



Rerouting of TUTAP Power Project: Protests in Afghanistan

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Introduction

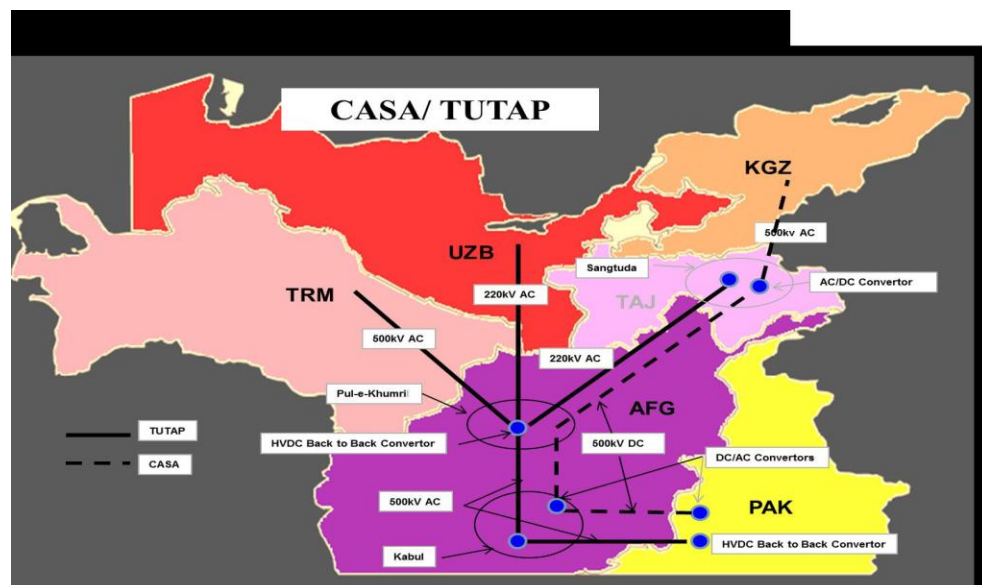
A huge protest by Afghanistan's ethnic minority Hazara took place in Kabul on 16 May 2016, over the decision of rerouting of TUTAP (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan) electric power project, which was originally set to pass through the Bamyan province (a Hazara dominated province) of central Afghanistan. In the past, demonstrations have been seen in Bamyan, Mazar-e-Sharif, Ghazni, Daikundi and Baghlan as well as in number of western capitals including Washington, Stockholm, Berlin, Tokyo and London¹ regarding the rerouting of TUTAP electric project.

The Afghan government, in a Cabinet decision on 30 April 2016, opted to route the electric power line over the Salang Pass (a mountain pass, connecting northern Afghanistan with Parwan province). The government argued that the decision to change the route had been taken by the previous government. Further, the government said that the shorter route would expedite the project and save millions of dollars in costs. However, by chanting the slogans of 'justice' and 'equal development', the protesters demanded the government to stick to the original route through their deprived provinces of Bamyan and Wardak, so that they can get better access to electricity. In a latest development, the government has appointed a 12- member committee to investigate the viability of re-routing the line through Bamyan and suspended the work on the project until the commission reports its findings.

What is TUTAP?

TUTAP is one of the most important regional economic projects financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and agreed among Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan with a transmission capacity of 500 MW from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, via Afghanistan.² The project aims to promote trade in electricity between energy rich Central Asian countries, and Afghanistan and Pakistan that face severe power deficit. From Afghanistan's point of view, this project is very important in providing people with reliable electricity supply throughout the year. The project can also support Afghanistan in realising the promise of CASA-1000, as without TUTAP Afghanistan cannot serve as transit system for transmitting electricity from Central Asian countries to South Asia³ (as showed in Figure 1). The two projects have different purposes: whereas CASA links Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan, the TUTAP addresses Afghanistan power needs with regional trade as a benefit. Currently, Afghanistan heavily relies on imported electricity as the persistent internal conflict has derailed the building of dams and kept internal energy production to a minimum. Access to energy has become high priority in Afghanistan, as energy demand has grown by almost twice the economic growth rate during 2005-2012.⁴

Figure 1: CASA/TUTAP Routes



Source: ADB⁵

In an assessment in November 2015, the ADB mentioned that Afghanistan is among the lowest five percent in per capita energy consumption globally and is a net energy importer. The ADB suggested the need for a unified national electricity grid in Afghanistan. In 2014, more than 80 percent (1,000 MW) of its total power supply (1,247 MW) came from Iran (16.2 percent), Tajikistan (25 percent), Turkmenistan (12 percent), and Uzbekistan (27 percent), with the rest generated through indigenous hydropower and thermal sources.⁶ TUTAP will, thus, support in bringing these networks together and allow flexibility in supply and provide efficiency in load dispatch.

ADB further states that lack of energy supplies and the demand-supply imbalance constrain growth and income creation opportunities; create disparities in economic development; and fuel ethnic and regional tensions, insecurity, and discontent. Bamyan is one of the most underdeveloped provinces of Afghanistan, though it is largely peaceful and has a potential as a tourist destination. The residents of this province suffer from lack of electricity and water shortage. Even after being a historical city with historical places, the province suffered because of the apathy of the Taliban regime.

