

An Assessment of Public Administrative Reforms in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This is a library based historical and qualitative research which reviews public administrative reforms in Afghanistan with a focus on international donors' financial assistance and the commitment of political leadership in Afghanistan. The conclusion is withdrawn from analyzing the findings of other researches and reports published from 2006 to 2018. The findings of this paper show that despite all the obstacles, it is apparent that since 2001, the capacity of the public institutions and ministries has significantly improved in Afghanistan. They are now far better than few years back in catering services and management of finances. The capacity at the central level has drastically improved though at provincial and district levels it remains low. The progress made during the last few years can not be neglected though most of the citizens remain dissatisfied and doubt the effectiveness of the financial aid spent on various public administrative reforms undertaken. The analysis show that preference of individual donor interests over the general interests of the country, lack of coordination, transparency, poor management and monitoring have been some of the main reasons for ineffectiveness and inefficiency in the programs and projects implemented. Moreover, high security threats in the capital, provinces and remote areas of the country add up to the slow progress of administrative reforms. The number of incidents remains high, security conditions aggravate and no improvement to stabilize the country can be observed. The billions of US dollars spent by the US and other donor nations in Afghanistan have made very nominal impact in the improvement of security, economy, social change and administrative effectiveness. The overall impact has been very low as the economy remains weak and administration ineffective. Conflicting norms and values, nepotism and favoritism, existence of traditional and modern institutions performing the same functions further hinder the process of development. Afghanistan still depends on the financial assistance of the international donors. If the donor nations leave Afghanistan alone, the country will once again face the tragedy of the 1990s for which the international communities have to pay even bigger price than what they are spending now. Investment in the improvement of the Afghan government will be a long term and wise investment which will give a sigh of relief to the international communities and yield better results in the years to come.

1. Introduction

Public administrative reforms are deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organizations with the objective of getting them (in some sense) to run better (Pollitt/Bouckaert. 2011).

Public administrative reforms were considered to be one of the top priorities of Afghanistan's state-building and reconstruction agenda drafted after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. And since then international donors have been funding and supporting these reforms in Afghanistan. The main purpose is to make the Afghan government more efficient, transparent, responsive, self-sufficient and sustainable so that it can foster economy, deliver better services and improve living standards of the people.

The progress made during the last few years can not be neglected though most of the citizens remain dissatisfied and doubt the effectiveness of the financial aid spent on various public administrative reforms undertaken. The progress so far made is comparatively lower than the aid dedicated to these reforms. Afghanistan despite having received international donors' financial and technical assistance for many years, is still

considered to be one of the most corrupt, politically unstable, economically weak and insecure countries in the world. Afghanistan remains a fragile state, ranked 9th out of 178 countries, (Fragile States Index 2018) which makes it very difficult and challenging accomplishing the very ambitious targets set by the government for the public administrative reforms.

This paper reviews public administrative reforms in Afghanistan with a focus on international donors' financial assistance and the commitment of political leadership in Afghanistan.

2. Objectives of the research

The main objectives of this paper are:

1. To review and analyze international donors' financial assistance for public administrative reforms in Afghanistan.
2. To review and analyze the Afghan political leadership commitment towards public administrative reforms in Afghanistan.

3. Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative and library-based historical research in nature which derives its data from secondary sources only. Various authentic research articles, reports and newsletters from 2006 to 2018 are used in this research. The conclusion is based on the findings of these secondary sources.

4. International Donors

Since the downfall of the Taliban regime and installation of the new Afghan government by the US and its allies in 2002, more than 30 donor nations (Jelena Bjelica & Thomas Ruttig, 2018) have been providing technical and financial assistance to the Afghan institutions and ministries. The aid so far provided is about 130 billion US dollars, which is considered to be more than the money spent on the reconstruction of the ravaged Europe after the World War 11 (BBC, 2018).

