

Democratization in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities

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Received date: December 22, 2016, Accepted date: March 23, 2017, Published date: March 27, 2017

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Abstract

Democratic reform and governance began after the collapse of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban ruled a brutal and fundamentalist regime from 1996 to 2001. In the last decade and half which has been free of Taliban control, Afghanistan has made significant improvements in areas, such as good governance, rule of law, women's rights and freedom of speech. Despite gains and progress made over the years, the country is faced with a resilient insurgency that constitutes the remnants of Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The Taliban claim that democracy is opposed to Islamic and sharia laws and therefore the group is fighting to establish a 'real Islamic state' based on conservative principles. This paper argues that a historical analysis in Afghanistan and other Islamic democracies proves otherwise. In Afghanistan, this is reflected in state development and democratic achievements of the last fifteen years, where democracy and political inclusion have helped to bring stability, peace and development.

Keywords: Democratization; Governance; Civilization; Law and order

Introduction to the Study and Rationale

During the last decade and half, Afghanistan has made significant progress towards rebuilding its institutions and political systems. Since the defeat of the Taliban regime in 2001, the country has adopted a new political structure, constitution, organized presidential and parliamentary elections, reformed the judiciary, established cabinet and developed a vibrant media along with an active civil society¹. Moreover, in the post-Taliban political order, political participation has increased, especially among women in different parts of state. These are all the accomplishments that have occurred as a result of the arduous work by the Afghans and their international partners. While democratization in Afghanistan has been perceived with negative and positive sentiments among the people, still there is hope that democracy can lead the country toward a brighter future. On the other hand, the Afghan government has attached a great deal of importance to incorporate different groups with their views into its political debate. It has helped the country to be politically stable [1]. This is due to the fact that political stability has been the key element in increasing security and stability of the state. As the historical experience of nascent democracies indicate that when there is the lack of stability in political establishment, the potential for fragmentation increases². Thus, one could contend that political stability is the fundamental element for provision of security and stability in a young democracy, such as Afghanistan. As noted, without a stable and responsible democratic government, especially in post-conflict societies, the various efforts for building state institutions as well as law and order would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Given that a democratic society along with its liberal values would help promote peace and harmony among nations, hence it is important for a democratizing

state to uphold and embrace these values in order to achieve progress. To that end, the purpose of this research paper is to assess the recent democratic progress of an aspiring nation (Afghanistan) as well as the challenges facing its future. A country that in the last four decades has been in turmoil due to the lack of a popular and legitimate government. With post-Taliban political order's democratic achievements, the arguments presented here is that an elected Afghan democratic state has the potential to unite its people, establish good governance, and help the country toward greater political, security and economic developments [2]. In light of these discussions, some important questions that arises are: What are some of the challenges does Afghanistan face in its democratic journey? What stakes does the regional countries have in Afghanistan's democratic transition? Finally, what makes Afghan democracy different compared with other post-conflict states? The literature that is used here mostly covers the decade and half long political and democratic developments in the country.

Trends and Prospects

After years of insecurity and instability, Afghanistan has finally transitioned to a democratic form of government. This has been possible due to the help of the U.S. and the rest of the international community [3]. The transition has been gradually taking place since the defeat of the Taliban by the U.S. and coalition countries in 2001. As a result, Afghanistan has made tremendous achievements in terms of political, security and economic that have transformed the social and political landscape of the state. Furthermore, like many other democratic states, the country has established strong democratic institutions that could ensure political participation of its citizens in the spirit of the rule of law³. This is promising for a young democracy such as Afghanistan that continues to secure stability and overcome its myriad challenges. This development is further evidence by successfully holding elections and establishing good governance across

¹ Survey of Afghan people by Asia foundation, 2016

² Mansfield and Snyder, 1995

³ Shiri, 2009

the country [4]. As noted, it is important because Afghanistan's contemporary history proves that one of the major reasons behind the chaos in the past has been due to the lack of an inclusive and representative political system. Thus, the establishment of a functioning and effective government does not only ensure, but also protect the gains that have been made over the last decade and half in the country. To be sure, this could be the only plausible task, especially under the auspices of a democratic rule- empowered by the people in order to achieve stability and prosperity. On the other hand, implementing reforms within Afghanistan's political system, while maintaining a high political culture would lead to greater political success and inclusion that would be significant for the country's future. In addition, democratic development would also help the prospect for long-term peace and stability for the country during this momentous transition period [5]. It is an important milestone for the foundation of every democratizing state. It is also significant at the moment as Afghanistan is striving for a political settlement with the Taliban and other armed groups.

