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**Stuck in a Struggle**

The Lack of Economic and Social Progress is Bound to Undermine Government Authority in Afghanistan

The threats that Afghanistan faces are easy to list: An insurgency of Islamic fundamentalists, a violent drug trade, and 'Warlordism'. But there are social and economic issues that seriously undermine the authority of the Afghan Government that might prove the undoing of an orderly Afghanistan – and the May 29<sup>th</sup> riots in Kabul should serve as a warning in this regard.

Kabul itself is largely safe from the threats of the insurgency, the narcotics trade, and the feuds of warlords (which the Afghan government, as per a heavy-handed 'suggestion' to journalists, would rather have labeled "Freedom Fighters"). In spite of this, Kabulis are frustrated by the lack of economic and social progress.

Since the collapse of the Taliban regime, a new generation is emerging. This generation does not remember the past bloodsheds and troubles and has very quickly forgotten the harsh living conditions under the Taliban. Those, who were teenagers during the rule of the Taliban, are now young adults. They have access to the world media through the internet and satellites dishes. They are inspired by the Western lifestyle, broadcast from economically advanced countries. They have legitimate desires, and hopes. They have dreams but when they think about the prospect of their own life they are shocked.

One of the crucial problems in Kabul is poverty and unemployment. Only a small number of young Kabulis are hired by foreign offices and earn a decent income. Even those who are employed in public administration do not earn adequate incomes. Unemployment becomes a growing concern both for people and government. For instance, last year approximately 100,000 young girls and boys graduated from high schools in Kabul. Only 15,000 have been absorbed into public colleges. The Afghan public administration does not have the capacity to recruit more and jobs in the private sector do not exist. In the absence of the enforcement of property rights, lack of security, and administrative corruption, private or foreign investments – the only source of sustainable employment growth – are understandably small, given the enormous risk. The situation is made more volatile by the 85,000 young adults that enter the job market every year – all on top of the already large amount of unemployed young Kabulis. While limited numbers of people live a relatively good life, the rest of the population struggles to earn their daily bread.

The failed policy of restructuring and reforming the administration and the security forces, which has resulted in mass unemployment, causes a further social and economic strain on Afghanistan. Thousands of young fighters who belonged to military forces have lost their occupation and income. Contrary to the stipulations of the reform

plan, the Afghan government was unable to create enough job training centers in order to provide new job opportunities for those who were forced out of military units. The resulting loss of income for many families has become a source for social troubles and crimes in the city.

The massive return of refugees from Pakistan and Iran is another cause for the deterioration of social and economic conditions. The majority of returning refugees have opted to reside in big cities, mainly Kabul. The sudden increase in population in Kabul has added to growing problems. The government authorities did not make adequate plans and preparations to deal appropriately with returning refugees.

What will happen to the disenchanted young generation? This generation, who benefits from relative education, has a political conscience. People read free newspapers and listen to the radio and watch independent television stations. The multitude of private newspapers, radio-, and television stations scrutinize and criticize government actions and policies. Although that is – in part – their job, they contribute to fueling popular disenchantment with the government. For instance, local media talks about what the world community has promised help for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, how much money is pledged, and how foreign donations are wasted in the hands of inefficient and ineffective government and non-governmental organizations, and how corruption is strangling the administration. The difference between what people listen to from official channels and what they actually see and experience is the cause of many of the current problems. In the past four years a lot of things in terms of economic and social improvement have been promised but few have been delivered.

The much publicized unfortunate road accident of May 29<sup>th</sup> of a US military vehicle wasn't the main cause for riots in Kabul. It became a pretext for those unemployed, disenchanted, and disillusioned to show their anger toward the government and the region's most convenient boogey man, the United States. They believe that the government is incapable of meeting their demand. They have waited for four years to see the end of their daily struggles but have not seen much improvement in their social and economic conditions. People have lost hope about the prospect of their life – in part because the government failed to deliver what was initially promised by the international community in terms of development.

The Afghan government is now facing these new dilemmas. The demands of young Afghans are not that different from those in developed countries. They demand education, the availability of jobs, and legitimate means to live a decent life. That these are hard to come by in a society of relative lawlessness and a weak, if not impotent, central government – and that many of Afghanistan's problems are self-reinforcing does not bode well for the future. If they prove the current Afghan government's undoing, they might also prove the undoing of hope for normality for a whole generation of young Afghans.

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