This financial year (March 2017 – February 2018) alone, international donors funded about 66 percent of Afghanistan's total budget (Jelena Bjelica & Thomas Ruttig, 2018) of which 42 percent will go to defense (Aljazeera, 2018). This indicates that the Afghan government is highly depended on donors' aid even today after many years of its establishment.

Independent Administrative Reforms & Civil Services Commission (IARCSC) established in May 2002 based on the Agreement signed during the Bonn Conference is the main apex body to lead the government's process for public administration reforms. Its initiatives are also technically and financially supported by various programs and countries like Egypt, the EU (European Union), Germany, India, UK, UNDP (United Nations Development Program), USAID (The United States Agency for International Development), and the World Bank. Over the past 17 years, the Commission (IARCSC) has received continuous donor development assistance and the donors have pledged that the trend will continue in the future too.

Now the questions are that; how effectively these funds have been spent? And what impacts have these funds made in the improvement of economy, society and administrative effectiveness of Afghanistan?

Two-third of the billions of dollars in aid, poured in a very short span of time in Afghanistan, has bypassed the Afghan government (Jelena Bjelica & Thomas Ruttig, 2018). The donors claim that the government system is corrupt and other governmental and non-governmental agencies are more transparent and can provide better financial accountability. Moreover, the remaining of the fund allocated to governmental institutions for reforms such as Independent Administrative Reforms and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) was also coming with donors' agendas and conditions. Each donor had a different set of approaches and agendas in supporting the commission (IARCSC). Thus, the Commission (IARCSC) had to comply with donors' rules and regulations or else the fund would have been spent elsewhere where the donors' interest could have been served. As a result, the Commission (IARCSC) lacked the autonomy in spending these funds according to its own priorities, goals, and objectives. Therefore, the efforts to bring reforms didn't produce the desired results.

International NGOs also proved to be incapable of spending these funds wisely. The source of spending more than 10 billion US dollars contributed by 34 nations in aid since 2002 wasn't traceable; moreover, the World Bank couldn't evaluate the impact of the funds used in Afghanistan (France 24, 2018). The overall impact has been very low as the economy remains weak and administration ineffective. Individual donor interests over the general interests of Afghanistan, lack of coordination, transparency, poor management, and monitoring have been some main reasons for ineffectiveness and inefficiency in the programs and projects implemented. Furthermore, security threats in the capital, provinces and remote areas of the country add up to the maladministration.

Although the International donors are skeptical about transparency and the Afghan government capacity to use the funds effectively, they have recently shown some interest in linking some of their funds with the Afghan strategic goals for development and the Commission (IARCSC) rather than following their own particular interests which somehow gives a hope of financial autonomy to the Afghan government.

5. Afghan Political Leadership

The current constitution of Afghanistan was adopted in 2004 nearly two years after the collapse of the Taliban regime. The first presidential elections were also held in the same year (2004) and the second presidential elections took place in 2009. Hamid Karzai won both of the elections and led the country for almost 13 (including the interim period) years. Furthermore, three parliamentary elections in 2005, 2010 and 2018 were also held. Although all these elections (presidential and parliamentary) lacked transparency and were fraudulent, the third presidential elections that took place in 2014 were the most controversial elections as the two leading candidates (Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah) didn't agree over the results of the elections. Consequently, John Kerry U.S. secretary of state meddled between the two and formed a coalition government under the name of The National Unity Government. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani was appointed as the President and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah the Chief Executive a post which doesn't have constitutional ground.

In addition, the 2018 parliamentary elections though conducted with a biometric system and much more preparations than before by the Independent Elections Commission of Afghanistan were reported with a high level of rigging and manipulations.

During Hamid Karzai's presidency, the top positions in provinces were divided among him and his vice president Mohammad Qasim Fahim (from Northern Alliance). The purpose was to increase their influence in the domestic and business affairs of the country (Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, 2016).

