

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



October 20, 2019

The Eradication of Poverty: a Distant Dream in Afghanistan

Yesterday was International Day for the Eradication of Poverty which every year is marked throughout the world on October 17. Historically its first commemoration took place in France, in 1987 when 100,000 people got to gather in Paris to honor victims of poverty, hunger and violence. In 1992, the United Nations officially designated October 17 as the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. One of the primary goals of the Day is to recognize the struggles of the impoverished and to make their voices heard by governments and ordinary citizens. Raising awareness and participation of poor people is another important aspect for the observance of the Day.

The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is also marked in Afghanistan with giving reports and talking about poverty consequences on human life. According to the latest report revealed by FAO, 44.6% of Afghan citizens do not have access to enough food while 33.6% people, especially the vulnerable people such as children and women are suffering from malnourishment. Unfortunately, it imposes very incurable health consequences on children such as mental retardation, stunting, and psychological problem and so on. Overall, Afghanistan remains one of the world's poorest countries with more than half population living under the national poverty line.

However, the international community has contributed billions of dollars to Afghanistan in last 18 years and if it was distributed in cash each person could receive around \$ 33,000. Unfortunately, the aid was not properly managed and so no fundamental change has taken place in economic situation of the Afghan people. It is said the donated money flew from the country investing in Dubai, Istanbul, London and other cities around the world that must be returned to Afghanistan with the help of the international community. According to a survey which was carried out in 2016 and 2017 by the Central Statistics Office of Afghanistan, about 55 percent of Afghans are below the poverty line. Based on geographical situation and seasonal changes, the poverty rate in summer is reduced, but in winter it is increased to about 67.7%.

Now, as we mark the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, the level of poverty is worrying and its eradication seems a distant dream due to lack of strategy and everyday conflicts. According to some international reports, Afghanistan is the second poorest country in the world after Somalia. However, poverty is not a new phenomenon in Afghanistan it has a long history and widely challenged the Afghan people. Thus, it has been the effect of various causes needing a separate comprehensive research but the decline of international aid has certainly intensified the issue in recent years.

After decline of international aid many people have not only lost their jobs but also lost one or several member of their family in the war, addition or migration. Because of many reasons such as rising volatility in Afghan cities and also poor monetary or fiscal policy in central bank, the underground economy has expanded, Afghan currency lost its value, the basic goods became more expensive and consequently more people fell below the poverty line. Accordingly, the brain drain, capital flight and opium addiction has also intensified the condition.

Since Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world, paying attention to poverty trap is very important. The idea of poverty traps is very simple but often belittled. The main idea of the poverty trap is that every country in the twenty-first century needs to some infrastructure to achieve economic growth and sustainable development. For example, every country needs basic facilities such as roads to transit goods and move people, having seaports to exchange goods from one country to another through sea, airfield, electricity, water and sanitation and access to basic health services. If a country has no access to primary health care services in the country, the population will be exposed to all kinds of diseases, and thus impose a lot of expenses on people. However, many of the poor government are not able to afford the expenses in short time.

In general, there are a lot of debates about elimination of poverty traps in countries and there have been many studies in this regard, but there are two basic ways to eliminate poverty traps. Firstly, we need to identify the poor; In developed countries, the welfare system and the tax system are either in the hands of an entity or its information is provided to the relevant institutions therefore identifying poor is easy. So, when a person claims that he/she is poor to receive welfare services, he/she is assessed according to the work experience and available information. Unfortunately, in our country, due to the lack of a robust information system, people are difficult to be identified by government support programs.

Secondly, we need to create support programs for poor people and it can be divided into two different categories: conditional and unconditional. The conditional support means that the government can pay a certain amount of money to students' families for enrolling their children in school to continue their class every month. This program has several benefits. First, it encourages families to send their children to schools with leading to increased literacy and eliminating illiteracy in the country. Thus, the policy maker can also support the poor. The second type of support is unconditional support without any conditions and certain privileges. For example, the government can identify the poor and declare that health care services are free for poor. Anyway, it should be emphasized that poverty has a direct link to insecurity in the country. As long as we cannot put an end to the war, the eradication of poverty would remain as a distant dream in Afghanistan.



