**A democratic and inclusive Afghanistan**

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Millions of Afghans face the spectre of hunger and starvation. The recent devastating earthquake is likely to complicate the situation, pushing more Afghans below the poverty line, adding to the army of beggars that have become a permanent feature of urban areas.

According to a UN-backed report published in May this year, nearly 20,000,000 people in Afghanistan, almost half the population, are facing acute hunger. An integrated Food Security Phase Classification analysis for the country also reveals that a pocket of catastrophic levels of food insecurity exists in the north-east of the country, affecting thousands. The analysis was conducted in January and February by the FAO and other global bodies.

It may be mentioned that the IPC was developed in 2004 to determine the severity and magnitude of food insecurity and acute malnutrition situations in a country. Although the report had predicted a slight improvement in the food security situation from June through November with the number of people facing acute food insecurity dropping to 18.9 million, it is feared that the recent terrible tremors are likely to scupper the chance of such improvement. The natural calamity has claimed more than 1000 lives, exposing the gross incompetence of the Taliban who miserably failed in protecting lives of the people or extending any held and succour to those who survived the traumatic incident.

Some other international organizations are even drawing a more gloomy picture. The World Food Programme claims one in three Afghans is hungry and two million children are malnourished, and that with the drought and pandemic the food security situation will continue to worsen and hunger will rise. The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees believes around 24 million Afghans are in the need of humanitarian assistance owing to the hunger and economic crisis caused because of the lack of development aid and impact of the changeover in government authorities. The country houses around 3.5 million conflict displaced and 1.57 million climate displaced people. Millions of Afghans are also living as refugees outside the country.

Amidst this grim situation, the obscurantist forces that are ruling over Kabul are still carrying out moral policing, harassing women who may not be properly covered or beating a man who might not be following their code of ethics. For them, the solution to Afghanistan's problem lies in shutting down schools for girls and confining women to the home. The Taliban tend to believe that an archaic system could resolve all the problems of Afghanistan.

For them, from the economy to natural calamity, morality is the key to resolving all the issues of the country. Despite spending close to a year in power, they do not seem to have any idea about governance. They have miserably failed in alleviating poverty, providing decent housing, building hospitals and dispensaries and running the existing health units in an effective manner. Instead of resolving the problems of the Afghans, they are resorting to sledgehammer tactics forcing tens of thousands to flee the country, taking refuge here and there. After coming into power, the Taliban claimed that they would not attack the former employees of the government but a number of human rights organizations have challenged such assertions asserting that Taliban militants have been targeting employees of the former government – especially those belonging to the armed forces.

It is not only the Afghan Taliban that should be blamed for everything that is going wrong in the war-torn country; the corrupt leadership of Afghan warlords should equally be sharing this blame. They failed to utilize the billions of dollars that poured into the country in the aftermath of the American invasion of Afghanistan. Many critics say that the former rulers siphoned off millions if not billions of dollars. The US and international communities that pushed the country towards the current crisis cannot be exonerated either. While Washington was quick to extend billions of dollars of aid to Ukraine that was not devastated by Western powers, it remained reluctant to extend any financial help to the people of Afghanistan whose lives were partly ruined by the US invasion of the country. The ruling elite of America allocated more than $40 billion for Ukraine but it is not ready to release over $5 billion which the US froze after the Taliban takeover, prompting many critics to call it the biggest money heist of modern times. The release of such funds could go a long way in alleviating the sufferings of the Afghans who are facing hunger and starvation.

The Afghan Taliban should remember that, in the long run, they cannot govern the country without the help of the international community – and to make the international community cooperate with the regime in Kabul, they will have to make an inclusive government reflecting the representation of ethnic, religious and sectarian minorities. Before the Taliban came into power, the country would be funded by the Western powers with most of the funding sources coming from the US and European states. Afghanistan does not have industries and with the arrival of the Taliban it does not have any attraction for foreign investors as well. Given the situation, it is highly unlikely that the county will receive any financial assistance or investment from the Western world or international organizations, given the way the Taliban have disrespected human rights and ignored women and minorities' rights.

The Taliban should remember that during the decade of the 1990s at least three countries had recognized the Afghan Taliban led Afghanistan, extending some sort of help to the cloistered group of the militants – but this time even Saudi Arabia and the UAE are reluctant to recognize the government. Its sole supporter Pakistan also finds it difficult to lend support to a group that is not only creating international embarrassment for Islamabad but also ignoring Islamabad's interests by not coming hard on the TTP terrorists hiding on Afghan soil.

Therefore, it is important that the Taliban accept the rights of their citizens enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, allow pluralism and dispel the impression that they are representatives of one ethnic group or one sectarian entity. They must include more Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras and Turkmen in governments and local administration besides lifting all curbs on women who are an essential part of Afghan society. The Taliban claim to have the support of the people. They must prove this popularity among the Afghan through fair and transparent elections. A nascent insurgency in parts of the country's north could plunge the country into another conflict. Before the roots of resistance get firm, a democratic way must be adopted to address the inveterate problems of Afghanistan. The salvation of the country lies in democracy.

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