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Hekmatyar in the Spotlight

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Signing peace agreement with Afghan government, the head of Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has entered the country. His return triggered mixed feelings among Afghan nation. The cyberspace is filled with his past and present practices. A number of Afghans condemn him for his active role in civil unrest and deem him a conservative ideologue. On the other hand, his loyalists welcome him with open arms and sparkling eyes. Perhaps the peace deal with HIA will be the only outcome of Afghanistan's High Peace Council (HPC) which is likely to be a pyrrhic victory since great sacrifices were made in this respect.

Ghani's administration signed peace agreement with Hekmatyar in September 2016 and pardoned him for his involvement in deadly incidents. Subsequently, the UN removed his name from the sanctions on February 03, 2017 as a result of Afghanistan's urge. The HIA vowed to respect the Afghan Constitution in exchanged for the government recognition of the group and support for the removal of United Nations and American sanctions against Hekmatyar. A group of activists staged a demonstration against the pardoning. Human Rights Watch called the deal "an affront to victims of grave abuses."

A number of people, mainly women, view Hekmatyar a religious ideologue with parochial mindset and fear that their freedoms will be curtailed if he gets power in the government's body. The head of Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) Simar Samar said, "We don't want to lose the past years' achievements that we gained with lots of sacrifices; we don't want to lose them with the return of a person or a commander." It reveals women's fear for losing their rights and liberty. It is an undeniable fact that Hekmatyar's involvement in civil unrest in 1990s resulted in indescribable destructions and fatalities. Moreover, his men also fought against Afghan government in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Picturing these views, one will feel a strong sense of fear and disappointment.

On the other hand, Afghan officials have welcomed his return with open arms and appreciated him for joining peace process. No wonder, Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) was established in 2010 to bring warring parties to negotiating table. All parties, including the Taliban's splinter group, refused to join peace process and intensified their attacks inflicting heavy casualties on Afghan soldiers and civilians. Neither Mullah Omar nor his successor held talks with Afghan government. Likewise, Mullah Haibatullah, who has recently announced "Mansouri offensive", follows his predecessors' footsteps and kill Afghan people indiscriminately. The Taliban also condemned Hekmatyar for joining peace process. In a video clip released by the Taliban, a high-ranking official from the Taliban's splinter group Mullah Manan says that the talks are mostly engineered by Pakistan and those who sit on the peace table are no more than political pawns. He says that an Afghan-led peace talks will be held on the condition that all foreign troops withdraw from the country.

However, Hekmatyar has urged the Taliban, in his speech, to stop violence and bloodshed and join peace process. He called the Taliban's war unsacred which has no religious legitimacy and lashed out against their recent attacks on unarmed soldiers who were offering prayer in a mosque in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Besides regretting women's absence in the welcoming ceremony in Nangarhar, Hekmatyar disapproved of women's negative role in media such as their half-naked presentation. He also criticized the national media for broadcasting serials which are against Islamic tenets. His words reflect two facts: first, he is no more against women's social and political life. Perhaps, he has reconciled his parochial mindset with the evolution taken place in the post-Taliban Afghanistan or he simply intends to say that he will respect women's rights in the frame of Afghan Constitution as he committed so in peace agreement. Constitutionally, there is no discrimination between men and women and both will exercise their rights and liberty equally. Second, his disapproval of anti-religious and anti-cultural values such as western serials shows his religious dilemma. The second fact does not bespeak of a radical view either. The broadcast of western

serials have been constantly criticized by the clergy since they are against Islamic tenets and moral values of the society.

However, there are doubt and wonder if Hekmatyar has accepted the Afghan Constitution and all its contents. The Constitution respects the United Nations Charter as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as it is stated in its preamble and article 7. Hence, now one will doubt whether or not Hekmatyar reconciles his religious views with the secular issues of UN Charter and UDHR – this paradox lies in the Constitution, too.

To sum up, Afghans fluctuate between fear and hope with the peace agreement and return of HIA's leader. Mixed feelings and anti and pro-slogans seem natural since every leader has their own opponents and proponents.