The Never-Ending dead end for the Afghan Election commission

By: Naser Koshan

The importance of elections is equally alike in both established and emerging democracies. In today's day and age, democracy and elections are synonymously used in political language. The very core pillars of any democratic society are gauged with peaceful transition of power through fairly conducted general consensus that is, Elections. Needless to say, it is the only viable option that strengthens democracy and prevents dictatorship in any given society.

Contemporary Afghan Elections from 2004 onward are marred with rampant fraud and evident vote tampering, involving potential candidates and the very key officials of the Election commission. The Independent Afghan Election Commission, referred as IEC, was initially set up to conduct and oversee broadly acceptable and equally transparent elections across the country, a crucial mandate that it has miserably failed since the ousting of the Taliban regime, in 2001.

It is evidently apparent that the world community felt a shared responsibility to assist Afghans in building public institutions that would eventually act as strong venues for coherent and efficient public service on their own, in the long-run. Considering the importance of a lasting legacy for the Afghan future, the donor countries provided undivided assistance in empowering electoral foundations in the country. The Afghan Election Commission was established with an ultimate aim of preserving its autonomy, demonstrate firm stance in its decisions, and above all, entrust the general public as the key stakeholders in election processes.

The IEC which was primarily destined to play a very critical role in mounting public support for robust democratic processes and act as a role model for impartiality and unbiased resolves never prevailed in performing its intrinsic mission with utter conviction and meeting public expectations. Unfortunately, government appointed IEC chiefs, eyed the executive branch for policy guidelines and electoral roadmaps. Afghan Presidents unconstitutionally time and again, casted influence over its autonomy and decision making proceedings. Former president, Hamid Karzai, would even personally handpick loyalists to oversee an election that he was a key stakeholder as a candidate and setting president. This malign political approach towards this seemingly independent commission is a prime example on why Elections in the country never scored a dominant status quo and yet again hits rock bottom like the ones before.

The blame on the commission's shortcomings in establishing itself as a formidable independent institution somehow falls on former Afghan officials and foreign slandering intervention in the process. Afghanistan lacks the financial means to indigenously finance its elections, this liability and reliance on foreign assistance is naturally posing vulnerability, and exposes the process to foreign ill-fated meddling. Meanwhile, the legacy and precedence left behind from the previous election officials are obviously not very plausible and encouraging for the prevailing IEC leadership. They have an enormous cloud of responsibility, which is to remain steadfast in dodging any likely attempts by the incumbent leadership to alter their respective decisions and decide future course of actions for them.

It is not the first time that officials from the IEC are under scrutiny for biased approaches and complicity in electoral fraud, in retrospect, former IEC commissioners in charge of the 2014 presidential elections and recent parliamentary elections were given hefty public sentences for alleged vote tampering, and soliciting bribes from candidates, a charge that is often politically motivated, and rarely sees full blown application. We all remember the fiasco that followed the presidential elections in 2014, both the front-runners refused to accept defeat, and claimed simultaneous victory, pushing the United States to mediate, resulting in a catastrophic two headed unity government. During the last five years of this set up, the already fragile Afghan state, cracked into deeper ethnic division, alarming poverty, an exodus of fleeing brain drain, deteriorating security, and, above all, the whole episode severely damaged public trust on election's merits and credibility. Corruption and lack of self-righteousness among Afghan public servants in many levels tempt

these officials to engage in treacherous acts of betraying public trust and pushing the whole country three step backward when it hardly takes a step forward.

The fundamental flaws lies in the Afghan constitution, this national rulebook legally tasks the president to choose all the upper management hierarchy for the election commission. This in turn seriously questions the neutrality of the appointed commissioners. We know that power is addictive; individuals in power stature are naturally inclined to resist giving up or transfer authority. In comparison to furbished democracies, politics and public service are merely means for elected officials in third world states for self-enrichment and adherence to demagogic approaches. Unlike many neighboring states, subsequent Afghan governments never made an effort to put a proper vetting system in place, capable of filtering fraudulent and unqualified applicants and voters in elections.

