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**Conflicts and democracies**

The recent game of death and destruction in Afghanistan has raised a number of questions for Pakistan, the region and the world. The clashes between Afghan forces and the Taliban have added to the woes of the hapless Afghan people.

The spectre of a civil war is not only haunting the citizens of the conflict-hit state but international humanitarian organisations and various global bodies as well. The current situation has added to the plight of the country's people who have not witnessed any major respite from the conflict during the last four decades.

For Pakistan the conflict has the potential of creating a crisis of refugees. The country is already hosting millions of Afghan refugees. There is a possibility that it would witness more exodus from its western borders. Millions of people from the conflict-ridden state have their relatives inside Pakistan, prompting them to take refuge in a place that they know better than other places in the hope of avoiding the horrors of the escalating conflict.

The knowledge of Pakistani languages and cultures makes it easier for them to adjust here better than at any other place. Afghans are no strangers to Pakistan and have been coming here for treatment, businesses, education and other purposes. The Afghan refugees who came here during the decade of the1980s and 19890s have now well-established businesses and are in a position to extend help and succour to their loved ones that have been facing the civil war.

But such migration will add to the financial woes of Pakistan besides possibly creating tensions between different Pakistani ethnicities. In the past politicians like Mehmood Khan Achakzai expressed a willingness to help the refugees but Baloch nationalists resented such arrival fearing this would change the demography of Balochistan. In Sindh, the entry of Afghan refugees in the past created communal tensions in Karachi. Sindhi nationalist parties in parts of the province also staged demonstrations against such migration.

Pakistan is already going through one of the biggest financial crises of its history. The pandemic has already affected millions of people with more than 20 million people losing their jobs. The International Monetary Fund and other global financial bodies are reluctant to rescue Islamabad. There has been a phenomenal increase in our external debts while the cost of doing business is also becoming unbearable. Health, sanitation, housing and the road infrastructure are already in shambles. Amidst all this, if Pakistan witnesses more influx of refugees, it will definitely add to its economic and financial problems, which might also damage the social fabric of Pakistani society in the long run.

The situation in Afghanistan has also created the spectre of a humanitarian crisis. Millions of people there are already on the mercy of aid extended by various global bodies. The country already lacks water, health and sanitation facilities. All the warring groups are involved in destroying the country's infrastructure and meagre sources of amenities. The destruction of hospitals and health units will especially multiply Afghans’ woes since they have already been facing the paucity of such essential entities. The situation of poverty and hunger will also be exacerbated by the conflict, snatching away the livelihood of millions of Afghans, which means that the country will have more malnourished men, women and children in the coming years.

For the region too, the situation has created security concerns. The chaos in the landlocked country during the decade of the 1990s created favourable conditions for Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Extremists from the western Chinese city of Xinxiang and Muslim regions of Russia found refuge under the banner of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan.

Several sectarian leaders of Pakistan turned the conflict hit-country into a sanctuary with the cloistered group of the Taliban refusing to hand them over to Islamabad. Such pampering of religious and sectarian terrorists harmed not only Pakistan but other countries of the region as well. The Afghan Taliban have promised not to allow their country to be used against any other state but if the situation remains chaotic such insurances would be of no use.

This senseless war in Afghanistan has also highlighted the importance of democracies. It cannot be asserted that the democratic system is the best but when it comes to a peaceful transfer of power, this system is still the best on offer in the world. The world experienced monarchs, autocratic rulers, dictatorships, tyrannies and totalitarianism. Under all these systems, a peaceful transfer of power was never possible. Kings, queens, lords, knights and the clergymen fought terrible wars to capture powers in the European continent. The Ottomans introduced the obnoxious practice of fratricide to consolidate their power. The ruling elite in Mughal India also resorted to death and destruction for grabbing the throne at Delhi.

In undemocratic systems, rulers had to be killed or forced to abdicate power under the threat of force. Even the so-called socialist dictatorships prolonged the rule of one person or one party, creating a myriad of cracks in their societies that had catastrophic consequences. Regions that had weak democratic traditions plunged into several conflicts and civil wars.

Dictators in Africa pushed the region towards a conflagration several times in the continent’s short modern history for the sake of their power. Some of the most horrible crimes of the 20th century also took place here. From Rwanda to Burundi and Angola to Congo, those who drowned the continent into a river of blood subscribed to the ideals of autocracy and dictatorships.

Non-democratic states elsewhere also faced turmoil and chaos. The Syrian dictatorship was one of the factors that plunged the country into a deadly conflict claiming over 555,000 lives besides rendering 11 million people homeless. The dictatorship of Saddam Husain sowed the seeds of communal conflict that destroyed the lives of millions. The whims of erratic Arab dictator Colonel Gaddafi decided the fate of Libya, which is now on the verge of social, economic and political destruction.

It cannot be asserted that countries with democratic traditions did not witness wars and conflicts. The European continent before the emergence of the democratic system was a battleground for competing clergymen, feudal lords, warmongers and conspiratorial royal families. The continent also faced the brunt of first and second world wars.

But after the two terrible wars, they did not face any major civil war except the ones in Yugoslavia and Greece. But even these did not affect the land of democracies the way such conflicts affect other regions. The leadership of Europe made hectic efforts to restore peace. Some believe that it was strong democratic traditions that helped the European leadership sort out this issue. Although the conflict led to the violations of human rights and rapes of Bosnian women on a massive scale, with the passage of time sanity prevailed and the country got stabilised. It was also because of the strong institutions that those who committed horrible war crimes were prosecuted and sentenced. Had such a conflict taken place in areas with weak democratic traditions, it would still have been going on.

Therefore, it could be argued that a permanent solution of the Afghan imbroglio lies in the strengthening of democracy and democratic institutions. The Taliban, who claim to enjoy immense popularity among the Afghan people, should give up arms and take part in elections to prove the veracity of their claim. Violence breeds violence and if the Afghan Taliban capture Kabul through force, others will also try to dislodge them with the force of might, which means a perennial war and unending suffering.

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