Despite major threats that have existed in the last decade, Afghanistan has been able to successfully transition toward an inclusive and democratic state. It has already made significant developments in many areas, particularly in restoration of law and order that was absent throughout the country during the years beset by war and conflict. It is because of these improvements, that the nascent Afghan democracy is slowly taking roots and the culture of peace and harmony is prevailing over gun and violence. This is important to mention that the developments are occurring in a time that the country struggles to make peace with numerous insurgent groups [6]. Based on principles of democratic values that insist on legitimate ruling of the majority and respecting the rights of the minorities, one can suggest that in a multi-ethnic society, such as Afghanistan, an inclusive and broad-based government will serve the interests of its people⁴. This would also have a tremendous effect in the unity and prosperity of Afghans, particularly in overcoming the long ethnic and tribal rifts among its people. Moreover, from the theoretical and practical perspectives, democracies lead to economic growth and higher standards of living among nations. These developments could take place through opening of markets and free trade agreements in which different parties could benefit from their mutual relations. As an example to be examined, the European Union EU integration stands out as a prominent case which member states have eliminated boundaries and other forms of barriers in order to promote peace and harmony. As a result, the integration of EU nations within a single entity has resulted in enormous gains among the member states. In addition, the unique and strong ties among the EU states have further helped to bring prosperity and economic growth to all its member states [7]. It is probably because of this factor that most scholars argue that the present EU model is a successful example between various democracies in terms of collective assistance and cooperation. It is interesting to see the collective and integrated forms of cooperation among countries in a continent that was once plagued by expansionism and domination. There were multiple belligerent powers in Europe which were not only fighting among each other, but also competing for expansion and influence. But today the continent is thriving because of its liberal order, connectivity and democratic

system of governments which have allowed for greater political, economic, and social integration of its member states⁵. Hence, the EU case study could serve as a positive experiment for post-conflict and new democracies. Given the success achieved in the case of the EU in terms of its interdependence relations for building a prosperous future, in this part, I would like to compare the EU's experience to Afghanistan and its wider region. It is important especially in the context of its strategic location as far its courses of democratization and regional interactions are concerned. Moreover, comparing the EU integration to Afghanistan's regional dynamic is similar because the country is geographically located in an important location that has the potential to connect South Asia to East Asia [8]. Thus, making it unique to serve as a crossroad regional corridor for the inter connection of the entire region.

Regional Environment and its Challenges

For every democratizing country, the regional and surrounding counties have a large role to play. It is because the regional states are considered stakeholder and therefore it could either back or opposes the democratizing states⁶. Concerning Afghanistan, the regional dynamics have played out not to be an inspiring lesson for the country. One of the reasons is that a democratic Afghanistan may not necessarily serve the regional states' interests. It is because of the ongoing struggle between the regional states for using proxies and greater influence in the region. Similarly, another reason could point to the security threats posed by the state and non-state actors in the region [9]. Thus, the regional states are inclined to see an authoritarian regime in charge rather than an elected government bound by laws. As mentioned, from a historical perspective, Afghanistan's security challenges in the last four decades have ascended from the lack of legitimacy and stability in the country. The country has failed to maintain a stable regime through a democratically elected government in order to be politically secured and economically stable. For instance, a legitimate political system that could guarantee its national security and help the country on its path for long-term stability has been absent from its political arena⁷. Additionally, tension and hostility between regional states have been great sources of concern not only for Afghanistan, but also for the wider region. This complex environment has led to suppress democratic forces and prevent them to thrive in the region [10]. Thus, maintaining security and stability legitimized by democratic systems have been a major challenge for regional security. In particular for those states that are sharing borders with Afghanistan. As mentioned, the dominant realistic policies of regional states have hampered democratic forces to join hands for regional integration. For instance, Pakistan, which is an important neighbor sharing border with Afghanistan is a good example to be examined. Pakistan has often been in turmoil due to the lack of stability in its internal political arena, mostly emanating from the confrontation of civilian versus the military leadership [11]. As a result, the role of the military to take the power has been significant, especially by promptly intervening and controlling the government affairs. Although resorting to such actions by the military leadership has resulted in prevention of political instability inside Pakistan, but at the same time, it has prohibited the country from its aspiration for greater civilian control and democratic governance. The same is true about Iran, another influential country

⁴ Rowe, 2014

⁵ (Schmidt, 2005)

