It's time for Tehran to start listening to ethnic minority groups

On June 18, the Islamic Republic of Iran will hold its 13th presidential election. This election will be one of the most critical in the country's recent history for multiple reasons. The widening gap between the needs and desires of the Iranian people and those of the country's rulers is profoundly undermining the regime's legitimacy and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's power. Thus, the regime is in desperate need of a credible election that would give it renewed legitimacy. Nevertheless, due to the country's ongoing political and economic crisis, and the Guardian Council's decision to ban several prominent candidates from participating in the presidential race, the voter turnout on Friday is expected to be low, raising questions about the credibility of the election.

The seven candidates who have been approved by the Council to participate in the election are all focusing on different socio-economic and political issues in their campaigns and making promises to handle future challenges better than the current government to convince Iranians to come to the polls and vote for them.

One of the issues nearly all candidates touched upon during their campaigns was ethnic rights. In an effort to attract Iran's ethnic minority groups – who together make up 40 to 50 percent of the population – to the polls, the candidates repeatedly expressed sympathy for their concerns. Two candidates, Mohsen Mehralizadeh and Abdolnasser Hemmati, even addressed the members of the Azeri minority in their mother tongue to garner their support. Nevertheless, despite cynically pandering to ethnic minorities to reach their electoral goals, none of the candidates made credible promises to these groups, or explicitly criticised the regime's ethnic policies.

The issue of ethnic rights have long been part of electoral discussions and campaigns in Iran. During the 1997 presidential election, Muhammad Khatami promised to make wide reaching socio-economical reforms to ensure equality between all Iranians regardless of their ethno-sectarian backgrounds. Khatami's ethnic promises successfully mobilised a large segment of ethnic minorities – especially Kurds and Baluchis – to vote in the election and carried him to the presidency. As a result, since Khatami's election, presidential candidates – and especially reformists who are in a better position to garner the support of minorities seeking reforms and rights – have been courting Iran's ethnic minority groups to realise their electoral ambitions.

The votes of ethnic minorities are also important for the state itself. Ethnic minorities not only make up a significant percentage of the general population, but they are also located all across the country. Thus, the regime needs them to participate in elections to enhance its legitimacy and national cohesiveness.

Khatami and other reformists that came after him, however, have routinely failed to keep the promises they made to ethnic minorities during their election campaigns after assuming power. And this trend continues to this day. Not only reformists, but also conservatives, moderates and hardliners routinely talk about ethnic rights during local and national elections to mobilise people to vote, but never even try to fulfil their promises when they assume power.

For instance, Hassan Rouhani, the current president of Iran, promised to allow ethnic and religious minorities to be involved in "in all political and administrative levels of government, including membership in the cabinet" during his presidential election campaign in 2013. He also pledged to allow the mother tongues of ethnic minority groups, such as Azeri, Kurdish and Arabic, to be taught in Iranian schools in compliance with the Article 15 of the Iranian constitution which states while the "Official language and writing script (of Iran)… is Persian … the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian."

However, after winning the election, with the help of ethnic minorities, he failed to fulfil these promises. Recently he even stated that he does not understand the need for teaching the mother tongues of ethnic minorities in schools, claiming that such a move could even "pose a threat to the Persian language and marginalise it".

The candidates' tendency to pander to ethnic minority concerns during election cycles but ignore them completely once they assume power is widening the long existing trust gap between these groups and Iran's political classes. This effect was most clearly seen during the Green Movement of 2009. While thousands in mostly Persian inhabited cities in Iran, such as Isfahan and Shiraz, rushed to the streets to protest in support of the reformist presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 presidential election, none of the provinces populated by ethnic minority groups joined the demonstrations.

Ethnic minority groups in Iran actively participated in the 1979 revolution, but have been completely sidelined from the political scene after it. The Islamic Republic's first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, promised ethnic groups greater rights while the revolution was underway, but in the following years responded to their demands for equality by executing their leaders, destroying their homes and villages, and exposing them to other forms of state-sanctioned violence and discrimination. Since then, Iranian politicians across the political spectrum have been remembering ethnic minority groups during election seasons, making promises to them to secure their votes, but consequently turning a blind eye to their plight.

