

## Afghanistan after five years of democracy

(The article appeared in Afghanistan Times, Kabul on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2009)

By Jimmy Dabhi

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Afghanistan is gearing up for election. Not all are enthusiastic about it, some are even pessimistic. Many do not see much future for Afghanistan. Many young people even think of leaving the country. Some are sceptical of the quality and scope of democracy in Afghanistan. The understanding of democracy may vary from people to people but one can sense the spirit of freedom in the air. There are many opinions and views about democracy but a large population of Afghanistan want it.

It is very encouraging to read in the news reports that since the fall of the Taleban in 2001, more than 4.2 million children have returned to school. Out of which girls make up just 35% of the school population however it is a huge increase compared to Taleban regime where they were banned from schools. There are two-thirds of Afghans over the age of 15 who cannot read and write. People want equal opportunity and access to education for Afghan women and men. On 25<sup>th</sup> November 2009 the BBC internet news reported that Afghanistan has some of the world's worst health indicators, with an average life expectancy of 43 years. About one in five children dies before his/her fifth birthday. The news also reported that the country has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world - at nearly one in 50 births. BBC on health status in Badakshan reported that for almost 16 babies born, one woman dies in labour. People want a healthy Afghanistan where people do not suffer and die a premature death due to lack of health facilities and health care for common citizens. Afghan women want to be seen and treated as equals at all levels including rebuilding of Afghanistan. All women especially the single mothers and women from poor strata of society want safety and security for their children, their family and themselves not only physical but social as well.

The young people in Afghanistan want to study, find gainful employment, work hard to raise a family and live a dignified life. The cost of living is high in Afghanistan and many cannot afford it. In some cases especially from some of the southern districts people join military forces - either the government or the Taleban - because they need to feed their families. They do not want to be compelled to leave the country but contribute to the building of Afghanistan they and their children will be proud of.

There is a big gap between what people want and what they have. The aspiration of people and the reality does not match. Who is responsible for this mismatch between dream and reality? Without playing a blame game we need to examine some of the issues which may throw light on what needs to be done, how and who can take greater responsibility.

It is a common and widely shared belief that a lot of money has been poured into Afghanistan and yet one wonders where all that money has gone. One cannot rule out the fact that money has been promised but the promises are yet to be fulfilled. George Alagiah in BBC News November 2008 reported that ordinary Afghans have known for some time that the liberation of 2001 offered more promise than delivery. Even if this was the case there is a huge amount of financial support which has come in for specific support and projects and people know that it has not gone where it should have – for development, health care, education, infrastructure such as roads, gutter system, affordable housing etc. No doubt some work has been done and one can see it around but after 8 years of change in regime people expect much more. There are issues of governance, legislation, execution, management, financial and social audit to ensure that the resources are well used and put at the service of people and not pocketed by a few. Corruption and mismanagement at high up is contiguous and easily spreads in the entire system at all level. Not much can be achieved by

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penalising a small fry when the rich and powerful go scot-free. Corruption has to stop at all level beginning from top. It is responsibility of the legislatures, executives that money allocated for various sectors and various projects is well utilised and as per the scheduled. The judiciary needs to play an active role in ensuring that the culprits are brought to the book.

Building Afghanistan needs commitment from all. A student in Bamyan last year said that ethnicity is greater than nationality in Afghanistan. One has to put aside ethnic loyalty and look at Afghanistan as a whole. Vulnerable communities, marginalised ethnic groups, and deprived sections of afghan society have to be included in the process of development. Political will and executive skills are needed to include all groups and communities in decision making, planning and sharing the fruits of development at all levels. Nepotism is taken for granted at all levels but it does not help in providing employment opportunity to all and especially to those who need most.

Consumerism and disparity between a few that have and masses that do not have is growing at alarming rate in Afghanistan. Imitating the west in life style without having their kind of resources and management will not help us in Afghanistan. It will create waste of resources and increase the gap between the rich and the poor, fuming undesired conflict between those who have and those who do not. There are a few who have plenty of assets and wealth. On the other hand there is increasing poverty and destitution. An estimate suggests that there are 60,000 beggars of which 4000 are children in Kabul alone. One can see women with children begging on the street some of them sitting in a puddle of water in the middle of Barakhy road in Kabul shivering in cold. Luxurious life style of a few and glaring inequality is jarring when millions find hard to make two ends meet. Afghanistan at this stage needs productive use of finances and resources.