Since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 the situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan has improved relatively. Hazaras are one of the national ethnic minorities recognized in the new Afghan constitution and have been given full right to Afghan citizenship. Though, in the last parliamentary election in 2010, Hazaras gained 25 per cent of seats, however, they still face discrimination in many other areas particularly in the area of development.⁷ Post-Taliban regime, billions of dollars have been poured into Afghanistan for reconstruction and developmental works. Several mega-scale reconstruction projects have been initiated, and Hazara group leaders are voicing for 'end of discrimination' and 'balanced development approach'.⁸

The Controversy

Current tensions started since January 2016, when Hazara members of the government prevented a potential rerouting of the electricity transmission line away from their ethnic group's settlement areas.⁹ The second Vice President Mohammad Sarwar Danish spoke out against routing the TUTAP project through Salang rather than Bamyan.¹⁰ In early May, following a cabinet decision to

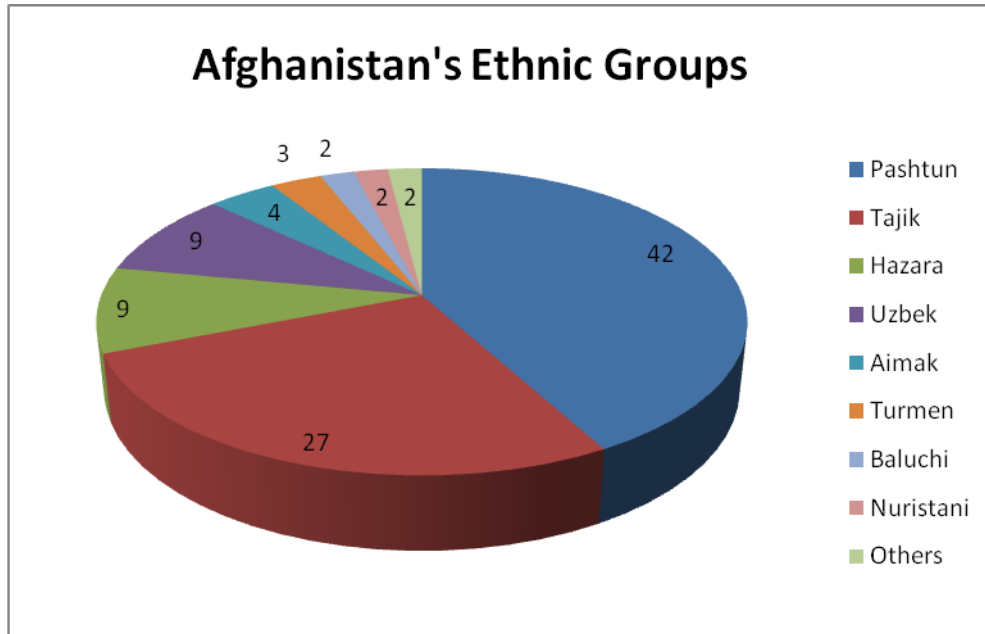
stick to the rerouting plan, the subject reached the wider public, translating into a broad protest movement, known as Jombesh-e-Roshnayi (Enlightening Movement).¹¹

The protesters have two key arguments: firstly, based on the recommendations by the German Fichtner Engineering Company, they consider Bamiyan, a better option technically. In 2013, the Company, in an assessment for ADB, suggested that Bamiyan route would avoid the narrow space and difficulties along the Salang Pass and would also secure a power supply of Kabul and south Afghanistan by using a separate route.¹² It is being said that the Salang Pass is vulnerable to avalanches. However, in a latest development, while assessing the project in February 2016, German company Fichtner found that routing the line through Bamiyan would cost \$35 million extra and delay the project by at least two years.¹³ Though experts say the location of the power line will not directly impact Bamiyan's electricity needs, the dispute has taken an ethnic tone and served as a vehicle for Ghani's opponents to voice frustration at his government's inability to revitalize the economy.

Secondly, the protesters say that the decision contravenes the government's commitment to social justice by neglecting development in Bamiyan (and other central province). Residents of Bamiyan have frequently complained of suffering from a "peace penalty"—there is a widespread perception that the area, which has been more stable than the rest of the country, has been neglected in favour of more insecure areas.¹⁴ The change in TUTAP's route has therefore likely exacerbated existing perceptions that Bamiyan has been ignored. Also, this has sparked complaints that President Ghani's government discriminates against Hazaras.¹⁵

However, much of the demonstrations focus on the larger issues what the protesters called "the systematic and shameful injustices"¹⁶ against the Hazara community. Hazaras, which is the third largest ethnic group in the country, most of whom are Shia Muslim, have been persecuted in the past, notably by extremists Sunni Taliban's 1996-2001 regime.

Figure 2: Afghan's Ethnic Groups



Source: Author's data from different sources

The figure 2 shows percentage of diverse ethnic groups where as the figure 3 shows the settlement pattern of those communities in Afghanistan. The Hazara community which consist of 9 percent of the total population is settled largely in central Afghanistan.