Today, this vicious cycle is still not broken, but it needs to be for the wellbeing of not only the Iranian people but also the state. If candidates who expressed their sympathy for these groups during their election campaigns once again ignore them after the June 18 election, the disenchantment between ethnic groups and Tehran will grow further. If those in power in Tehran continue with their oppressive ethnic policies, persistent Shia centric discourses and empty promises of equality, the Iranian people will remain divided, and the regime cannot make a renewed claim to legitimacy.

Outgoing UN aid chief says we must tackle root causes of hunger, desperation

The outgoing UN humanitarian chief warned that "the explosion" in needs for humanitarian assistance in recent years will keep getting worse until major powers tackle the root causes of hunger and desperation -- conflicts, extremism, climate change, poor governance, corruption, and violence, to name a few.

Mark Lowcock, who steps down on Friday after four years, said in an interview with The Associated Press that unfortunately the world has been dealing with symptoms, including people displaced by fighting and natural disasters or at risk of famine, which is now stalking Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region and Yemen.

In a very divided world, where the geopolitical system has failed to manage conflicts very well, he said, there has been a "failure of the leading powers" to tackle the causes. "If the world wants to see less humanitarian suffering, you have to deal with the causes of that suffering," Lowcock said. "If you tackle the causes, you can make progress, you can improve people's lives."

During his lifetime, the 58-year-old British economist said the world moved from having more than half the global population living in "the most extreme poverty" to less than 10 percent in that dire situation before the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The people and countries left out of that economic progress are "the ones enmeshed in humanitarian suffering," he said.

Lowcock was highly critical of the world's rich countries, and especially the Group of Seven leading industrialized nations, for "not acting much more aggressively and generously and protecting the poorest countries coming out of the pandemic," not only with vaccines but supporting their economies, which "have taken the biggest hit in relative terms" and are "under huge strain."

Rich countries pumped trillions of dollars into their economies to protect their citizens and their nations, and "that's the right thing to do," he said.

"But it would also have been a smart thing as well as a kind and generous thing to have spent a little bit of that money protecting the very poorest countries," Lowcock said in the virtual interview on Wednesday.

It is also in the self-interest of wealthier nations, he said, because the problems that can brew in fragile countries — becoming havens for terrorism, places where climate change is hardest to tackle, sites where new diseases emerge and old diseases like Ebola re-emerge — "come back to bite you if you don't invest enough to contain the problems."

Lowcock called for a much bigger effort to help poorer countries out of the pandemic.

Rather than just announcing it was donating vaccines, he said, the G-7 should have made clear that what they were doing was "a small down payment," and that they would work with the larger Group of 20 major economies to do a lot more.

The G-7 leaders promised 1 billion doses for vaccine-hungry countries, far short of the 11 billion doses the World Health Organization said is needed to inoculate at least 70 percent of the world's population and truly end the pandemic. Lowcock said the G-7 announcement -- including 500 million doses from the United States and 100 million each from Britain and Canada -- is basically enough vaccine to reach about 10% of the people who need it in low- and middle-income countries.

He said the G-7 didn't announce money to get the vaccine from the manufacturer into the syringes of health workers who can immunize people, stressing that there are "huge costs in the delivery system." Some of the very poorest countries that got a little bit of vaccine but had no delivery systems gave some back, he said.

The G-7 should have made "a much more rounded, longer term commitment" to finance vaccine requirements, he said, and it should be challenging the G-20 "to step up and meet part of the share of the costs as well."

We cannot afford to give up our fight against polio now

I joined Rotary's efforts to eradicate polio more than two decades ago, shortly after meeting a mother in Karachi, Pakistan, who was struggling to carry her 11-year-old son whose legs had withered from polio paralysis. She told me that the virus paralysed three of her six children – a shocking fact given that the disease is easily preventable with a vaccine.

This encounter underscored to me the urgency of getting to zero cases. Back then, wild polio was paralysing more than 1,000 children every year in my native Pakistan, and 45 countries were still recording cases.

Today, the wild virus is still being seen in Pakistan and just one other country – Afghanistan. Five out of six world regions are wild polio-free. This progress is a testament to the collaboration between health workers, governments and donors around the world, and the coordinating efforts of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), which Rotary helped found in 1988.

Getting this far in our fight against polio was not easy. The number of cases fell in some years but increased in others as new obstacles arose.

Now, we are close to eradicating this deadly disease but we are also facing one of our biggest challenges to date. So it is vital that the GPEI has the global community's support to get across the finish line.