The 2014 controversial elections have made the situation fragile. It took, the new government (The National Unity Government) under the leadership of Ghani and Abdullah, approximately two years to form its cabinet. For several months ministries and provinces were headed by acting ministers and governors. The National Unity Government, more or less, has

similar characteristics to that of president Karzai's when it comes to the recruitment and appointments of high-ranking positions. Since its inception till date (the time of writing this paper), the National Unity Government has made several and frequent transfers, removal and appointments of high-ranking authorities on the bases of political settlements. Political negotiations and bargaining take place over these frequent transfers, removal, and appointments of high-ranking authorities among President Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah, and other top politicians though a legal framework for merit-based recruitment exists. Besides, the civil service law of 2008 clearly emphasizes on the practice of open competitive recruitment.

To build and develop modern institutions of democratic governance, to realize the delivery of important public services, to promote law and order, and to create an enabling economic environment, political will is necessitated. In the past four international conferences (Kabul 2010, Tokyo 2012, London 2014, and Brussels 2016), the Afghan government and international donors have pledged to meet the aid criteria and make the aid effective.

Furthermore, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani has recently recommended 28 written instructions on reforms to be followed and implemented by the Commission (IARCSC). Institutional capacity of government ministries and agencies, staff capacity development, personnel change, ministry and agency performance appraisal, provincial personnel assessment, evaluation of organizational structures, recruitment, dissolution and merging of agencies are some reforms recommended by President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani (IARCSC, 2018). As part of the recommendations for reforms, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani has recently ordered merging of transport and public work ministry, civil aviation authority, railway authority, and interior ministry's traffic department to establish a single administrative unit under the title of Transport Ministry (1tvnews, 2018). The merger of these institutions is currently underway. Moreover, improvements in the Civil Service Commission, Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), the Attorney General's office (AGO) and the Process of Elections are some other public administrative reforms achieved by the National Unity Government (Chief of Staff's Office of the President, 2018).

There have been gradual improvements in the performances of ministries and institutions though the government still needs to merge some of its ministries and agencies that share the same functions. For instance, the function to curb corruption in the civil sector is dealt by President's office, Audit and Control Authority, Internal Audit Departments of the individual ministries, High Office of Oversight on Anti-corruption and Attorney General's office.

One of the greatest achievements among others of The National Unity Government under the leadership of Mohammad Ashraf Ghani is the Peace Agreement signed in September 2018 with Hekmatyar leader of the Hezb-i-Islami group and one of the prominent figures in Afghanistan civil war of the 1990s (Aljazeera, 2018). Hekmatyar now lives in Kabul the capital of Afghanistan with having political freedom and more. In addition, The National Unity Government also took the initiatives to start

the peace and reconciliation process with the Taliban which didn't happen since the rise of Taliban against the Afghan government and its allies.

6. Analysis & Conclusion

Afghanistan is a traditional country, passing through a transition period where all the three features (overlapping, formalism, and heterogeneity) of a prismatic society coexist. Conflicting norms and values, nepotism and favoritism, the existence of traditional and modern institutions performing the same functions hinder the process of development in Afghanistan. In addition to these challenges, high-security threats, weak and aid-dependent economy, poor management, lack of coordination and unstable political environment contribute to the ineffectiveness of the efforts made.

Experiences from other developing countries show that public administrative reforms are time and money consuming as well as require strong political will. Those developing countries that avail skilled and professional workforce, committed political leaders and citizens' support can achieve reforms somewhat easily. However, the scenario in Afghanistan is quite different.

Despite all the obstacles, it is apparent that since 2001, the capacity of the public institutions and ministries has significantly improved in Afghanistan. They are now far better than few years back in catering services and management of finances. The ministries have greatly increased their staff in Kabul, and many ministries line departments in the provinces have access to modern technology but the effectiveness of these technologies in daily operations and service delivery is not realized yet. There is also to some extent improvements in terms of merit-based recruitment.

The progress made during the last few years can not be neglected though most of the citizens remain dissatisfied and doubt the effectiveness of the financial aid spent on various public administrative reforms undertaken. The capacity at the central level has considerably improved but at provincial and district levels it remains low.