Figure 3: Afghanistan's Ethnic Group's Settlements



Source: www.mapsoftheworld.com

The current rerouting of the TUTAP electric project reflects a kind of biasness against the Hazara minority in Sunni Muslim dominated Afghanistan. The demonstration in Kabul, was the second major protest against the government since Ghani became President. In November 2015, thousands of people protested as 'Zabul Seven' against the beheading of seven Hazara hostages in southern Afghanistan by groups believed to be affiliated with Islamic State.¹⁷

It is not clear, apparently, when the decision was made to switch the route from Bamyan to Salang. Some local news papers as *Khaama Press* suggests that the change was made in recent Cabinet meeting however, some other local sources say that it was chosen previously. Nonetheless, the issue has merged with wider tensions in Afghanistan and within the government.

Responses

In response to all these protests and allegations, President Ghani blames previous government for ambiguities regarding the change of the route. Further, the Ministry of Energy and Water and Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS) also blame the previous government. However, the government now fears that the reversal of decision could cost millions of dollars as well as delaying the project by years. Hoping to defuse the situation, President Ghani has set up a 12-member commission to investigate the issue. There have been counter- demonstrations against the protesters, particularly in Kandhar, accusing them of politicising TUTAP along ethnic lines.¹⁸

However, in Kabul, many high ranking government officials and members of the parliament have come out to support the protesters against the decision. At the forefront of the protest are the leaders who are the part of the cabinet in the former government. They include Karim Khalili former vice president and Sadeq Mudaber, former cabinet secretary.¹⁹ Recently, Muhammad Mohaqiq, CEO Abdullah Abdullah second deputy declared that changing TUTAP's route meant a clear discrimination and bullying against the people of central provinces and government should hear the people's voice in order to safeguard peace and stability.²⁰

Though the present power issue is specifically related to Hazara community, President Ghani has been criticised for not treating Afghanistan's ethnic, sectarian and geographically divergent groups equally. Afghanistan's other ethnic group – Tajiks – have also been backing the

Hazara demands and it has gained momentum as an umbrella issue for many opponents of Ghani's government. This highlights the latent political crisis in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The TUTAP project, which aimed to unite country's power lines, instead caused a split on ethnic lines. The benefits of Salang route could be financial but the costs seem to be political. Afghanistan is already in the grip of many challenges such as political, economic and security issues. The government should realise that it is crucial to avoid alienation of masses and stop deterioration of Afghanistan's sensitive inter-ethnic relations.

The demonstrations over the electricity project may further compound the problems the national unity government is facing. The protest over TUTAP is not merely an ongoing political controversy or a public grievance, but may well have long term implications for the country's inter-ethnic harmony. The government needs to take concrete step to resolve the problem.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.

Endnotes:

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⁴ Asian Development Bank, "Afghanistan: Energy Supply Improvement Investment Program". URL: [file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/Asian%20Development%20Bank%20-%20Energy%20Supply%20Improvement%20Investment%20Program%20\(Formerly%20Multitranchise%20Financing%20Facility%20II-%20Energy%20Development%202014-2023\)%20-%202016-04-18.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/Asian%20Development%20Bank%20-%20Energy%20Supply%20Improvement%20Investment%20Program%20(Formerly%20Multitranchise%20Financing%20Facility%20II-%20Energy%20Development%202014-2023)%20-%202016-04-18.pdf) Accessed on 23 May 2016.

⁵ Jim Liston, "Central Asia –South Asia Connectivity: Impact of Afghanistan Power Master Plan on regional interconnection" Bangkok November 2013, IEA Training, ADB. URL:

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⁶ See Asian Development Bank, no. 4.

⁷ "Afghanistan-Hazara", World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples. URL:

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⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Catherine Putz "TUTAP Energy Projects Sparks Political Infighting in Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, 10 May 2016. URL: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/tutap-energy-project-sparks-political-in-afghanistan/?allpages=yes&print=yes> Accessed on May 10, 2016.

¹¹ See Thomas Rutting, no.7.

¹² See "TUTAP Controversy Heightens", no. 3.

¹³ Ali M. Latifi, "An ethnically charged dispute over electricity brings protesters into Kabul's streets", Los Angeles Times, 16 May 2016. URL: <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-afghanistan-protests-20160516-snap-story.html> Accessed on 18 May 2016.

¹⁴ See Emily Winterbotham, no. 1

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mujib Mashal, "Huge Protest Against Afghan Government Brings Kabul to a Halt", *The New York Times*, 16 May 2016. URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/17/world/asia/kabul-protest-afghanistan.html?_r=0 Accessed on 17 May 2016.

¹⁷ See Thomas Rutting, no. 7.

¹⁸ Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi "Energy Projects divides Afghan Society", DW, 18 May 2016. URL: <http://www.dw.com/en/energy-project-divides-afghan-society/a-19265123> Accessed on 20 may 2016.

¹⁹ See Mujib Mashal, no. 14.

²⁰ See 'TUTAP Controversy Heightens' no.3.