

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



April 23, 2017

Afghan Security Forces Being Targeted

The Friday attack on Afghan National Army's 209 Shaheen Corps Headquarters in Balkh province proved to be highly lethal. Initial statement by Ministry of Defense (MoD) after the attack confirmed the death toll to be 11; however, on Saturday morning it said that about 100 soldiers have been killed and wounded. Meanwhile, Reuters reported that 140 soldiers had been killed in the attack. And, U.S.'s Central Command Colonel John Thomas told that the casualties could be more than 50.

This is really tragic and hints at the level of threat that Afghan forces face. It is also important to note that 209 Shaheen Corps Headquarters is a highly protected installation with multilayered security setup. A high level attack without the support from inside the installation is almost impossible. Therefore, it is really vital to gauge the level of threats that such security installations face from the insider attacks or conspiracy and take necessary measures to thwart them.

It is also necessary to see the attack in the light of the increasing insecurity in different parts of the country. Only a month earlier, a similar type of deadly attack was carried out in the Army Hospital in the capital Kabul. There were claims after that attack as well that insiders were there to support the insurgents. Afghan security forces, therefore, need to carryout extra-vigilant measures to stop such attacks and protect themselves, particularly, in the coming few months during the Taliban's spring offensive.

Last year, Afghan security forces faced a challenging scenario as well and in the process many of them lost their precious lives. US government's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) earlier said in its report for 2016 that 6,785 Afghan security force members were killed in the year, and another 11,777 were wounded. Comparing it with the previous reports revealed an increase of about 35 percent against the same period in 2015, when some 5,000 security forces were killed. The SIGAR report stated that the majority of Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) casualties continued to be the result of direct-fire attacks, with IED explosions and mine strikes accounting for much lower levels of casualties.

Moreover, SIGAR's analysis of the most recent data provided by U.S Forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) suggested that the security situation in the country has not improved. The numbers of Afghan security forces were decreasing, while both casualties and the number of districts under insurgent control or influence were increasing. USFOR-A found that about 57.2 percent of the country's 407 districts were under Afghan government control or influence as of November 15, 2016 - a 6.2 percent decrease from the 63.4 percent reported the previous quarter ending late August, and a nearly 15 percent decrease since November 2015. Of the 407 districts of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, 233 districts were under government control (83 districts) or influence (150), 41 districts (in 15 provinces) were under insurgent control (9) or influence (32), and 133 districts were "contested." The report described contested districts as having "negligible meaningful impact from insurgents," contending that neither the insurgency nor the Afghan government maintained significant control over these areas.

The data clearly shows that insecurity is going to be a major challenge for Afghan government and security forces this year as well. Taliban and other insurgents have already increased their activities. There are fears among the people in Afghanistan that their lives would once again be influenced badly by the wave of terrorism and insurgency. After the downfall of Taliban, Afghan people had hoped that their lives would change and the circumstances would lead towards a better and peaceful future, but the last few years have pointed towards worsening security situation.

The response of the government in the face of the rising insecurity is really lethargic. It has been largely influenced by the differences that prevail within the ranks of National Unity Government (NUG) regarding the approach that has to be adopted against the situation. The members of NUG see the issue with different perspectives and are not ready to cooperate with each other in designing a comprehensive and unanimous policy to tackle the situation. This has led to misunderstandings and ambiguities in the war against terrorism on operational level as well.

Afghan government, therefore, has to get united and strive to control the situation properly. It needs to understand that as a result of decades of instability and socio-economic and political problems, the Afghan people have been suffering from myriads of problems. Coupled with the issue of insecurity, there are some very concerning issues that exist in our society and threaten the lives of the common people of Afghanistan.

Afghan government must therefore get serious in tackling the issue of the insecurity and strive to protect valuable human resource. Afghan National Security Forces are vital for the peace and tranquility of the country. Though their profession requires them to be on the forefront of the war, proper strategic planning and policy making by the government officials can support them in achieving peace without having to lose many valuable lives. Moreover, proper strategies can assist the government in building its legitimacy and gaining support among the people, who otherwise seem to have lost their hopes about a tranquil and prosperous future.

