

# AFGHANISTAN

## DEMOCRACY AND ETHNIC PARADOX

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### **Abstract**

*Throughout the ages Afghanistan remained, “a country without state”. The toppling of one regime, dominated by one ethnic group by the other remains the perennial problem of Afghanistan. This ethnic conflict also leads to inter-alia to an epoch in the post-Soviet era where Taliban quickly gained public support in the vast majority of the country, who sought to stabilize the country through a policy of ferocious repression. The old socio-political fault lines, enmeshed with divergent interests of various internal and external forces involved, however, continue to grow. And this confrontation between ethnic groups and different state apparatus, external and internal, became a vicious cycle. Even after the collapse of Taliban and deployment of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and introduction of democratic elections, things are not looking good. This paper tries to highlight the deep-rooted ethnic identity and its impact upon the emerging democratic state of Afghanistan.*

### **Keywords**

Ethnic Groups, Democracy, Northern Alliance, Taliban, Warlords, Ethnic Conflict, Fault Lines, Afghanistan, Post-Soviet Era, External Forces.

### **Introduction**

Most societies are split along one or more lines. Often these splits, or cleavages, become the society's fault lines along which political views form. Important social cleavages, in addition to ethnicity, are: social class, religion, rural-urban, and geographic region. Almost any social cleavage or category can become politically relevant. In Afghanistan Ethnicity appears to be an especially salient cleavage.<sup>1</sup> Therefore ethnic conflicts are considered crucial challenges to national politics and are often accompanied by a gradual collapse of state authority. Furthermore, these conflicts appear to undermine identities are generally defined by the belief in a common origin and are expressed by a common language, historical consciousness, religion, etc. however, labeling violent conflicts as ethnic involves the risk of oversimplifying complex issues.<sup>2</sup> At the dawn of modern times, the territory of what is now Afghanistan was inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups which apart from the Muslim faith, had

little in common.<sup>3</sup> The Afghan society is the land of much ethnic diversity with Pashtun 40 percent, Tajik 33 percent, Hazara 11 percent, Uzbek 9 percent, Aimak 1 percent, Turkmen 2 percent, Baloch 1 percent and others 3 percent.<sup>4</sup>

The 1964 constitution of Afghanistan ended ethnic preference by awarding all the ethnic groups equal treatment but just after one and a half decade or so soviet's occupied it, which led to the decline in the domination of Pashtun's and resulted in the alliance of non-Pashtun resistance and military commanders. The communists encouraged other languages like Uzbeki, Balochi, Turkmani and Nuristani by giving them the official status.<sup>5</sup> In rural areas the movement against the Communist regime was spearheaded by the *ulema* and the Islamists, where as political parties and groups dominated the urban space.<sup>6</sup> Historically there were no dominant elements that would distinguish the Islamists from the communists. The political parties and factions within them exhibited communal divisions based on tribal loyalties, religion and regional loyalties that have fragmented the Afghan politics.<sup>7</sup>

Once the Communist regime was toppled, the various political factions could no longer justify mobilization on the basis of jihad and thus looked for alternative recruiting tools. The largely Uzbek-based Junbeshi-milli (political party), although initially conceived as a group encompassing all of northern Afghanistan, became more and more Uzbek while alienating and losing its Pashtun and Tajik commanders. Jamiat-i-Islami, in turn, was becoming increasingly the Tajik in composition. Hizb-e-Wahdat defined itself as the official representative of ethnic Hazaras, with little controversy or opposition.<sup>8</sup>

Political leaders often used group identity in their pursuit of power and resources by reinterpreting history around symbols of ethnic or religious differences, especially during civil wars. The homogeneity of the Taliban and Ahmad Shah Massoud's forces, as well the historically rooted anti-Pashtun sentiments among Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Tajiks, were all useful to various political factions during times of civil war. Likewise, Pashtun aversion to acceptance of a Tajik dominated central government proved convenient to the Taliban's quest for power.<sup>9</sup> A couple of historical events can be quoted when a non-Pashtun assumed power but was challenged by the Pashtun leadership and ousted eventually. Habibullah ('Bachai-Saqao' Tajik), who overthrew Amir Amanullah Khan in (1929) and ruled for nine months, was overthrown by the combined might of the Pashtuns and thus Pashtun rule was restored.<sup>10</sup> Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik, according to the provisions of the Peshawar Accord (1990) assumed leadership of the central government in 1992, igniting the bloody civil war in which Pashtuns under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar fought pitched battles against a non-Pashtun president and his military commander, Ahmed Shah Masoud.<sup>11</sup>

