

# The Morning Call

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***Reader's Note: The Morning Call is the leading Newspaper in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania, the Allentown – Bethlehem – Easton greater metropolitan area, encompassing Lehigh, Northampton and part of Montgomery counties. The op-ed appeared with a picture of the main Kabul market and a graphic depicting the Afghan economy and took up almost the entire front page of the paper's Sunday Opinion section. The heartland is interested in Afghanistan.***

## **OPPORTUNITY IN KABUL**

***New Afghan International Chamber of Commerce poised to move country into “democratic capitalism.”***

**Don Ritter and Atiq Panjshiri**

It is fair to say the Afghan presidential election on Oct. 9 was a victory for all of humanity, given the importance of democracy as an alternative to radical Islam in that region of the world.

On this historic day, the people of Afghanistan spoke loud and clear to the world that they, too, traditional Muslims, love freedom. Afghans braved bullets to cast ballots. The snow, the cold, the trek to the polls did not deter them, either.

People who suffered over a million dead in their war to expel the brutal Red Army were not deterred by the threats of those seen as Taliban remnants and their al-Qaida paymasters. Afghans do not frighten easily.

Throughout the run-up to the election, the people of Afghanistan said they wanted government based on competence and integrity, not ethnicity, tribe or militia; they wanted to show they are Afghans first and that they want their leaders to be for national unity, not for one group over another.

The people also want leaders who can help them further their living conditions. They want food for their children and decent homes for their families. They want their sons and daughters to go to school and they want medical care when they get sick.

That means they need jobs and sustainable incomes to get off their dependence on foreign life-support systems.

Given the level of devastation of the country, Afghanistan needs a "roll up your sleeves," job-creating, rapid-growth-based economy to improve things ... now.

Without it, too many Afghan men will continue to seek employment with warlords and drug lords and the religious extremists will come back and say, "I told you so."

To attract competent and honest employees, wages for government jobs must at least keep up with the cost of living. Otherwise, bribes and corruption are irresistible, and the new economy is stymied from reaching all levels of society. It's cheaper for America and others to assist Afghanistan in fighting the war against corruption than it is to fight a war against a resurgent Taliban. President Karzai has made a good start. His election gives him the mandate to go a lot further.

The anti-business mentality of some in the leadership, resulting from decades of Soviet infiltration into the Afghan economy where government was the employer of choice, is obsolete. Businessmen deserve respect because they are the ones who will create the jobs and wealth needed to sustain the country.

A "market economy," defined in the constitution as the economy of Afghanistan, should be nurtured, promoted and practiced relentlessly. Competition in the marketplace, not government fiat, should set prices for labor, goods and services.

Government needs to get out of business and go from being a participant to a regulator in the economy. Whether in telecommunications, mines and minerals or the hotel business, government should cease to partner with private companies when the alternative is available. The old strategy, while convenient in the short term, can easily lead to favoritism and wasteful, anti-market decisions.

Incentives for private firms that train and hire ex-mujahideen and militia soldiers should be sharply expanded to reduce their dependence on jobs with local commanders. In the future, the young men of Afghanistan will carry tools for their work, not guns for their commanders.

On the drug trade, government, along with the international community, working with farmers and agricultural businesses can help promote alternatives to opium that have higher market value than the basic grains. Seeds, technology, investment capital and markets for export should be facilitated for Afghan agriculture.

The consuming nations of Europe and elsewhere have deeply vested interests in helping the producer nation curb the drug trade.

Businessmen and women in Afghanistan have taken a big first step toward securing pro-market economic policies and the promotion of investment in the country. They have created the Afghan International Chamber of Commerce (AICC), modeled on the principles of the world's most effective business association, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and its chapters across America.

In an historic event, more than 2,000 businessmen and women gathered in Kabul this past summer to inaugurate AICC and elect its first ever board of directors.

A strong private sector can help pull Afghanistan out of the abyss of the last 25 years and into the future. It represents the only engine that can drive the country toward freedom: not only political freedom but freedom from want and freedom from fear.

"Democratic capitalism," while providing for the needs of the Afghan people, will make the Afghan economy the model for — and the envy of — the nations in that

part of the world.

Investors can count on being well-received in Afghanistan these days; we can personally attest to that. It's a lot like the American "Wild West," but remember, in those days, there really was "gold in them thar hills." With \$28 billion in donor nation assistance pledged over seven years, a lot of excellent business opportunities are available to the adventurous. (However, when you think about it, Kabul is probably safer than much of big-city America.)

We welcome the citizens of the Lehigh Valley to join with us in rebuilding this deserving nation and making good money in the process.

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