The Downgrading of Knowledge at our Universities

By Mohammad Baqirian

University is a highly significant institution which has played a key role regarding human societies around the globe. University is the mainstay of progress and development since great challenges and evolutions begin with knowledge and schooling. In other words, university engenders positive changes and university students are strong intellectual power behind them.

Ill-fatedly, university has lost its true role in Afghanistan and has changed into a document-producing factory rather than knowledge - a factory that students gain documents after four years of study rather than expertise, experience, knowledge and capacity. Educational researches, commentaries and books to meet international standards have no room in Afghanistan's universities.

Instead, the students are dictated the decade-long repeated words and information and plagiarism is rife with changing the cover of books. For instance, some scrambled sentences are juxtaposed with one another and called scientific thesis, etc.

What is a matter of great concern is the proportion of quantity. Quantity is paid high significance in all aspects, mainly in educational institutions, rather than quality. The ministry of higher education proudly speaks of number of graduate students and those who gained entry in universities, the ministry of education speaks of multi-million students in schools, and teacher training department speaks about great deal of governmental and private teacher training centers (TTC). The heads of these educational institutions are delighted with the numbers and statistics being announced through the media.

However, the quality is faded into oblivion. No one asks the quality of knowledge in these institutions or our proportion in producing knowledge in the world, or how many students have been graduated without proper knowledge. We are deeply obsessed with quantity. In such a case, those who are keen on learning knowledge, their interest will reduce and die away.

When asked about the university, the graduate students speak with a sense of disappointment for not having their thirst for knowledge quenched. They, who entered universities with keen interest, have graduated with disappointment after four years.

According to them, they entered universities with dream come true and a world of hope and wishes, but graduated with chagrin. They all acknowledge their lack of knowledge. I am sorry to say that our universities are the grave of intact talents which are great and unique but lack the

blessing of knowledge.

Moreover, university students are passing time rather than studying for not being explained the value of books, how to research and ponder over issues. Many students graduate from university after four years or so without knowing even the history of their field.

Knowledge has a retreating process in our country rather than progressive. To put a glance over the past, even though there were lack of universities, books, libraries and other facilities for learning, we still had prominent scientists and thinkers who are known globally and their books were taught in western countries for years. This is the land of Avicenna, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, al-Khwarizmi and Syed Jamaluddin Afghan.

The spiritual mystics such as Rumi, Sanai, Nasir Khisraw, etc. were born in this land. To view our past honestly, we will come to know that we have retreated in terms of knowledge and education. I wish all universities of Afghanistan offered one like Avicenna to the society after every century.

It is crystal clear that our universities are not comparable to the universities in our neighboring countries. To take, for example, Kabul University, which was established in the solar year of 1311, and Tehran University. Tehran University was established two years after (in 1313). Now these are not comparable at all since Tehran University offered great personalities to Iran.

However, Kabul University has not offered one-hundredth of that to our society. If we justify this fact for experiencing decades of war and violence, Iran nation also experienced conflicts which did not hamper their universities from producing knowledge.

Similarly, other countries are also at high level of knowledge and know much about the modern science and technology, but we are obsessed with luxury and quantity of fatal stroke. To sum up, the issue of knowledge and education is estranged from our universities which is easily noticeable by viewing the university students.

It is hoped that our generation that has passed its time in universities without a tangible outcome will raise its voice so that our next generation does not fall victim to the same fact and the academic institutions do not be quantity-centered bases.

It is believed that our country will not be built unless professors and lecturers are all from this land.

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The Coming French Revolution

By Zaki Laïdi

In a few weeks, France will elect its next president. Given the French executive's considerable powers, including the authority to dissolve the National Assembly, the presidential election, held every five years, is France's most important. But the stakes are higher than ever this time. The two frontrunners are the far-right National Front's Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron, who served as economy minister under Socialist President François Hollande, but is running as an independent.