Based on President Ghani's recommendations, the merger of some institutions is currently underway. Moreover, improvements in the structures and processes of the Civil Service Commission, Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), the Attorney General's office (AGO) and the process of elections are some other public administrative reforms achieved by the National Unity Government (Chief of Staff's Office of the President, 2018).

Dependency of the Afghan institutions and ministries on foreign aid is one of the major obstacles that isn't resolved yet. This financial year (March 2017 – February 2018) alone, the international donors funded 66 percent of Afghanistan's total budget. However, the international donors don't trust the Afghan government and thus most of the funds provided by the donors bypass the Afghan government. Most of the donor-funded programs and projects are implemented by international non-governmental organizations as they are trusted in terms of better service delivery, transparency, and financial accountability.

Furthermore, reforms in Afghanistan collide with other already established structures and procedures. Concurrent and at a large scale restructuring of institutions and ministries, creation of new regulations, rules, procedures, and TORs for various functions of various levels created chaos. The commission (IARCSC) due to its limited and weak institutional capacity couldn't cope with these highly ambitious goals and targets. Creating parallel agencies and powers to do the same function also made things worse. International donors did a lot of paperwork by creating unrealistic and unachievable goals and objectives which merely served the purpose of attracting more funds, the funds that would be spent ultimately by the donors themselves wherever their interests are secured.

Most of the funds provided by the donors were allocated for capacity building training, high salaries to the international consultants and top-level managers who worked for them in Afghanistan. Additionally, government employees were paid handsome money for attending the capacity building training conducted by the donors and implementing partner NGOs that led to spoiling employees' attitude and behavior.

The slow progress of the reforms is attributed to various factors such as security-related issues that pose high threats and impedes the progress at national and sub-national level, preference of individual donors interest in aid spending, the unclear and overlapping roles of the commission (IARCSC), Finance ministry and the office of the president, the legal framework for the commission (IARCSC), deficiencies within legal and regulatory environment, multiple strategic planning exercises by different governmental bodies, the institutional and operational incompetence and inability of ministries and agencies at the central and sub-national levels, and lack of public aspiration.

Fiscal sustainability is a prerequisite for self-rule. And this could only be achieved when the central government is strong enough to deliver justice, boost economic growth, and be accountable, responsive and transparent. Institutional and individual capacity building play a vital role in the smooth functioning of the government machinery. The exercise of merit-based recruitment is also crucial for the implementation of administrative reforms which in reality require a strong political

commitment. The focus has to be changed from central to local governance. In the far remote suburbs of the country hardly citizens can get access to even basic services like water, health, education and electricity. If the local government which makes the foundation is weak then the entire government would be prone to failure.

Structural and process changes shall follow attitudinal and behavioral changes as social infrastructure is more important than physical infrastructure right now in Afghanistan. Change in the perception of the citizens and officials towards modernization and new changes will pave the path for administrative and economic reforms.

The Public Administration and Policy faculties recently established in the five large public universities across the country (located in Kabul, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif provinces) can play a vital role in the attitudinal and behavioral change of the new generation. Hence they should be given high priority and strengthened so that they can equip the new generation with technical, human and conceptual skills and new approaches to better shoulder the future development of the country.

Individual donor interests have to subordinate the general interest of Afghanistan. Not only this, but also the financial and technical support by the international community has to continue until the country achieves economic growth, sustainability and peace. Afghanistan can't survive without the financial assistance of international donors. The recent emergence of ISIS besides the Taliban is another major threat which needs vigilant attention. Furthermore, the international community has to ensure the inclusion of the current government in the ongoing peace and reconciliation talk with the Taliban a process which was initiated by The National Unity Government itself under the leadership of Mohammad Ashraf Ghani. If the donor nations leave Afghanistan alone, the country will once again face the tragedy of the 1990s for which the international communities have to pay even bigger price than what they are spending now. Investment in the improvement of the Afghan government will be a long term and wise investment which will give a sigh of relief to the international communities and yield better results in the years to come.

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