The Afghan presidential palace (Arg), post 2001 has had a subordinate approach towards the institution, meddling in all aspect of its activities beyond policy levels, stretching to executive plans; as well as structuring the top hierarchy favoring the setting president. The Afghan constitution and prevailing Election law fall short in providing legal structure for the government in the election year; an imminent clause that sheds lights on addressing conflict of interests, proposing a caretaker government and utter profiling and vetting of prospective candidates while remaining steadfast on timelines and public deliverables.

On the other hand, all the stakeholders in the process have failed to address the trembling electoral failures and come with a viable remedy to reincarnate the ousted credibility from the election commission and provide a safety net for all its employees who fear persecution in performing duties with honesty and public interest in mind. It is about time that the international community along with United Nations' bodies working on electoral reforms asserts concerns on mishandling of funds, and illicit interference undermining its impartiality and autonomy. The underlying problem with IEC's inability to keep up with electoral timelines and cut short bureaucratic red tapes is summarized as a: the ineffective manually operated process, b: Intimidation and threats posed to the officials from political stakeholders, c: Complexity and abundance of lengthy administrative hurdles.

Afghan policy makers lack the urgency and prudence to plan ahead, and draft policy guidelines in cutting down on state bureaucracy, easing access to public services replicating internationally successful approaches. Afghan status quo can no longer cast away the blame for laziness and rampant state corruption on inherited legacies and young democracy. In contrast, many other countries, transformed from regressive and corrupt oriented governance in less time than Afghanistan's two decade journey post the repressive Taliban regime. The Afghan political elites' take on acquisition of political office largely begins with an entourage of family and ethnic sympathizers, pre-promised public postings that inherently requires academic expertise and working know how. The scrambled administrative system of the country provides no settled bar or, at least, firm red tapes for unqualified individuals to eye and abuse public offices in any shape or form.

This election observed the least amount of participation since the first presidential elections in 2004. The total turnout is believed to reach 1.5 to 2 million voters across the country. Afghanistan's total population is estimated around 34 million, this means the elections will declare a winner representing merely 5% of the aggregate populous. We shall not forget that chances of any election taking place on September 28th was largely at odds when key candidates were skeptical of the Taliban-American led peace process almost reaching a conclusion prior to the elections, pushing the presidential elections for an indefinite future date. This in turn, inflicted a psychological effect on major candidates and general public to demonstrate less interest in campaign rallies to the very last minute, only when U.S. president abruptly cancelled the peace negotiations through a series of tweets, making the elections inevitable.

Naser Koshan is the newly emerging writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan.

Corporations that abuse human rights are a threat to SDGs and our planet

By: Bobby Ramakant

One of the major processes at the United Nations (UN) that gives hope for a better tomorrow where "no one is left behind" is the UN binding treaty on transnational corporations and other business enterprises with respect to human rights.

History is marred with examples how transnational trade and businesses kept profit over people. Domestic laws and legal frameworks failed to hold abusive transnational corporations to account for not just human rights abuses but also for environmental damages (often irreparable loss like that of biodiversity). That is why we urgently need strong legally binding mechanisms globally to end all forms of corporate capture.

Governments need to walk the talk on the promise of sustainable development where "no one is left behind". When corporate power undermines democracy and democratic processes, a large number of people are left to deal with a range of injustices, inequalities and abuses, as well as, climate crisis deepens which further exacerbates the impact on the poor people.

PEOPLE'S REPRESENTATIVES GLOBALLY CALL FOR UN BINDING TREATY

This week UN Inter-governmental Working Group (IGWG) is discussing a global binding treaty on "transnational corporations and other business enterprises with respect to human rights".

