

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



December 24, 2018

Making Democracy Work

As the history has proved that the best form of democracy is by and through the people, it is important that the people who live within democratic societies must have an active role within the making, sustenance and development of democracy. Democracy is not possible without people, but it is not strong without vigilant and active citizens who both understand the demands and the challenges of democracy but also play an active part in the affairs of the state. This participation should be both at individual and institutional levels.

Strong democracies have always had strong institutions. The institutions that are not run by the whims of the individuals but the ones that guarantee the collective objectives and wellbeing. The basic institutions that can ensure proper democracy are the ones that are part of judiciary, legislature, executive and media. These institutions should ensure that they perform their duties by prioritizing the democratic values and principles and they contribute in the nourishment of democratic culture. If these institutions favor the interests of certain individuals or the group of individuals, they can never support in strengthening democracy.

At the individual level, the most important prerequisite is that the people must bring change in their behavior and attitude. A democratic behavior is largely based on the art of proper speaking and the patience to listen carefully. Democracy supports the freedom of expression and allows everyone to say what they want to say. In democracy, we basically accept the sort of environment wherein we can be opposed openly. Those people who support democracy fundamentally want that the issues should be solved through dialogue and reasoning not through violence. They want that the opposite reasons should be listened to sufficiently and the claims should always be reconsidered. Within democracy, as an essential element, we need to develop the preparedness to accept that the truth may not be with us and it may be with others. Democracy is never suitable for those who believe that their views are absolute and final and they do not have the patience to listen others. That is the basic reason that Taliban do not favor democracy. They believe that only their ideas and thoughts are correct, while all others have 'false' and 'non-Islamic' ideas and thoughts.

It is really vital to understand this basic truth that the absolute truth has never been known by the people. Yes, certain aspects of a complete truth have been known and people have to compromise with the same. These aspects are present within different circles. Within the circle of politics, the aspect of truth lies within a system which considers the welfare of the people as its basic pillar. And, democracy strives to establish the sort of circumstances that are suitable to guarantee welfare of the people.

Though we have had considerable strides towards democracy, yet there are many behavioral issues that we need to deal with. We have dishonesty in our intentions and extremism in our actions. The difference in opinion and thoughts are dealt through intolerance and even violence. Mahatma Gandhi had said that intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit. Our statements have taken the shape of threats. Some people have even started the attitude of calling others with different opinions as non-Muslims and infidels. The true spirit of democracy can only be found in the theories and promises; therefore, the people do not see the true practice of it and are ambiguous about it. This is really unfortunate that at this instance of hope and great expectations, we are suffering from these problems; yet, we do not have to be disheartened. Acquiring a true and stable democracy is a difficult task and it requires a lengthy process of evolution. The great democracies in the world have been able to achieve their distinct positions only after many decades of political evolution. We, therefore, require giving it time and never give up struggling for it.

If we really like democracy and democratic values, we would require making its prerequisites possible. We would need to feel our responsibility in order to lead our country towards true democracy; otherwise, the dream of democracy may shatter and we will not be able to recreate it. Though the roles of government and the people are vital within a democratic system, most of the responsibilities go to those leaders and religious scholars who have great influence in forming the opinion and the attitude of the people. They need to understand that instead of sowing the seeds of hatred and intolerance in the minds and hearts of the people, they can spread love and tolerance and they can really participate in forming an environment that is suitable for democracy.

Thus, the dream of a stable and well-developed democratic system can change to reality in our country if there are honest and dedicated efforts at both individual and institutional levels – efforts that are not aligned with the personal benefits but support the democratic principle and democratic values.



Peace Talks Put US at a Crossroads

By: Hujjatullah Zia

The US' abrupt decision for decreasing its military presence in Afghanistan from more than 14,000 troops to about 7,000 is most likely to be the result of its backdoor negotiations with the Taliban's representatives in Abu Dhabi, organized by Islamabad between the US envoy and the Taliban.

The withdrawal of troops has caused serious concern for US high-level officials and called a "big mistake" and "calamitous" by James Stavridis, a retired Navy admiral. "It would lead to the resurgence of the Taliban, who would welcome al-Qaeda back with open arms," James is cited as saying. Moreover, a number of US lawmakers are of the view that since Donald Trump never set foot in a conflict zone, he lacked the credibility to make decision about the troop pullout in Syria and Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, Afghan officials, who had not been warned or consulted about the drawdown, believe it will not affect the security situation in Afghanistan. Unlike the withdrawal of US-led NATO troops in 2014, Afghan grassroots also seem less concerned as the news could not attract much attention on social media.

The drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan was predictable since Trump, declaring his strategy about Afghanistan and South Asia last year, said, "Shortly after my inauguration, I directed Secretary of Defense Mattis and my national security team to undertake a comprehensive review of all strategic options in Afghanistan and South Asia. My original instinct was to pull out. And historically, I like following my instincts."

But the time-sensitivity made this decision unpredictable and unbelievable as Trump added three major points in his strategy regarding Afghanistan: First, seeking "an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made". Second, he warned about the horrible consequences of rapid exit adding that "a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum for terrorists, including ISIS and Al Qaeda". He also disapproved of his predecessor for a hasty withdrawal from Iraq. Third, he stressed the serious security threat as he stated that "20 U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan". Now US officials espouse the very three facts Trump maintained in August 2017, in turn, Jim Mattis resigned as a result of Trump's decision

on military drawdown.

Whether or not the decision about troop withdrawal is the product of a backdoor deal with the Taliban, the insurgents will interpret it as their own triumph. But, unlike the Taliban, being generous on the negotiating table will lead to horrible consequences. I believe that since the conditions are not mutually accepted, the withdrawal of US forces will be one step forward, two steps back.

