Establishing independent institutions to restore the public confidence

Sayed Ikram Afzali, Executive Director

Public confidence in the Afghan government to bring the much needed political and economic stability has always been low. The 2016 National Corruption Survey indicated that more than half of the respondents felt the political situation was “somewhat” or “very” bad. In addition, 67% of the respondents felt that the government had not done enough to address the major issues faced by the Afghan people. Amid the current tide of political turmoil, insecurity, unemployment, and corruption, public confidence does not seem to have improved despite the efforts being made by the government.

Public debates are full of allegations of corruption against senior government officials and even the leadership of National Unity Government, especially relating to the award of government contracts. Recent allegations of corruption made by the Minister of Energy and Water against National Procurement Commission are particularly worrying.

Overall, anti-corruption efforts have been cosmetic, with only a few individuals actually prosecuted, while hundreds of corruption cases are still pending. The anti-corruption and transparency commitments made by the government have not been fulfilled. In addition, anti-corruption activists and experts are concerned that the teams in power might use the institutions of the state to favor individuals and groups close to their teams in order to win their political support and funding for the next elections’ campaign. The government has not been able to address the allegations and concerns in a satisfactory way.

In addition, political opponents of President Ghani have accused him of centralizing power andsidelining his opponents within the government, and also of politicizing the fight against corruption. Whether these claims are right or wrong would be difficult to prove but it is clear that to have such accusations made from within the government erodes public confidence.

It is important to acknowledge that the government has taken important steps in some areas, such as joining the Open Government Partnership and establishing the Anti-Corruption Justice Center. However, these efforts are not enough on their own. In order to restore public confidence, there is a need for establishing independent institutions composed of apolitical and impartial individuals with high integrity and competence appointed through a competitive and transparent process.

Such institutions must be independent of political interference, have control over their finances and staff, and be provided with enough resources to function smoothly (all core elements of internationally accepted Jakarta Principles for anti-corruption institutions).

On the basis of these principles, the government should establish the independent anti-corruption commission that it promised during the London Conference in 2014. They should also make the National Procurement Commission into an independent body, and make substantive reforms in the Independent Civil Service Commission to make it truly independent as well. Similar bodies could also be established for regulating other sectors such as the judiciary, the police, and service delivery.

The Afghan government must regain public confidence in order to get public support for its reform agenda, to end the war, and to bring lasting peace and stability in the country. But this is not possible without independent institutions that will be capable of building public confidence in a sustainable way. President Ghani has recently reiterated his commitment to giving away his power to the institution. It is time for the government to turn its rhetoric into action.
Integrity Watch to host the CoST initiative for the second consecutive year in Afghanistan

Integrity Watch was elected as the “Host Organization” for the Construction Sector Transparency Initiative, also known as CoST, in Afghanistan. This is the second consecutive year that Integrity Watch is hosting the CoST-Afghanistan. Other participants in the mid-June election were members of civil society, the government, and the private sector. The event was hosted at the Ministry of Economy where the secretariat is housed.

CoST is a global initiative working with governments and civil society to ensure transparency in the construction sector. The initiative is aimed at ensuring public infrastructure construction projects by accountability and transparency.

Afghanistan joined the CoST initiative in 2013. Since then, Integrity Watch Afghanistan has been a member of the Multi-Stakeholders Group of the initiative and has provided administrative and technical support to CoST-Afghanistan secretariat since 2016. The initiative has produced a scoping study and an assurance manual for implementation of CoST standards in the country.

So far, Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Ministry of Public Works, and Ministry of Economy have signed MOUs with the initiative to implement CoST standards in their ministries.
Integrity Watch uses “Theater of the Oppressed” to engage communities in court proceedings

Ali Ahmad Mashal Afrooz, Provincial Coordinator Kapisa

Integrity Watch, in collaboration with Afghanistan Human Rights Development Organization (AHRDO), conducted the first-ever “Theater of the Oppressed” at Imam-e-Azam Darulolum (religious school) in Kapisa province to engage over 70 Ulema Council members and students in court proceedings. Participants not only the participated as the audience but also took part in the acts as characters. The religious scholars and students found the Theater of the Oppressed very useful to improve their understanding of court proceedings and how to engage with the courts to improve integrity in the process.

Theater of the Oppressed uses theatrical forms that the Brazilian theater guru Augusto Boal first used in the 1970s starting in Brazil and later spreading to Europe. Boal used theater as a tool to promote social and political change. His techniques mainly focused on getting the audience involved in the act by analyzing the play, expressing their views about their own realities, and performing the act in the way the audience themselves thought they could transform the realities they lived in.

In October of 2011, the first community-based monitoring of trials program was introduced in Kapisa province. Ever since the inception of the program in the province, Integrity Watch has strived to enhance the capacity of local communities, civil society networks and citizens to engage with local courts through monitoring of open trials and sharing their observations with court officials. This has resulted in more openness of courts to the public, increased the percentage of open trials, and improved compliance with the fair trial guidance. In addition, the courts in Kapisa province recently initiated accountability to the public sessions where the courts presented their reform achievements and answered questions raised by the public. This is a huge step forward in Afghanistan where courts normally interpret their independence as not being accountable to the public.
Community action provides clean drinking water to students of Kapisa province

Ali Ahmad Mashal Afruz, provincial coordinator, Kapisa

Students at Nasaji Gulbahar female school are now able to drink clean water. A few months ago, the school had no clean drinking water which resulted in the spread of waterborne diseases among students which created not only physical but also a social and financial burden to the communities.

The students and school shared the issue with the education authorities in the province several times but to no avail. Finally, in collaboration with school management, the Integrity Volunteers of the school discussed the issue directly with the governor of Kapisa himself. The governor promptly asked the donor representatives to help the school with drilling a borehole. The community extended a helping hand and the school got clean drinking water shortly.

The Community Based Monitoring of School program started in 2014 in Kapisa province. Since then, the program has covered more than 50 schools in the province. About fifty thousand students covered through the program of which 35 percent are female. Students hold School Management Shura (SMS) to discuss major problems of their schools.

With an aim to increase coordination between the people and the government representatives to bring transparency and accountability, the program is monitoring schools in nine provinces including Balkh, Bamyan, Herat, Kabul, Kapisa, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Paktia, and Parwan provinces.
Public healthcare workers use Access to Information to receive their salary after months of delay

Benazir Hayat, Advocacy Intern

A public healthcare worker at a drug-addicts curative hospital in District 3 of Kabul complained that they have not received their salary for the last six months. As a result, the staff who number close to twenty faced major problems. The reason for the delay as mentioned by the staff was that their salary comes from Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) now while it was paid by an NGO earlier. The Ministry was not able to pay the staff salary for six months. Integrity Watch requested for information on the issue from the Ministry that resulted in the workers received their salary shortly afterward.

Integrity Watch facilitates complaints between people and government departments. Bridging the gap between public and government through access to information restores the confidence and the public trust.