logistics and procedures transparent, accountable and efficient.

The other challenges are, creating a level playing field, and how to protect and strengthen the relative autonomy of IEC in its relations with the political parties, the legislature and the incumbent executive arm of government.

To tackle these challenges, IEC shall undertake some quick actions on planning, programming and leadership by example. The electoral body shall also introduce the use of technology to secure sensitive election materials; biometric registration; and online verification of registration status using SMS.

Additionally, IEC in its drive for transparency and accountability also shall redefine its mode of engagement with key stakeholders, such as the International Community, political parties, civil society organizations, media, security operatives, the government as well as traditional and religious leaders.

Delivering electoral integrity in Afghanistan is a collective responsibility. It involves the active participation of multiple stakeholders, governments, IEC, civil society organizations, the electorate, media, the security apparatus and election observers and monitors, local and international. This is a delicate team work and any flaw or irregularity has the potential to trigger avoidable conflagration that could undermine the peace process and further deteriorate social divisions in the country, increase the gap between the people and government, worsen security and also derail democracy.

### Reforms In Government Educational Institutions Needed to Improve Quality Education

By Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

Government funded schools take on the largest number of students from grade one to grade twelve across the country, and Ministry of Education is the largest employer in Afghanistan. Thousands of schools are run by the Ministry across the country. Thousands of teachers and school administrative staffs are on the pay roll of the Ministry of Education, and millions of books are printed and distributed among students for free. This huge program is funded with money coming from troves of national exchequer and donations from international community. But the level and quality of education imparted to students are sub-standard, low and nowhere close to any standard education system in the world. This status quo persists despite expenditure of hundreds of millions of US dollars on schooling program in the country.

Lack of innovative management, alignment of current education system with acceptable standards, and dragging on with dilapidated, old schooling system are some of the main causes for the present disaster in schooling system. Curriculum is part of the problem as well. A student of grade seven has to study scores of subjects in a year, and the number of subjects increases as the student promotes to next level every year. In addition, content of the books are laid out in a boring and unattractive way. Students are not attracted to chapters' contents because of complexity and lack of illustrations in their books. Teachings hours are thirty-five minutes on average, and every shift of schooling is two and half to three and half hour for elementary and primary schools, and four hour for high schools. In addition, there are sixty to seventy students crammed in each class and this is true for all grade students - which in no way is suitable to provide learning environment. Students' commute to schools is another problematic area, especially in cities. Students of all ages walk to schools, which make them vulnerable to incidents including being hit by careless drivers and girl students' harassment by passerby.

In the face of all the issues furnished above, Ministry of Education in Afghanistan has only tried to keep the status quo. Though more funds were made available for schooling program by international community, government of Afghanistan is bragging about 'millions of girls and boys attending schools' after Taliban regime was toppled - referring to quantity only. No reference is made to quality of government schooling program despite passage of eighteen years of relative calm, at least in urban areas where population density is high. The establishment of private schools has brought about some new ideas and changes in schooling system. They operate standard teaching hours and provide transportation for students. School curriculums of private schools also include additional subjects with more emphasis on English language, but they are obligated by rules and regulations enforced by Ministry of Education to include all the subjects which government schools teach students, and this makes curriculum cumbersome and boring for students studying at private schools as well. But these schools mostly cater for middle class families, which comprises very small percentage of students compared to school going boys and girls across the country.

Government schooling system can improve and there are many unexploited areas and ways to bring about drastic improvement in the sector. First and most important step is to bring innovative managers at the helm of affairs at Ministry of Education. Unless a team with innovative mindset is in place at the decision making level, this trend to keep

status quo will continue to take toll on the new generation of students every year. The leadership of Ministry of Education needs to overhaul the entire schooling program in the country. In order to do so, a team of highly specialized, expert advisors and consultants should be called in to undertake this process. Managers and owners of private schools - including highly successful Afghan-Turk schools - should be part of the process of this overhaul. Recommendations and suggestions put forth by the experts should be made public and shared with central government and donor community to effect changes. Better use of the current allocated financial resources is key to making it possible for changes and improvement in schooling system in the country. This area should be parts and parcels of the thorough overhaul and evaluation of the country's schooling system. Teaching hours, school timings, curriculum, and finding ways to provide transportation for schools girls and boys in government schools are main areas for improvement and should be focused upon relentlessly. In order to complement this process, Ministry of Higher education should unleash education and teacher training programs for teachers to bring up their knowledge level and to understand psychology of teaching and their ability to identify students' abilities and talents in various fields, and to level playing fields for these talents to nurture during teaching hours. It is important that teachers are trained to standard pedagogical level in order to bring about healthy teaching methods. Students need encouragement and focus for their development.

It is falsely believed to live with the sub-standards of government schools 'because government schools are substandard all over the world'. This kind of perception is not true. We can easily see government schools in Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, Iran, Pakistan and neighboring Turkmenistan where schools funded by government have established good teaching methods, and have brought about drastic reforms in imparting quality education to students. Example of such school is Afghan-Turk school chain, which operate in Afghanistan and in many other countries since last twenty years. These schools excel in all important aspects of a better schooling. Innovative management and rules based accountability and reprisal mechanism should be in place to make sure continues improvement in schooling education takes place. Afghanistan has been graduating engineers, doctors, lawyers, managers and accountants for the last one and half decade. But still our patients leave for India or other countries for treatment of their illness, our construction sector hires engineers from other countries for a bit more sophisticated projects and our Ministries and other national institutes hire specialists and advisors from other countries. Why they don't hire local graduates? Our education system lingers behind the accepted international norms and standards, and very little efforts are made to update and improve quality of education in these precious institutions. This is the reason local graduate cannot do the job! Quality and quantity of schooling system, Universities in a country determine standards of life and development of that country. Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan should take heed of this important sector, and leave no stone unturned to improve standards and quality of schooling for students. Quality education is the number one requirement for a successful, prosperous and developed nation.

