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Ashraf Ghani: A return to traditional Afghan governance

Afghan president's speech signals return to a consultative and consensual relationship between the state and society.

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Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's April 25 address to his country's parliament signaled a much-anticipated shift in his administration's war and peace policy, according to many observers. Ghani's domestic critics, though, quickly branded the speech as demagoguery.

Ghani's actions over the next few weeks will determine whether this was an attempt to temporarily appease domestic opposition to his controversial peace initiative or a true genesis of a fresh policy.

But, perhaps as pivotal as the content, was the Afghan president's method of adjusting and communicating his stance.

Clearly, the content indicated Ghani's moving away from his previously conciliatory position towards Islamabad. He bluntly declared, "The leadership of terrorists is in Peshawar and Quetta", adding that "the Haqqani Network and some groups of the Taliban" are goons, assassins and only foot soldiers for other countries' interests.

Duty of the state

Afghanistan does not expect Pakistan to bring the Taliban to talks, Ghani explained. Rather, Islamabad should either conduct military operations against them or extradite them to be tried in Afghan courts.

He branded the Taliban, "baghi", an Islamic term for armed insurgents, whose killing is a duty of the state.

A striking moment in the speech that received little media attention came when he said, "the dignified women of this land still remember the whiplash of those ignorant oppressors and would never again tolerate such a group", referring to Taliban's draconian treatment of women.

This was the first time an Afghan leader acknowledged, in a public speech, Afghan women's legitimate concerns in the war and peace discourse.

But, beyond the specifics of Ghani's address, one detects a fundamental procedural shift to a more consultative and consensus-based approach to governance.

The event was prompted, in part, by mounting discontent by Afghan politicians and the general public with Ghani's peace policy and deteriorating security.

It was also a move to disprove claims that his governance style was becoming autocratic. His political opposition as well as supporters of Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, were increasingly becoming louder in complaining about a lack of discussions and inclusion in important national policies.

Tribal context

As in many tribal contexts, the relationship between the state and society in Afghanistan was, for centuries, one of reciprocity between leaders and the populace.

Historically, a "good" leader in the eyes of the Afghans is the one who acts as a primus inter pares.

From Ahmad Shah (r. 1747-1782) to Zahir Shah (r. 1933-73), monarchs who could skillfully implement their vision while maintaining humility and dialogue with their subjects, were considered successful leaders.

Unlike the classical Iranian model of absolute rule, or the post-colonial pseudo-Western or military dictatorships of the rest of the region, leadership in the Afghan context was defined by its dynamic nature, a work in progress and dependent on continuous negotiation and consensus building.

From the 1973 coup d'etat that ended Zahir Shah's constitutional monarchy, successive Afghan leaders moved increasingly away from that tradition and adopted various forms of autocratic rule.

Whether it was the communist central committee in Kabul, the mujahidin's tanzims (organisations) in Pakistan and Iran, or the Taliban's leadership Shura (council) in Kandahar, governance became strictly top-down and decisions non-negotiable.

At the community level, too, the previous give-and-take relationship that existed between constituents and the community leaders was changed.

Local leaders' primary function in the past was to facilitate resolution of disputes. Their authority was derived and maintained through an organic and consultative relationship with their communities.

The new community leaders

Resistance commanders with direct ties to Mujahidin leaders became the new community leaders by supplying arms and money. In the wartime modus operandi, traditional leaders were rendered irrelevant and the principle of consensus building faded.

The post-Taliban order reinstated state institutions and added a few new structures to meet contemporary demands. Foreign aid allowed for the state to once again begin its functions.

However, Afghanistan's benefactors ignored the fact that without attention to processes, rule of law and political will, institutions alone cannot achieve effective governance.

With jihadist personalities back in power, hopes for the establishment of healthy processes and generation of political will were dim from the start. These were politicians who only knew the patronage system as an effective governance model. The state-society relationship neither returned to its traditional consensual mode, nor did an efficient modern style become operational.

For the next 13 years, the US and other coalition states in Afghanistan continued to insist on prioritising stability at the cost of the rule of law and good governance.

Ghani's predecessor, Hamed Karzai, had succeeded in creating a semblance of consultative rule by using international aid, appointments and impunity to bribe political leaders into acquiescence.

Ghani entered this environment with two handicaps: an extra-constitutional power-sharing arrangement with his rival Abdullah Abdullah and no background in jihadi-style governance.

Accommodating the "old guard" that constituted the majority of both his and Abdullah's campaign allies while implementing his vision of governance has proved more difficult than Ghani had probably imagined.

The dramatic increase in insurgency activities and the weakening of the Afghan economy, both largely correlated to the US and NATO military withdrawal, has further complicated the situation.

Perhaps in a bid to bring fundamental procedural changes that would result in curbing of corruption and weakening of patronage networks, Ghani's presidency fell into a highly centralised style of governance. Critics have accused him of micromanaging the affairs of the state only to consolidate his power.

A part of the criticism, of course, stems from the old guard's fear of losing control. But, while they may not have the capacity to break their jihad-era mould, they have quickly learned to use modern means of communication, in addition to endlessly holding meetings with their networks, the traditional way.

On the administration side, the president's brilliant concepts and fresh approaches have suffered implementation glitches, but Ghani's fundamental problem lies in his hitherto failure to effectively communicate with the public and the political elite.

CEO Abdullah's public relations savvy could remedy the government's communication discrepancy. However, unresolved issues about division of power - mostly appointments - and his legally precarious position had kept him from playing the communicator's role.

The cooperation that led to Ghani's parliament address signals a new understanding between the two partners and a shift of focus to greater issues like security and placating the growing discontent of the country's politicians with the unity government.

The speech was preceded by closed-door meetings between Abdullah and Ghani and Afghan MPs, in which a serious effort was made to listen to the concerns of the nation's representatives.

In parliament, Ghani pledged to act on most of the MPs suggestions and promised continued consultations with them on a regular basis.

If followed through sincerely, this signals a return to consultative and consensual relationship between the state and society, a revival of the traditional Afghan political culture in a modern form