**War crimes and election results**

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Two recent events on far sides of the globe have given many people in the Third World, from ordinary folks to autocrats and dictators, occasion to gloat and beat their chests triumphantly. Though they are different in every respect, one in the United States and the other in Australia, what ties the two events is that they ostensibly show the West in a poor light.

To the detractors, these two events eliminate or blur the distinction between “them” and “us”, between the West and the Third World, between democracies, on one hand, and pseudo-democracies, quasi-democracies, autocracies and dictatorships, on the other hand.

The more recent and by far the more publicized of the two is the presidential election in the United States. President Donald Trump, having lost to Joe Biden, is disputing the result and playing every trick to have himself declared the winner. In so doing, he is casting aspersion on the election process of his own country by alleging riggingand “illegal” votes against him. He even suggests that there is, in America, a “deep state” which is determined to oust him.

That has led some people in Pakistan and many other countries to ask whether the western democracies can claim that their elections are free and fair, after all. Well, the truth is that Donald Trump is a disgrace to America but he remains an aberration, rather than the rule. Even his own party, slowly but surely, is accepting the victory of Joe Biden.Nevertheless, many of the issues which garnered over 70 million votes for Donald Trump on this occasion are another matter. They must be taken seriously by his adversaries unless they want to self-destruct.

But no one anywhere should lose any sleep over this election’s outcome and a peaceful transition from this president to the next. The winner, Joe Biden, will be inaugurated on 20 January 2021 on schedule as the 46th president of the United States. The US constitution, judiciary, media and civil society are far too strong and entrenched to allow any upstart, even an incumbent president, to subvert the election result.

The other event concerns Australia. A few days ago, the Australian government officially released the “Afghanistan Inquiry Report”, the result of a four year-long investigation by Justice Paul Le Gay Brereton. He was appointed by the Inspector-General of the Australian Defense Force in 2016 to investigate pervasive rumors of war crimes in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2016. The report concludes that soldiers fromAustralian special forces committed 39 murders in Afghanistan, and recommends that 19 current or former soldiers face prosecution and be stripped of their medals.

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It is an exceptional case of a nation washing its very dirty linen under floodlights, so to speak.The report is scathing of patrol commanders of the Special Operations Task Group, where the “criminal behavior was conceived, committed, continued, and concealed”. Commanders further up the chain of command who are found to be negligent may also face disciplinary action.

The hitherto highly-regarded Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment’s second squadron will be disbanded following these damning findings of a “warrior-hero” culture that contributed to this criminal conduct.Compensation will be paid to the families of the Afghan victims. Most of these alleged murders involved prisoners who had been captured or subdued.

Announcing the findings of the inquiry, Australia’s military chief, Gen. Angus Campbell, said that he found the findings “deeply disturbing” and “unreservedly” apologized to the Afghan people.“Today, the Australian Defense Force is rightly held to account for allegations of grave misconduct”. “Rules were broken, stories concocted, lies told and prisoners killed.”

In the United States, Robert Bales is serving life in prison for the “Kandahar Massacre”, which involved the murder of 16 Afghan civilians in Panjwayi, near Kandahar, Afghanistan, on March 11, 2012. There have been reports of atrocities committed in Afghanistan by troops from other countries, including New Zealand, but no country has ever so thoroughly and comprehensively investigated criminal conduct by its own troops as Australia has now done.

This inquiry was not the result of any external or international pressure, but entirely an Australian initiative after reports began to emerge internally in 2015. Prime Minister Scott Morrison called Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani before the release of the report to express his “deepest sorrow”.

Contrast this with the response to allegations of atrocities against their own forces bygovernments and nations who will use this report to denounce Australia in particular and the West more generally. Let us begin with those who will scream the loudest, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Erdogan.

No Russian soldier has been investigated for crimes committed during their 10 year occupation of Afghanistan (1979-88)or during two military campaigns in Chechnya(1994-96, 1999-2009). Similarly, no Turkish soldier has been charged for any crimes resulting from military operations in northern Cyprus (1974), Syria or Iraq.

Indonesian atrocities in East Timor (1975-77) have remained unpunished and the on-going Saudi and Emirati crimes in Yemen will never be properly investigated. Closer to home, criminal conduct by Indian troops in in northern Sri Lanka (1987-90) and in Kashmir remain mostly unpunished.

And what about our own widely reported infamy in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971?To their credit, two officers of the Pakistan Army’s own public relations department (ISPR), Brig. A. R. Siddiqui and Major SiddiqSalik, have published damning first-hand accounts of atrocities against civilians during military operations(“East Pakistan: The Endgame, An Onlooker’s Journal: 1969-71” and “Witness to Surrender”, respectively).

What the Australian Defence Force and the government have done in relation to exposing, accepting and prosecuting its own soldiers for atrocities committed in Afghanistan is exemplary and a model to follow by other nations. While many individual heads must hang in shame, as a nation Australians should take pride in this investigation, the official expression of remorse, compensation to the victims and prosecution of offenders.

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