If, as expected, Le Pen and Macron face off in the election's second round on May 7, it will be a political watershed for France: the first time in 60 years that the main parties of the left and the right are not represented in the second round. France has not endured such political turmoil since 1958, when, in the midst of the Algerian War, General Charles de Gaulle came to power and crafted the Constitution of the Fifth Republic.

That shift, like any great political rupture, was driven by a combination of deep underlying dynamics and the particular circumstances of the moment.

Today is no different. First, the underlying dynamic: the rise, as in most developed countries nowadays, of popular mistrust of elites, feelings of disempowerment, fear of economic globalization and immigration, and anxiety over downward social mobility and growing inequality.

These sentiments - together with the French state's historical role in fostering national identity and economic growth - have contributed to a surge in support for the National Front. Le Pen's nationalist, xenophobic message and populist economic policies resemble those of the far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

Although support for the National Front has been growing for more than a decade, the party has so far been kept out of power by France's two-round electoral system, which enables voters to unite against it in the second round. And, given the National Front's inability to make alliances, power has remained in the hands of the main parties of the left and the right, even as France has moved toward a tripartite political system.

Now, Macron is taking advantage of current circumstances to blow up the tripartite system. Macron's great insight, which few initially recognized, was that the right-left divide was blocking progress, and that the presidential election amounted to a golden opportunity to move beyond it, without the help of an organized political movement. At a time when the French people are increasingly rejecting the traditional party system, Macron's initial weakness quickly became his strength.

It helped that, as Macron himself recognized, both the right and the left have fragmented in recent years. This is particularly true on the left, where a clear division has emerged between a reformist current, led by former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, and traditionalists, represented by the Socialist Party candidate, Benoît Hamon. The So-

cialists' problems are compounded by the existence of a radical left working actively to eliminate them, much as Spain's left-wing Podemos party has sought to replace the Socialist Workers' Party there.

The source of the mainstream right's travails is less clear. Its forces remain generally united on economic and social issues. In fact, until a few months ago, its presidential candidate, the Republicans' François Fillon, was expected to lead the pack in the first round by a wide margin. But a scandal over his personal conduct (he allegedly paid his wife and children for non-existent jobs while he was a member of parliament) damaged his candidacy - probably fatally.

Whatever the reason for the right's decline, Macron has benefited substantially from it, as well as from the rifts afflicting the left. Now, there is a real chance the young independent could be elected president on May 7, upending the Fifth Republic's political system.

But an electoral victory is just a first step. To govern in France's hybrid presidential-parliamentary system, Macron would need to secure a majority in the National Assembly. This opens the possibility of two scenarios.

In the first scenario, Macron quickly gains a parliamentary majority, as French voters seek to reinforce his mandate in June's National Assembly election.

This is conceivable, but not certain: it is here where the lack of an organized political movement on the ground remains a weakness for Macron.

That is why the June election could give rise to the second scenario: cohabitation with a parliamentary coalition comprising a small right-wing faction, a large centrist faction, and a hopelessly divided left-wing faction. Such a development would be familiar in many European countries. But in France, where republicanism gave rise to the left-right ideological spectrum that shapes politics throughout the West today, it would be a genuine revolution - one that could spell the end of the Socialist Party.

Given the symbolic power of the left-right divide, France's voters and political leaders alike have long tended to frame virtually all of the country's problems in ideological terms. The public and its politicians have little experience with government based on broad coalition agreements.

This partly explains why the political system becomes gridlocked, sometimes making reforms difficult to implement, and why Macron's message, which includes clear reform plans, is so unusual for France.

If Le Pen somehow comes out on top, French politics - not to mention the European Union - will be turned upside. But even the ostensibly moderate Macron represents, in his own way, a truly radical stance.

With both candidates likely to make it to the second round, France is on the verge of a political revolution, regardless of who wins. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

Zaki Laïdi, a professor at Sciences Po, Paris, was a political adviser to French Prime Minister Manuel Valls.



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