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TUTAP Controversy Heightens

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Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TUTAP) power project controversy seems to be getting serious as the plans are underway to start the activities of the project. TUTAP is basically a 500 kV electricity power project, financed by Asian Development Bank (ADB) and is meant to transfer electricity from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan to Afghanistan and ultimately, to Pakistan. From Afghanistan's point of view this project is very much necessary in supporting the electricity infra-structure in the country and provide people with reliable electric energy throughout the year. It can also support Afghanistan in economic terms. This project can also support Afghanistan in realizing the promises of CASA-1000, as without TUTAP Afghanistan cannot serve as transit system for transmitting electricity from Central Asian countries to South Asia because of the incapacity to export bulk of energy.

In an assessment in November 2015, Asian Development Bank (ADB) mentioned, "Afghanistan needs a unified national electricity grid. Different parts of Afghanistan's networks are supplied as passive islands by power fed from Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Because of asynchronous grid operations in these countries, the current network configuration is highly inflexible." TUTAP will thus support in bringing these networks together and allow flexibility in supply and provide efficiency in load dispatch.

The project seems to be of immense importance but, unfortunately, it is facing a controversy because of its route. It has been, somehow, decided that the project would follow the route through Salang but there are many analysts, politicians and people who suggest that it had to pass through central Bamiyan province. The most notable among them is the German engineering consultancy – Fichtner, that suggested in 2013, in an assessment for ADB that

Bamiyan route would avoid the narrow space and difficulties along the Salang Pass, would allow connecting further generation by coal fired power plants along the route and would secure power supply of Kabul and south Afghanistan by using a separate route.

In January, this year second Vice President Sarwar Danish had also voiced concerns regarding the implementation of TUTAP through Salang. He insisted that the multi-million dollar project could be jeopardized with devastating Salang risks and ignoring the recommendations of the Fichtner which sketched the master plan of the project. He also highlighted that the implementation of project through Bamiyan could bolster the power generation of coal mine in Dara-e-Suf and Ashpasta areas of Bamiyan, supply of power to Hajigak iron ore and Mes Aynak copper mine, and prevention of power shortage to Kabul and other provinces. He also wrote a letter to the Ministry of Energy and Water and Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS) and called for technical approach to implement the project, considering the needs of the residents of the central provinces for their access to energy who had repeatedly demanded the government to ensure social justice while executing such projects.

Recently, Mohammad Mohaqiq, CEO Abdullah Abdullah's second deputy declared that the changing TUTAP's route from Bamiyan meant a clear discrimination and bully against the people of central provinces and he would stop cooperation with National Unity Government (NUG) if his voice and the voices of the people were not heard.

The acting provincial governor Ata Mohammad Noor also slammed the government for selecting Salang as the transit route for TUTAP, saying, "Salang is not a priority considering the presence of power lines. The implementation of the project from Bamiyan will not only ensure balance and justice in the implementation of development projects but will also boost unity among the Afghan people." He, thus, urged the government to consider the demands of the residents of central province and allow the project to pass through Bamiyan province. Moreover, thousands of people in Bamiyan, Heart, Daikundi, Ghor, Paktia and Kabul protested against this change of route last week and they demanded that a decision based on justice should be taken and any sort of discrimination against the residents of the central provinces should be discouraged. People promised that they would continue their protests unless their voice were heard.

Demonstrations were staged even in London on Thursday, where hundreds of people gathered to condemn government's decision to change the route. These demonstrations were staged while President Ghani reached to London to attend Anti-Corruption Summit. Additionally, President Ghani's speech was interrupted in the UK-based Royal United Services Institute, when an Afghan protestor interfered during his speech, claiming that he had failed to fulfill his promises he had made to Afghan people. Meanwhile a second protestor raised his voice, saying that Afghan President was discriminating Hazaras, referring to the change in TUTAP route. President's security guards, however, got into a physical fight with the protestor, who was then dragged out.

In response to all these protests, President Ghani has blamed the previous government for ambiguities regarding the change in the route. He has also planned to setup a commission to

make the final decision. Meanwhile DABS and Ministry of Energy and Water also blame the previous government for changing the route. Karim Khalili, the ex-vice-President, however, says that the previous government had a clear idea that the project would pass through Bamiyan as it had the Fichtner report.

The ambiguities and back-door decisions have led to misunderstandings regarding the change in route. Government, in this regard, needs to remove all these ambiguities and it requires a solid reason to ignore the Fichtner report, which is based on technical suggestions not political inclinations.