⁶ Fitzgerald, 2009

⁷ Black, 2004

that shares border with Afghanistan. In Iran, despite being a theocratic regime, which is perceived to be democratic by its political leadership, the role of military and paramilitary institutions have been key in controlling the Iranian foreign policy and national security⁸. Hence, the revolutionary's grip on political power has been continuing under the pretext of maintaining stability in the country. This has also prevented democratic forces and civil society to thrive in the country⁹. It's for these reasons, that the two neighboring states have seen a democratizing nation as a potential threat to their national interests. Therefore, their contribution to the nascent Afghan democracy has not only been minimal, but also highly unproductive during the last decade and half. In addition, given Iran and Pakistan's fears and concerns from emerging of a democratic government in Afghanistan, the political and diplomatic relations between the two countries have remained tense [12].

While, cooperation and friendly relations among regional states can greatly help in the provision of stability and security of the region, yet most of the countries are unable or unwilling to cooperate among each other. As noted, there is enormous potential for cooperation in this respect [13]. Most of the regional countries are connected with each other in many ways. This can definitely play a significant role in maintaining peace and prosperity for the region. On the other hand, it is also important that the regional countries recognize the fact that a free, stable, and democratic Afghanistan would serve in their interest¹⁰. Similarly, a strong and democratic Afghan state that is politically secured and economically stable should minimize the concerns of its neighbors. It is significant because in order to deny terrorists from regrouping back in the country, Afghanistan must remain secured, and stable. As discussed, these efforts cannot be achieved without the assistance of the regional states, in particular Iran and Pakistan. Therefore, efforts to building a legitimate government in Afghanistan with strong state institutions would be a major victory not only for Afghanistan, but also for the regional stakeholders. Although at the beginning this was not realized by the neighboring countries that a democratic and stable Afghan state would be in their interest. But as the security of the region is deteriorating with new challenges emerging in different fronts, the desire for change in policy are becoming more palpable than before [14]. There is now a consensus and realization among the regional states that the only approach to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan is through free elections and representative government.

This is due to the fact that Afghanistan is located in such an important and strategic location that its neighboring countries are linked with deep historical, ethnic and social ties. For this reason, insecurity in Afghanistan does not bode well for the region. One the other hand, the peoples of the region have lived together within a common civilization during the course of history¹¹. The commonality in terms of ethnicity and social structures among various ethnic groups is another significant feature for promotion of democratic ideas. Additionally, the regional integration and cooperation for mutual peace and stability is equally important concerning Afghanistan's

security and stability [14]. Thus, it is important for regional states to support and respect the nascent Afghan democracy by helping its government and respecting its political institutions. To this end, equally important is the approach of the wider international community, countries such as the U.S. and NATO members, which have assisted Afghanistan during the last fifteen years. Hence, the U.S and its allies should continue to help the Afghan people in their quest for peace, security and political integration [15]. It is because sustained continuation of aid remains vital for Afghanistan in order to preserve the democratic gains achieved in terms of security, governance, civil society, women's rights, education, and freedom of speech¹².

Finally, it is essential to recognize that without continued contribution of the regional states and the wider international community, it would be difficult to maintain the hard-won progress and achievements. Above all, sustaining these gains would enable Afghanistan to secure itself from the challenges of insecurity, which is also a source of concern for the regional countries [16]. Thus, ignoring these realities would potentially contribute to the instability of not only Afghanistan and the region, but also the broader international community. Moreover, if Afghanistan's journey of democratization succeeds, it will become an inspiration for the fragile and struggling democracies in the region¹³.

Democratic Progress and Political Integration in a Post-conflict State

The impact of democracy has been successful and effective in promoting peace and security for the post-conflict societies. Moreover, this is an important feature in democratization trends toward uniting the people and establishing stable governments. As Charles Tilly describes democratization is a political process toward citizenship, equality, binding consultation of citizens as well as protection of citizens from arbitrary government actions¹⁴. In light of the above mentioned observation, a country that has suffered from war and conflict between its ethnic groups or other belligerent parties, such as Afghanistan, the only political system, which can guarantee the security of its citizens and unite its people, is the establishment of an elected government. This is only possible through a democratic process. Moreover, in order to attain these ideals, the implementation of free and transparent elections based on democratic principles is equally important [17]. These steps would ensure protection of the people's rights and guarantees that everyone is treated equally and in accordance with the rule of law¹⁵. Hence, in this case the fundamental and basic rights of citizens as well as opposition groups are protected. Since post-conflict societies will have their security and political challenges – most importantly in terms of incorporation of anti-state forces like Afghanistan is having at the moment, therefore it is significant that the democratic reconstruction model for these countries have to be implemented successfully. As previously mentioned, for democratizing states which have suffered from conflict, the participation of the people is significant. For that reason, when