The situation of many farmers and nomads who comprise about three-quarters of the Afghan population calls for concern and attention of various agencies particularly the government. An Estimate suggests that there is only about 12% of the land is arable for such a big agrarian population. War and drought have left about half of the rural population in poverty.

The UNHCR (2003) reported that Afghanistan witnessed one of the largest repatriation movements in 2002, with more than 1.8 million refugees and some 600,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) returning voluntarily to re-establish their lives. Some three million still remain abroad. There has been massive internal displacement, especially in the south as a result of the insurgency - which has intensified since 2006. Government has a massive population of returnees and internally displaced population to take care. The UNHCR has done commendable work in helping the 'recognised' refugees to return. The situation of unrecognised refugees in Iran and Pakistan is a major concern. A combine effort by many agencies and political will on the part of the governments is needed to integrate these people into main stream of Afghanistan. The rich and influential returnees can fend for themselves but what about those who have nowhere to go and no livelihood to depend on.

Health and education are important pillars of human development. Afghanistan needs these pillars to be stronger and of quality. It is heartening to see young girls and boys going to school, education centres and university. Education, research, development of people, development of public infrastructure and nation building go hand in hand.

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There is plenty of scope to enhance our efforts in this direction. The government must collaborate and encourage genuine NGOs to support the government in rebuilding the country. Bad experience with a few NGOs may end up throwing baby with the bath water and Afghanistan cannot afford to frighten good people who want help and stand by Afghanistan in spite of the difficulties.

The international community has a legitimate and relevant role to play if it wish to do so. Dolling out money or having feather in their cap that they have contributed does not take us too far. Systematic and responsible concerted efforts are need on the part of the government to take the civil society and good NGOs in confidence. Greater transparency, accountability and rust have to be exhibited by all the parties for greater good of Afghanistan.

The responsibility of rebuilding Afghanistan needs to be more effectively shared and coordinated. The tasks can be further distributed among the international community based on their competencies and capability. For example a group of countries may like to take up social sector development another group may jointly like to invest in public infrastructures facilities such as sewage, roads, electricity, water supply etc. Yes another set of countries can contribute in agriculture development and improvement of irrigation. Polluted and contaminated environment as well depleting natural resources are serious threats to Afghanistan. A few courtiers have to specifically focus on these issues. Duplication as well unequal distribution of resources in various provinces have to be avoided for inclusive development. Often it is the most remote and neglected provinces that need more attentions and resources.

The local as well as international NGOs must be credited for the good work they have done. However caution is required that their life style, their salaries do not upset the purchasing power of the locals and ordinary wage earners. Security is a problem for many of these NGOs to work at the grassroots but bearing in mind this limitation greater care and concern is needed that assistance and support goes where needed most. People also must be considerate not to demand unreasonable and unsustainable salary from NGOs which have genuine desire to contribute to development of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan needs to develop a strong civil society. Of course civil society is always diverse and often fragmented. However democracy to flourish requires a vibrant civil society and civil society organisations. A civil society focused on public interest and public action is often a challenge and threat to people in power, establishments and vested interests but then without it democracy becomes weak.

Afghanistan expects support from the neighbouring countries, their governments and non-State actors to rebuild itself. The role plaid by the neighbouring countries in Afghanistan is looked with certain apprehension. The polity, economy and social culture are influenced by these neighbours in one way or the other. Therefore good relationship which enhances bilateral trade, technological development and overall well being of both the countries is important. However the negative influence and impact needs to be firmly resisted.

The Universities, research organisations and academia have to do their bit in terms carrying out research at various levels providing data and analysis so that the policies and programmes designed and implemented by government and other agencies are more informed and effective. Inclusive and sustainable development needs sustained research in various sectors.

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Research and evaluation unit (AREU) in the report (May 17/2009) stated “Afghanistan faces intensifying threats from insurgency, opium and popular discontent. While these threats require immediate action, they will be properly solved only by the emergence of a stronger state and comprehensive improvements in governance”. People of Afghanistan deserve a better quality of polity. It is possible and needs political will on the part of the politicians, ministers and determination of the part of the bureaucrats for effective execution of good policies and programmes. The citizens of Afghanistan expect Politicians, Ministers and bureaucrats are to serve people and not lord over them. We need to create an enlightened, responsible and competent cadre of politicians and bureaucrats in Afghanistan. One does not need to import them, we need to encourage those that are and promote and train more of them in the years to come for effective and people centric governance in Afghanistan we want to live in.

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