The Afghan Problem of Instability

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Political instability is nothing new in Afghanistan. However, the present one proved to be longer, deeper, and more consequential than any other in modern Afghanistan. Why it became so and what should be done in the way of replacing it with stability is the subject of the following few paragraphs.

Like many other people in the world, the Afghans like to choose the short cut to state power by grabbing it by illegal means and violence. There are many reasons for this. Foremost among them is the fact that the Afghans do not value human life very much. Among certain communities notably the Mohmands persons of consequence are done away with more by their opponents than by natural causes. Perhaps it was the extension of this tendency plus the hold of radical dogmas on semi-educated Afghans that during the past thirty years or so numerous actual and potential leaders were terrorized, that is, murdered who were expected to organize social and political life and bring stability. Those who terrorized them were not only hired thugs, but also rigid political groups of the right and left in the name of the Islamic Shari’a and Marxism. Even the state resorted to terrorism in the name of society. Most such persons were done away with not only inside Afghanistan, but also in larger numbers in Pakistan where they had taken refuge. The prolongation of the present instability is a direct result of the elimination of the potential and actual leaders by terrorists.

Another reason for grabbing state power by violence is the fact that since the late nineteenth century, that is, from the time that the Afghan state had become authoritarian and to a certain extent also totalitarian it has become the most attractive source for almost unlimited power, wealth, and prestige in an atmosphere of no legitimate opposition. All this has taken place among a people among which respect for law and order is superficial, but recourse to revenge is the strong dictate of tradition and of social conventions. Individuals and groups with fixed agendas have not hesitated to employ any means available to them by which to grab state power. That is why in the last century six constitutions were promulgated, and six times they were abruptly abrogated, so that presently Afghans have no written constitution, but vaguely defined and in some respects outdated Islamic Shari’a. Of course, the Afghans have been rich in traditions and social conventions.

Another set of factors creating or perpetuating instability stems from the geographic location of Afghanistan. From this point of view Afghanistan resembles Germany in Europe. Six countries encircle Afghanistan. Besides, larger sections of major Afghan ethnic communities live beyond its borders in the neighboring lands.

Not long ago modern Afghanistan was much larger in size lying between the Oxus and the Indus rivers, but gradually especially after the Durand Agreement of 1893 and the cession from it of Panjdeh earlier in 1885 it was reduced to its present size. Present day
Afghanistan’s boundaries except for the Oxus are unnatural and porous. All this means that in disturbed times each of Afghanistan’s neighbors can create instability for it as it can do so for them. They have actually done so in the past, and the present instability is indeed a distant outcome of the Durand Agreement that eventually led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the subsequent civil war that was accentuated by the machinations of its ill-intentioned neighbors. That is why the external factors of the present instability are as important as the internal ones, as noted above. Had these ill-intentioned neighbors (Federal Russia as well) refrained from acting like little Soviets with regard to post-Soviet Afghanistan we would not have assembled here to discuss the Afghan crisis.

In the perpetuation of the instability the inability of Afghan leaders to institute a viable central government was even more significant. Here again external factors have played a part. The instability began in 1973 when Mohammad Da’wud overthrew the long established constitutional royal government. But the coup opened a Pandora’s box, until in one of them he was killed in 1978. Consequentially with the grab of state power for the first time in Afghan history by pro-Moscow Marxists people throughout the land were disturbed and rose in rebellion. But when President Amin showed skill in managing events and distancing the country from the Soviet Union the latter invaded it militarily. Afterward the new government in Kabul was mastered by the Soviets while the Islamic Organizations headquartered in Peshawar were led in their resistance struggle by Pakistan. Politically, Afghan leaders at both ends of the equation were sidelined, but militarily the mujahideen stunned the world for their tenacity and ultimate victory.

For almost ten years Afghan politics became internationalized, but when in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 President Najeeb Allah in Kabul started to share power and liberalize the authoritarian government he was ousted from power in a coup by his own former pro-Moscow colleagues in conjunction with a few resistance organizations of the ethnic minority groups. But the actual beneficiaries became the resistance organizations in accordance with the Peshawar Accords of 1992 devised essentially by Premier Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan. In this new Islamic State all key positions were assigned to persons from minority ethnic groups. But having dissolved the army and security forces of the land they were unable to maintain stability through their own former mujahideen who, in the tempting atmosphere of Kabul soon became uncontrollable.

A civil war of the worst kind ensued until the Taliban led by Mullah Mohammad Omar ended their rule in 1996. The situation had become so unstable that it enabled these religious functionaries to grab state power for the first time in the long history of the country.

In the course of ten years, that is, from 1992 to the present US bombing campaign, when governments of the ill-intentioned neighbors as well as Russia influenced events in Afghanistan through their proxy groups and the West had abandoned Afghanistan the country became anything and every thing but stable. No Afghan emerged as a national leader. No ruler or a ruling group showed genuine willingness to share high power. Instead, all tried to monopolize power and promote either ethnic nationalism, or radical Islamism or both. Burhan al-Deen Rabbani clung to his office of a four-month
term for four and a half years. Mulla Omar even tried to rule the land as if he was in Arabia in the first century of Islam, fourteen and a half centuries ago.

It was in the above-mentioned period that Afghanistan turned into a haven for international terrorists, and a flourishing land for guns and drugs as well. The overall consequence became the internationalization of Afghan politics as never before, and a country once again without a functioning national government.

The foregoing may help us envisage what kind of government may work for Afghanistan under the present altered conditions. We have gathered here to air and discuss views about the subject. Hopefully a consensus of opinion may finally emerge that may help those who work for it on the ground. It is easy to say that the mistakes of the recent past should be avoided. It is also easy to say that we should learn from such mistakes. But it is not so when we try to devise a scheme to fit valid universal principles, the inalienable rights of the sovereign Afghan nation as well as the concrete realities of Afghanistan. Hopefully all these may be successfully addressed within the frame of an independent and united Afghanistan for which the formula for a national government is envisaged in a way that empowers individuals to exercise their rights as free and responsible citizens irrespective of the distinction of gender, ethnicity, religious denomination and social status in a society organized on the basis of democratic principles. Difficult as it is it is now our task to discuss all these subjects impartially and realistically so that we may come out with a scheme that may help the Afghans as a sovereign nation to solve their most pressing problems of the day.