⁸ Coll, 2004

⁹ Mohsin, 1999

¹⁰ Gladstone, 2001

¹¹ Collins, 1985

¹² Survey of Afghan people, 2016

¹³ Tanner, 2002

¹⁴ Tilly, 2005

¹⁵ Tilly, 2005

there is a fair and equal opportunity given to all members of the society, one can argue that this will make a major difference in integration of various groups into the mainstream society. This is important especially in the case of post-conflict countries. In fact it will allow all belligerent forces involved in conflict against each other to unite and represent themselves underneath a national government in the new political order. This unity among different elites or members of the society would further boost and strengthen democratizing states toward free and inclusive governments¹⁶. Moreover, democratization can least likely lead to war when elites find a bright future for themselves in the new social order¹⁷. Hence, the priority in a new democratic state should be focused on creating equal opportunities for its citizens through a transparent political process. The experiment of Afghanistan indicate that the country's reconstruction and nation-building efforts have been successful, while efforts to bring the anti-state elements (Taliban) into peace and negotiations have faced serious obstacles¹⁸. Although it is challenging for any democratic state to incorporate its revolutionary groups into the government, yet there is potential for practical steps and reforms for forming a national government. This would increase the possibility for incorporation of other opposition groups within the state. For this reason, incorporating the Taliban and building a strong state that is able to sustain the current challenges should remain a top priority for the Afghan government in the future. So far efforts in this regard have not been fruitful in spite of several attempts even by major powers, such as China and the United States [18]. As the Taliban still believe in using violence and toppling the Afghan government, which has been established with enormous sacrifice by the Afghan people and rest of the international community.

Democracy, Islam, and the State

Despite some negative sentiments about the coexistence of Islam and democracy, most political scientists including Muslim scholars believe that Islamic values are compatible with liberal and democratic ideals. These scholars argue that as long as they are defined and practiced according to the aspiration of the people. Furthermore, the majority of the Muslim populations are cognizant of the fact that the religion of Islam, which incorporates norms and values that insist on justice, peace, and equality among individuals and groups have much in common with democratic principles than many other faiths [19]. Columbia University professor Richard Bulliet, who specializes in the history of the Middle East and Islamic studies, thinks that most of the presumptions and sentiments in regards to contradiction of values between Islam and democracy are rooted in anti-U.S. and anti-Western sentiments. In response to some fundamentalist individuals and groups who are denouncing democracy in Islamic countries, he states that these people are mistaken in their thoughts and understanding of Islam and thus do not have the necessary knowledge of the religion and its values. He further points out that those who state that democracy has no place in Islam, what they express is a sense that the word 'democracy' as presented in international discourse appears to be a political tool that is wholly owned by the U.S. and the Western world.

Hence their outlook is different instead of viewing it as an equal and just form of political system [20]. For this reason, those who oppose democracy conclude that democracy is a western export that serve the western political agenda. It is because of this fact that they express their antagonism for a democratic government or may possibly view it against Islamic values as well while they lack the evidence to back their claims. Bullitt also argues that despite the misperception that exists in this regard, there is only a small portion of people in the Muslim world who do not agree with liberal principles in their system of governance and political structures. Moreover, some other opposition are also referred to the word 'democracy' as a cultural imperialism.

Hence, one can argue that democracy as a dominant political system with rich sets of values that suggest rule of the people, by the people, and for the people, ensuring equality and justice within governments and societies are not in contradiction with Islamic beliefs. Instead they share the very same commonalities in many aspects [21-23]. In fact, most Muslims scholars believe that democratic process is similar to the early Islamic era, where the people used to elect their leaders through councils (Shuras) in a direct form of elections. According to these scholars, the very notion of elections and the right to self-determination are enshrined in Islamic teachings and rituals from the early Islamic history¹⁹. Therefore, the religion of Islam and its teachings in particular have nothing in opposition with democratic values, and thus do not reject democratic progress in Islamic nations. To prove this point, the example of Afghan democracy is a testimony to dismiss the notion that democracy is not compatible in Islamic countries. As noted, the Afghan people, as proud and devout Muslims, have embraced democratic reforms with great sense of enthusiasm and are paying enormous price to defend the hard-gained progress every day. Furthermore, one can also refer to some other major examples of the present Islamic democracies among others in which democratic standards are ingrained within their political culture [24-26]. Among several others, Turkey and Indonesia stand out as good examples in today's Islamic world. In Turkey, democracy has resulted in many advantages for its people and society despite numerous challenges that exist do date. These include unity, governance, economic growth and political stability²⁰. Similarly, another notable case in Islamic democracies is the country of Indonesia. Despite some irregularities, which have been occurring, Indonesia has seen massive economic growth because of a stable democratic government²¹. In addition, Turkey and Indonesia have both been able to fully adapt into democratic rules, while being the largest Muslim countries in the world. At the same time, the two countries have been able to maintain their Islamic faith and tradition through these transitions. On the other hand, the two states are not only successful Islamic democracies, but have also been referred as a good models for the rest of Islamic nations. Despite the challenges that continue to persist in both states, the two countries have remained prosperous in terms of governance and political stability [27]. It is important to mention that their democratic systems are protected with secular laws in Islamic societies that are unique compared to other Islamic nations²². Meanwhile, some other political scientists also contend that democratization could yield