The Taliban regime further strengthened the ethnic divide through its policy of excluding from power political forces other than Pashtuns and, in some cases, followed a policy of elimination of minorities. There was a fear

that the Taliban might convert Afghanistan into an ethnic state at the cost of diverse ethnic minorities in the country.<sup>12</sup> The rise of the Taliban constituted yet another serious step towards ethnicizing conflict in the country. The movement rose from Kandahar, the conservative heart of Pashtun lands, and remained completely dominated by Pashtuns. Its initial, amazingly rapid spread - explained by its missionary zeal, but slowed significantly as it reached non-Pashtun areas. And Taliban's take-over of Kabul in 1996 'clearly changed the conflict into an ethnic power struggle of Pashtuns against non-Pashtuns'.<sup>13</sup>

Historically rulers of Kabul have adopted a strategy of patronage which has been extended to all tribes in return for loyalty to the ruler. It became more evident and visible after the Soviet withdrawal. The roots of the chronic instability lie mainly in the nature of the Soviet strategy, which encouraged minority ethnic politics to supersede national politics. The years of Soviet occupation (1979-89) were characterized not simply by an assault on the Afghan state, but more importantly an attack on Afghan identity. With the realization that Communist ideology was no match for the solid front of Islamic resistance in Afghanistan, the Soviets redefined Afghanistan as a country of diverse and distinct ethnicities, rather than as a unitary state with a single religious belief system. Their goal was to weaken potentially the most resistant of the ethnic groups, the Pashtun majority - the traditionally dominant group in the Afghan armed forces, a majority among the Afghan resistance groups, and the cultural core of Afghanistan's "national" identity.<sup>14</sup> The post-soviet withdrawal phase only confirmed the existing fragmentation of political classes along the lines of ethnicity, tribal affinity and the ideological underpinnings of their movements.<sup>15</sup>

Afghanistan has undergone several phases of failed transition and conflict cycles. By 1992, the Northern Coalition (later renamed Alliance) was formed, in which the prominent ethnic minorities in the north were united against the Pashtuns. Thus on the eve of the centennial of the Durand Line that had divided Afghanistan in 1893, a deep chasm was created in the ethno-linguistic mosaic of Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance's first mission was to bring down the Communist government in Kabul.<sup>16</sup> The national minorities of northern Afghanistan close their ranks to resist domination by the Pashtuns. The Uzbeks being a major ethnic group, together with other small national groups of the north fought unitedly against the Central Pashtun authority. However, their revolts were ruthlessly suppressed by Kabul.<sup>17</sup>

Brutalities against Pashtuns in the North and targeting of Hazaras in the south posed great challenges for both the Afghan Government and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The Hazarajat region had seen a series of reprisal killings over the years. In 1997 alone, the Taliban killed over 6,000 Hazara Muslims in retaliation for the execution of thousands of Taliban prisoners in Northern Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> The relatively weaker socio-economic status of the non-Pashtun ethnic groups was the direct result of the

government's practice of Pashtun favoritism, the concentration of economic development projects in Pashtun areas and the appointment of Pashtuns to help administrative posts in non-Pashtun areas which antagonized the minorities, particularly the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen in the north and the Hazaras in the central parts of the country.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ethnicity and Political Elite**

The Afghan war led to major changes in the way space was perceived. On the one hand the national territory progressively lost significance as a frame of reference for the activities of political and military actors this was above all because the state and its functions were eroded in the course of the war.<sup>20</sup> One consequence of this collapse of the state was that power became de-territorialized, particularly in 1990s, Afghanistan collapsed into hundreds of petty empires that could scarcely be fixed in spatial terms and which were ruled by a myriad of warlords and local rulers whose power was based on client networks and personal loyalties.<sup>21</sup> Militia leaders attempted to carve out what Schetter, borrowing from Appadurai, calls *Ethnoscapes*, imagined political territories that are mythically connected to the genesis of specific ethnicities.<sup>22</sup>