Interest in this process continues to grows as evidenced in the significant presence of government delegations, civil society and elected officials worldwide. 321 members of regional and national parliaments, as well as municipal authorities have endorsed the Call of People's Representatives Worldwide for the UN Binding Treaty. Charles Santiago, Member of the Parliament of Malaysia stated, "Prices of medicines are very high and people are dying because of that. This is a consequence of the monopolies controlled by transnational corporations. The emerging movement for UN binding regulations to tackle power of transnational corporations, is encouraging for all of us."

Delegates from over 40 countries representing communities affected by transnational corporations' human rights violations, social movements, trade unions and civil society organisations are speaking up too. These are the voices of affected people that should be in the centre of these negotiations.

Tchenna Maso from La Via Campesina (Movement of affected by Dams) in Brazil, said, "We are concerned about the content of the revised draft text presented for discussion this week because it does not reflect many of our key concerns and proposals. In particular, the treaty needs a primary focus on transnational corporations, as indicated in the original resolution 26/9, to address the corporate impunity we see in the world."

Kea Seipato, Coordinator of the Southern African section of the Global Campaign to Reclaim Peoples Sovereignty, Dismantle Corporate Power and Stop Impunity, stressed that, "The people of Southern Africa are calling for a self-determined development and are demanding a Treaty that will ensure that. They are calling for the 'Right to Say No' to the plunder of their resources by transnational corporations." Pablo Fajardo, representative of the Union of People Affected by Chevron in Ecu-

ador, said, "International financial systems and multinationals have captured the Ecuadorian State over the last two years. That is why a binding treaty is needed, which returns sovereignty to peoples and states. But it is also clear to us that a UN binding treaty that is not accompanied by sustained social action will not be effective - as exemplified by recent events in Ecuador over the past ten days."

Karin Nansen, chair of Friends of the Earth International said: "Environmental and human rights defenders are on the frontline of resisting the violations committed by transnational corporations, enduring systematic attacks of intimidation, silencing and killings. The historical importance of this binding treaty process to end, once and for all, the impunity of transnational corporations and guarantee access to justice for those affected cannot be overemphasized."

Recently activists performed in front of the Palais de Nations representing how transnational corporations use Investor-State Dispute Settlement mechanisms (ISDS) to sue governments that implement regulations to protect labour standards or the environment. The action is part of a tour traveling from Geneva to Vienna, where today the UN Trade Commission UNCITRAL begin negotiations on a reform of the ISDS system. Dr Thomas Köller from Attac Germany remarked, "We call on the European governments and the European Union (EU) to participate constructively in the negotiations on the UN Binding Treaty. In Vienna the EU must withdraw its push for a Multilateral Investment Court."

This is not the first time where countries globally have joined hands against corporate abuse. More than a decade back in global tobacco treaty negotiations, despite tobacco industry tactics to water down this treaty process, governments agreed to stop tobacco industry interference in public health policy. This treaty, formally called the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), has two backbone Articles that potentially empowers governments to better implement life saving public health laws: Article 5.3 of this treaty, guidelines of which were adopted in November 2008 by governments, recognizes in its preamble that there is a direct and irreconcilable conflict of interest between tobacco industry and public health policy. Article 19 of this treaty which is being worked upon by governments is to hold tobacco industry legally and financially liable for the damages it has caused. I have been part of every global tobacco treaty negotiations so far (Conference of the Parties to the WHO FCTC) as an observer (part of Corporate Accountability led Network for Accountability of Tobacco Transnationalers team). Tobacco industry interference in global tobacco treaty is a stark reminder why we need laws and policies in place to not let abusive corporations interfere with health and development policy making.

NO TIME TO LOSE IN DEALING WITH CORPORATE ABUSES

Only 135 months are left for 193 governments to deliver on promise of sustainable development goals (SDGs). Conflict of interest of several transnational corporations with health and development policies is stark enough to raise alarm for stronger action to make strict legally binding rules and laws against it. It is vital to protect sustainable development policy making from corporate capture. As thousands and millions echoed last month during climate strike, there is no planet-B.

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