Contrary to emerging optimism, the Taliban still seek to play a foul game on the table through holding out against negotiating with Afghan government or accepting any conditions set by their US interlocutor. The Taliban are fighting against Afghan government and killing Afghan soldiers and civilians, however, claim that their insurgency has nothing to do with Kabul government but with foreign forces – this is ridiculous and reaching an agreement with such a groups seems unlikely.

Perhaps, troop pulldown may not affect the security situation in Afghanistan as last-year increase could not mitigate the insurgency, it still has its adverse effect. For example, it will, on the one hand, prompt the Taliban to haggle over higher price on the table and, on the other hand, spread a stronger sense of fear and disappointment in the public air. Thus, Trump had better not follow his instincts in such significant issues and should be sure this is an honorable result, worthy of "the extraordinary sacrifice of blood and treasure" made in the past 17 years. Being at a crossroads, Trump's administration has to make the right decision.

Meanwhile, regional stakeholders, mainly Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, have to use their leverage on the Taliban and push them to sit around the table with Kabul government and negotiate with bona fide intention. If the Taliban once more play a foul game in the talks, the fragmented pieces of trust will be hardly repairable.

All in all, the 17-year conflict has inflicted casualties on both sides without any light at the end of the tunnel. The continuation of war will lead to further casualties and destructions without any end. With this in mind, all insurgent groups, mainly the Taliban, need to stop their militancy and settle their issue through meaningful negotiations.

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Taliban Continue to Outsmart Afghan Government & the US under the Guise of 'Peace Talks' (last part)

By: Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

People of Afghanistan doubt the intention of Taliban insurgents in the ongoing peace negotiations. They fear balance of flow of things has been tilted towards Pakistan agenda in the ongoing peace negotiation because of the nature of demands of Taliban insurgents, and the countries involved who push rigorously for these skewed agenda. Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Pakistan were the three countries who recognized Taliban regime during their rule in Afghanistan (1995 – 2001), and these countries are fully engaged in the ongoing peace negotiations. Afghan Government has so far been left out of the peace negotiation process, and this phenomenon – if continued – doesn't bode well for an acceptable settlement among stakeholders. According to Upendra Baghel, an expert in security and building state institutions, 'international community members have legitimate individual and collective interests, which are to be aligned. Russia is concerned on expansion of ISIS towards Central Asia, India is on the use of Pakistan sponsored Afghan fighters in Kashmir, US is on terrorism impacting that country, Pakistan is on Durand border dispute and water share, Iran on Shia support and water share and Northern border countries on anti-establishment groups in their countries and Tajik / Uzbek issues'. It is, therefore, critically important for Afghan Government to address causes for the ongoing war and underlying fault lines and engage in productive talks with these countries to settle their worries. Till now, Afghanistan has been depending on USA and coalition partners for addressing Afghan issues, which distanced it from making efforts to address causes of multi-cornered conflict. Taliban insurgents are fighting force, hence a tool in the hands of those behind these big agendas. It is always good to have active diplomatic channels among warring factions, but unless concerns of countries involved are not addressed, such peace talks / negotiations will not result in any major settlement or peace deal.

Recent announcement by president Trump administration to reduce US forces in Afghanistan by 7000 troops has been seen as a tactic and tool to exert pressure on both sides i.e. Afghan Government and Afghan Taliban insurgents to cede ground for peace to prevail. Taliban insurgents have been demanding that US should withdraw from Afghanistan and Government side demand continued presence of US forces in the country. This move has been seen as a stick to Afghan Government and carrot to Taliban insurgents. But the decision also prompted resignation of Defense Secretary, Jim Mattis, the highest official in Trump administration, which makes things more muddy and opaque.

Another conspiracy theory, which is floating among Afghans, is that this move of Trump administration is 'an attempt to bring Black Water to Afghanistan to privatize the war'. The 7000 troops leaving Afghanistan would be replaced by Black Water 'fighters'. It was touted few months ago that Black Water, a US company doing defense and security works, will be given contract to fight insurgents in Afghanistan. This plan was apparently shelved because most Afghans and President Ghani opposed it. On a realistic account, Afghan security and defense forces are improving their ability to fight Taliban insurgents and other international terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan. Thus, a smaller number of US forces who can provide training and advice to Afghan military and police forces will be enough. Unless complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces is looming large, reduction in number will not have any negative impact insofar as monetary and military equipment and weapons are provided.

Another worrying point in the ongoing peace negotiation is the intention of President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani toward ongoing peace talks. General elections are to be held by end of March 2019, and one can easily extrapolate from the apparent look of speeches given by President Ghani's team about peace with Taliban insurgents. They have referred to and pointed out to reaching peace deal with Taliban insurgents during second term in office, tagging the whole peace process to second five years term of his government – and there is no guarantee if he can win in the next general elections. In addition, this apparent lean to prolong peace negotiation by Government of President Ghani is in direct contrast to the US and NATO member countries, who want a peace deal in the soonest possible time, out of the urges originated in their home countries' policies and national agendas. For the Government of Afghanistan to come clean and honest out of this difficult and tasking challenge, it should work closely with stakeholders and address their genuine concerns about their national security and strategic issues. Also, it should learn hard on some of the most important works at home, which include straightening national institutions, delivering good governance, putting in place effective accountability system whereby corruption and male-practices could be checked and contained, and officials involved are punished. Also, government should mobilize its military might to engage Taliban insurgents in the battle fields and diplomatic arena limiting their influence, and this should remain constant until a peace deal is reached.

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