¹⁶ Zeeuw, 2006

¹⁷ Mansfield and Snyder, 1995

¹⁸ Seierstad, 2013

¹⁹ John, 1991

²⁰ Taspinar, 2012

²¹ John, 1991

²² Taspinar, 2012

success when there is a consolidation of Islamic and democratic laws working together.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that despite challenges present in Afghanistan, there is enormous progress made in different areas. For instance, during the last fifteen years, Afghanistan has made numerous developments, such as the establishment of democratic institutions, women's rights and freedom of speech in its democratic journey. Moreover, there is an overwhelming support for freedom and liberty within the framework of a democratic and national institution in the country. Given the historical experience of democratic development in countries as discussed earlier, one can argue that the process of democratization differs from one country to another. It also depends upon their internal and external political factors. On the other hand, an important trend in democratization, especially within states that have no or less democratic experience depends on aspiration of its people. It is also related to the reception of norms and values within its polity and society. This is important as to how aspiring is a state in adapting itself to a liberal and democratic political culture. At the end of the day, there has to be a significant internal desire and support for democracy in order to take root within a state and consolidate into its society. In the case of Afghanistan, despite numerous challenges, the new democratic process has been successful as it has led to many positive developments within the country. As noted, Afghanistan has made substantial progress in improving its economic and political systems. These developments have been achieved as a result of substantial progress in the country by holding two presidential and parliamentary elections in which the Afghan people overwhelmingly participated in order to elect their leader and secure a prosperous future. Consequently, despite major flaws that persist do date, the democratically elected government in Kabul has been able to improve the conditions. It has been able to work toward good governance, maintaining the rule of law, achieving women's rights and securing freedom of speech. Moreover, the numerous progress which have been able to sustain despite the current Taliban led insurgency, have served as a driving and inspiring force for the unification of the Afghan people. For instance, it has contributed toward building a strong sense of nationalism among various ethnic groups of Afghanistan. As a result, the nation is more united than any other time in its modern history. Furthermore, under the newly elected government, Afghanistan's ethnic groups are represented equally and proportionally, making it a national and broad-based institution, widely acceptable to the entire Afghan population. In this vein, democratization in post-Taliban era has also ushered a period of economic, political and social progress for the country, affecting the Afghan people positively in all walks of life. This has been underway since the fall of the Taliban and has resulted in major successes despite persistent security and economic challenges. It is because of these positive developments that most analysts argue given Afghanistan's recent history, and its challenges emanating from political stability, no other type of governments, except a democratic, can succeed to address the legitimate demands of its people. In fact, it was based on this notion that the idea of a national unity government in which members of the Afghan society are equally represented in a coalition government was embraced after the contentious and fraudulent elections of 2014 by the Afghan political elites. As a result, the National Unity Government NUG headed by Ashraf Ghani as president and Abdullah, Abdullah as the Chief Executive was established. Despite the many problems and mismanagements of the elections, the aspiration of the people for

freedom and democracy was once again demonstrated by their high turnout and overwhelming participation in the elections. In the presence of widespread threats and security challenges, Afghans from all corners of the country enthusiastically participated in the presidential and provincial council elections. By casting votes and exercising their legitimate rights for a stable and prosperous country, they proved that democracy is viable and sustainable in Afghanistan.

In closing, since there is a dearth of literature on Afghanistan's post-Taliban political order and its democratic achievements, it is hoped that this paper contributes an empirical evidence to the existing literature. Moreover, the hope is that it can also help in terms of how democratic development could serve as a positive precedent for budding democracies, such as Afghanistan and others toward a prosperous and stable future.

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