



Federalism in Afghanistan: A recipe for disintegration

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As the U.S. and British forces continue to strike at the Taliban and the hideouts of the suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, many Afghan and non-Afghan observers look at it as an endgame for the hard-line Taliban regime and are already looking ahead.

The US and its allies initially maintained that their current involvement in Afghanistan was to cripple the terrorist networks in that country and not to get engaged in “state building”. However, they have now realised that the former cannot be achieved without first doing the latter. High ranking US and EU officials have recently been actively engaged in consultations with their allies and the players in the region about the formation of a post-Taliban government for Afghanistan.

Although there is no shortage of proposals for such a government, there is little consensus on what type of government could bring about a lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. Of the many proposals put forward so far, a high ranking State Department official recently pointed out that an effective government for Afghanistan would be a loose federation:

“As we have studied the situation, the Afghan experience seems to show that when the government is roughly a loose federation, it seems to work, with a very high degree of local autonomy”, said Richard Armitage, US Deputy Secretary of State.

While most Afghans would appreciate and welcome any active positive involvement of the international community to help them have a government that can restore peace

and stability in their war-shattered country, they are sceptical of any mechanism the Afghans are not party to, and is imposed on them. The very crisis that has been looming in Afghanistan

Federalism: an unnecessary option

Those who propose federalism as a preferred option for governance in

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for years is a direct result of government formulas imposed from the outside and foreigners’ unwelcome interventions. A government that comes about due to consultations with others to the exclusion of Afghans negates—as they have many times over the past two and a half decades—the very basic rights of Afghans to self-determination.

As far as federalism goes, it is not a governance option for Afghanistan. Many who know the ground reality in Afghanistan would agree that federalism is not only unnecessary under the circumstances, but it also would serve as a recipe for deeper divisions among diverse ethnic groups in Afghanistan and would lead to a subsequent disintegration of the country.

Afghanistan often cite “grievances among minorities” over their marginalisation by previous governments as a reason for change. However, they fail to explain why a unitary system—of the type we used to have—couldn’t be improved upon to take care of the inclusion of all ethnic groups in the governance of Afghanistan. The truth remains that of the many factors that can be listed as possible causes of the on-going crisis in Afghanistan, grievances from different ethnic groups in Afghanistan over the type of government we used to have is not one of them.

This is not to claim that the governance system that used to exist in Afghanistan

was free of faults—in fact, no such government exists in any part of the world. However, given the complex cultural, historical, demographic and geographic realities of Afghanistan, it was a government that could be built upon and a government that certainly was superior to a federalist system. A change in the system just for the sake of change is not necessary and, in fact, is meaningless unless there are valid reasons to believe that it is necessary.

The root causes of the current abject state of Afghanistan have always been foreign interventions.

First, it was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and then the neighbouring countries continuously pursuing their various self-interests in Afghanistan at the expense of peace and stability there. The ongoing war in Afghanistan would be better described as a proxy war by neighbours, rather than as a civil war, as it is termed by most foreign observers. Some foreign experts who threw in the ethnic factor in their mix of causes for the Afghan crisis are mistaken at best.

Most such analysis is based on the observed fact that the current warring factions in Afghanistan are formed around ethnic and regional lines. For example, the Taliban are predominantly Pashtoons from the South and East, while the Northern Alliance derives its military manpower from the Tajeks, Uzbeks and Hazaras of Northern and Central Afghanistan. All factions are extremely ethnocentric, with each having committed serious war crimes against the people of rival ethnic groups on numerous occasions throughout the internal war. This, in turn, is translated into evidence of grievances that existed among ethnic groups because some (majorities) in previous governments marginalized others (minorities).

Such analyses, however, fail to take into account that each warring faction in Afghanistan is hated by the ethnic group it supposedly represents as much as people of rival groups hate it.

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In addition, unlike often suggested, the various ethnic groups such as Pashtoons, Tajeks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmens, Baluchs, Nooristanis and others have evolved—even during the past two and half decades of war—into a mix of Afghans with common culture, psychology and ethos. For example, Pashtoons from the Eastern part of Afghanistan have more in common with and therefore bond with Uzbeks from the North of Afghanistan better than they would with the Pashtoons of Pakistan.

Though ethnically diverse, politically and socially Afghans have mingled into one distinct entity: “Afghan”. It is this distinction—as Afghans—that has enabled them to remain living in one integral country despite the fact that over the years, numerous attempts have been made both by neighbouring countries, such as Iran and Russia, and some warring factions at the behest of their foreign masters, to disintegrate Afghanistan under the guise of federalism.

Warlordism, personal fiefdoms and foreign interference

If one looks at the history of the unitary system in Afghanistan, one will find that it was compelled by the very things that a federation would lead to in a country like Afghanistan.

Federalism is an advanced system of a democratic government that allows citizens to be part of the democratic

process and decision-making in all levels of government. However, in a country like Afghanistan, where illiteracy is abundant, the economy is in shambles and land and other natural resources are not evenly distributed across the country, federalism would lead to warlordism, personal fiefdoms, no respect for the central government and a continuation of internal war—this time over who gets what.

It might also further the chances of neighbouring countries interfering in the affairs of Afghanistan more effectively and may eventually prove to be a recipe for a permanent division of Afghanistan along ethnic and linguistic lines.

It is no wonder why the two warring factions that have called for a federalist system in Afghanistan—the Iran backed Hezb-i-Wahdat of Khalili, and the Uzbekistan- and Russian-backed Junbish-i-Mili of General Dostam—are also the ones that have already drawn maps of their independent countries within Afghanistan. They have guessed quite accurately, perhaps, through a careful search of their political dictionaries, that the word that would bring them steps closer to their ultimate goal is “federalism”. If only their respective ethnic groups supported their desires, Afghanistan would now already be divided.

It cannot be emphasised enough that a government able to bring a lasting peace and stability to Afghanistan has to be representative of all ethnic groups. It cannot be manipulated by one group at the expense of others, but rather must allow every ethnic group to have a fair share of say in the day-to-day affairs of their country. It must give every citizen a sense of belonging to the government and to the country, regardless of his or her ethnic and linguistic background. I see no reason why a unitary system won't be able to have such characteristics. ☺