Efforts to eradicate polio, as is the case with every health programme, have suffered since the emergence of COVID-19. Vaccination campaigns were rightly paused for four months last year to protect front-line workers, and communities. As a result, tens of millions of children missed their polio vaccination.

This compounded the challenges we were already facing. There has been a resurgence of wild polio in Pakistan and Afghanistan in recent years due to insecurity and parents refusing to vaccinate their children against the disease. And there have been several outbreaks of cVDPV, a non-wild form of polio that is harmful to under-immunised communities.

While these setbacks are disappointing, the GPEI has shown it can make progress even when the odds are stacked against it. The initiative already successfully ended polio in several war zones and some of the most difficult geographies across the planet.

It has also shown how the efforts to stop polio have a broad impact on public health. During the pause in polio campaigns, the GPEI's vast disease surveillance and front-line workforce – including thousands of Rotary members – were key to the COVID-19 response in almost 50 countries. They helped track and trace the virus, improve community-level planning for the response, and distribute vital public health messaging.

The GPEI has recently focused its energy on three important areas, which gave me confidence that it will one day be able to defeat this disease for good while also supporting – and providing lessons for – other public health initiatives.

First, the GPEI has made a promise to increasingly support the delivery of essential health services to meet the needs of vulnerable communities.

Many of these communities, especially in parts of Pakistan, have grown weary of regular visits from polio vaccinators and few other health professionals, which has negatively affected vaccine uptake. While the programme has in the past helped deliver other vaccines, medicines, and maternal health advice, this will become more integrated into eradication efforts to improve health more broadly.

Second, the programme has been increasing its partnerships with governments in polio-affected and high-risk countries and empowering local leaders to support polio vaccination campaigns and engagement with families. To this end, it has been heartening to hear Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent commitments to keep treating polio as a public health priority in Pakistan.

And finally, the GPEI is working to broaden the use of innovative new tools that can help us defeat polio. These include a next-generation oral polio vaccine that could help more sustainably end outbreaks of cVDPV, and digital payments for polio workers, which are helping improve the efficiency of polio vaccination campaigns and boost motivation.

All these tactics are part of the new GPEI Polio Eradication Strategy 2022-26, and they give us a lot to be hopeful for. But no matter how strong our plan is, it will only succeed if governments and donors recommit the political and financial resources that the GPEI needs to end polio for good. If they don't, polio could resurge in countries where it has previously been eliminated and once again start paralysing tens of thousands of children every year – an unimaginable prospect, given how far we have come.

When governments support eradication, they are not only working towards a future where no family has to live in fear of their child being paralysed by a preventable disease. They are also supporting an entire infrastructure that can protect communities from emerging health threats, as we saw so powerfully with COVID-19.

The pandemic has stretched countries' resources, and some are considering reducing their support for polio. While these are difficult times, we cannot afford to win the fight against COVID-19 by allowing other vaccine-preventable diseases to resurge. Pulling back on efforts to eradicate polio now risks undoing everything we accomplished over the last three decades.

Rotary made a promise to end polio for good and it is one we intend to deliver on. Others must, too. **aljazeera**

War of words: MoFA asks Pakistan to avoid unrealistic...

From P1

The Afghan NSA had tweeted that Qureshi's interview "comes as Taliban launches violent offensives against Afghan people across the country, we know how & why they continue to be enabled to do this. Quraishi is either uninformed, ignorant or accomplice. Maybe he also rejects that, Osama was found next to Pakistani Military HQ."

The war of words erupted between Pakistan officials and NSA Mohib last month when the latter called Pakistan a 'brothel house'. Islamabad in protest over the remarks ended all official contacts with the Afghan NSA.

Last month, in a public speech in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan National Security Chief, Hamdullah Mohib called Pakistan a "brothel house." Pakistan's foreign ministry reacted sharply to remarks by Mohib and called on him to reflect on his statement.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said: "The national security adviser of Afghanistan carefully listen to me ... as the foreign minister of Pakistan I say that no Pakistani will shake your hand or talk with you if you don't desist from the kind of language, you are using or the accusations you're making against Pakistan."

Meanwhile, the Afghan government has longstanding reservations that Pakistan may be using the Afghan Taliban as a proxy. Pakistan has been long blamed for providing support to Taliban terrorists in Afghanistan.

The Kabul Times