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### Int'l Day of Peace: A distant dream in Afghanistan

By Mohammad Zahir Akbari

With issuing the resolution No. 235/252, The United Nations General Assembly declared 21 of September as International Day for Peace. The main aim of this resolution was to provide an opportunity for warring parts to stop and think that life is possible without violence. The second philosophy this day is to encourage warring parts to stop hostilities during at least 24 hours and seek solution through peaceful dialogue. According to Article 3 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right of life, liberty and security of person." None of These elements are possible in practice without its foundation which is peace.

In the other word, the goal of the international peace day as, highlighted in the UN General Assembly Statement, is to commemorate this day in order to draw people's attention to the importance of peace and encourage public opinion to celebrate global peace. It also invites all UN member states, relevant organizations, nongovernmental and regional organizations, and those individuals who have influential role on global, regional or domestic affairs, to celebrate the International Peace Day in an appropriate manner. In addition to celebrating this day, they need to train and raise awareness about the importance of the global ceasefire. Considering the resolution of the UN General Assembly, peace is seen as a common wish and goal of all nations but this is not enough, and there must be some practical mechanisms to establish the requirements for achieving peace. Kofi Annan, the former secretary general of the United Nations, commended the decision of the General Assembly in a statement on the same date when the day defined a year as an international Peace Day would provide a brief opportunity to warlords and political leaders engaged in war to think about the devastation that comes to the people and their land.

The United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, said that this one-day opportunity is enough for those who are in the trenches or behind the barbed wire and think that life is just a war. They would take a look at war-free life from the rear of the trenches and from the barbed wire holes to see that there is a way other than war to survive. Celebrating the United Nations Day as International Peace Day and encouraging people and governments to celebrate this day shows that peace is a worthwhile human wish that can be materialized for many human societies. However, it remains as a distant dream for many human society, like Afghanistan due to lack of practical guarantee.

The good news is that development of global communication seems to reveal the importance of peace more than ever. In societies that enjoy peace, public welfare is at the center of their attention but in societies

that are in war, people cannot afford to meet their most urgent needs as the main concern of people in the realm of war is to survive. In Afghanistan more than 50% of people are living under the poverty line but they forgot to ask for food and employment while do ask for peace and justice. Perhaps this is why the greatest wish for people living in peaceful areas is to achieve peace and security.

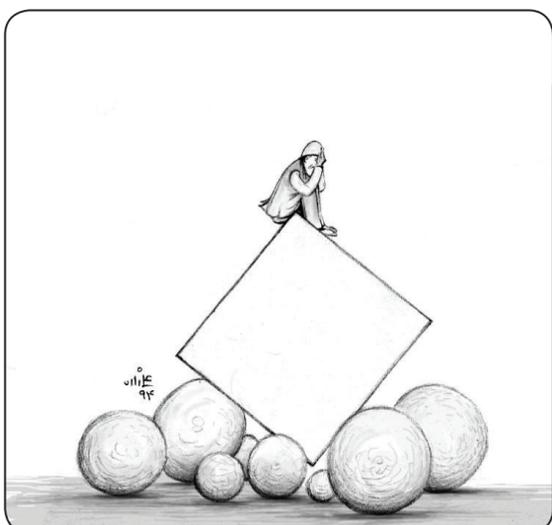
In the war-torn countries, such as Afghanistan, the wish of a mother is living a day that her sons or daughters go to school without fear of bomb explosion. The aspiration of displaced people is to return home without persecution of terrorist groups. The wish of a father in the geography of war is that her children immigrated is to stay alive and celebrate the return of her children.

Despite efforts to bring peace in Afghanistan, so far, this has not materialized, and dozens of people are killed and wounded in battles between the Taliban and government forces every day. The Afghan residents say that these wars have tired them and they do not want to see Afghanistan like this. Different peace activist groups walked on bare feet to the Capital of Afghanistan to ask warring parts and international community to resolve their demands through dialogue. While the Taliban, as a party to the war in Afghanistan, is not ready to sit on the table with the national unity government, they want to talk directly with the United States.

The fruitless efforts for peace in Afghanistan raise a question why so far peace is not succeeding in this country? In answer to this, some of Afghan experts believe that peace is not achievable in the country unless the roots of terrorism is dried up. It means that peace is not possible by imprecation, so war needed for peace; in addition, as above quoted from Kofi Annan, peace cannot be reachable in Afghanistan unless the political leaders think about the consequences of devastation of war on their people and their land.

So, the first important thing factor can help to bring peace in a community is to raise awareness and activate public wisdom for peace and consequences of war. The second thing that help for sustainable peace is social justice and firm will for peace but what is happening in Afghanistan is disrespect for the mentioned and it is well understood from the behavior of community leaders. In spite of the hope that democratic mechanisms in Afghanistan would provide a space for public opinion and value to the needs of the people but it has not seen in practice and the concept of democracy was used only for monopolistic uses. However, the values of equality, justice and non-differences have been accepted in formality.

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