The power of warlords and their private military network, including private security firms, presented the biggest challenge to the country's rehabilitation as a functioning state. War criminals were trying to maintain their criminal militias and keep the state weak. The warlords have also cultivated political patronage and are connected to the higher officials in the government. In the process some of them have developed a sense of impunity for violations of human rights and are engaged in retribution of their opponents. Government functionaries have patronized them to secure themselves from extortion and attacks by criminal elements and the Taliban. Security and stability being keywords for western countries that wanted to exit from Afghanistan; these militias have emerged as new associates in enforcing security, gathering intelligence and also helping NATO convoys to pass dangerous terrain. Due to this role there is an increasing criminalization and a nexus between drug dealers, militias and arms smugglers.<sup>23</sup>

When president Karzai (2001) took office, he had considerable support over the south and west. Karzai has had difficulty in limiting the power of the *Shura-I nazar* in the national government and in successfully challenging local warlords elsewhere in the country. The President's popularity among Pashtuns rose in October 2002 when he announced the dismissal of 30 middle-level commanders throughout the country. However, compliance with the order was unseen.<sup>24</sup> Serious clashes with warlords have since taken place in the north and west. Karzai continued the policy of appeasement with warlords.<sup>25</sup> Nazif Shahrani, a foremost expert on Afghanistan, relates the country's communal tensions to the type of government in effect since Abdur Rahman (1880-1901).

Shahrani argues that transformation of tribal structures and ethnic differences into groups, fragmented along ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian cleavage, was the direct consequence of the policies of centralizing government. State structure and policies have been the problem in breeding communal violence and conflicts in multiethnic societies.<sup>26</sup>

### **Democracy: Prospects and Challenges**

The post-Taliban political situation was quite disappointing for the Pashtuns. On the one hand the Taliban were ousted, and on the other, the new dispensation was dominated by their rivals from the Northern Alliance. They were expecting that the *Loya Jirga* (tribal councils) would redress the concerns of the Pashtuns. The reinstatement of the existing cabinet for a two-year transitional period added to the disillusionment of the Pashtuns.<sup>27</sup> However, formulation of a centralized constitution as a result of deliberations during the constitutional grand assembly restored some of the lost hopes of the Pashtuns. The Pashtun majority struggled hard for a centralized constitution and the minorities forcefully argued for the federal one but the majority's view won the day. Stalwarts of the ethnic minorities are still struggling to substantially modify the constitution according to their desire.<sup>28</sup>

Afghanistan went to elections without political parties. Most of the presidential candidates lacked a well-defined agenda or vision for the future of Afghanistan. They were either offshoots of some factional group or had the support of one of them. Though political parties were restrained from fighting elections, they were, however, allowed to register themselves. It is noteworthy that 'article 35' of the new constitution clearly states that the citizens of Afghanistan have the right to form political parties provided the "organizational structure and financial sources of the party are made public," "the party does not have military or paramilitary aims and structures," and that the "party is not affiliated to foreign political parties or sources." It further states, "Formation and functioning of a party based on ethnicity, language, Islamic school of thought (*mazhab-e-fiqhi*) and region shall not be permissible."<sup>29</sup> Now, if any of these clauses were applied, then most of the political formations in Afghanistan would not have qualified to be registered as political parties.

The post-Taliban political process was fragile and the position of Hamid Karzai was delicate, the west was keen on holding the first presidential election as early as possible. Because different factions of the Northern Alliance were fielding their own candidates, which made it increasingly difficult for Karzai to consolidate his support among the minority ethnic groups. Who together formed a substantial chunk of the Afghan population. His limited authority, absence of local support base, and dependency on the west, stood in stark contrast to those of factional commanders and leaders, particularly from the former Northern Alliance, in the fray.<sup>30</sup> Before the presidential election,

some crucial measures of the incumbent president, Hamid Karzai, against the warlords such as the dismissal of thirty, mostly Pashtun, warlords and removal of defence minister Qasim Fahim from his position, upheld Karzai's position in the public, particularly among the Pashtuns and so he won the overwhelming support of his co-ethnics all over the country.<sup>31</sup>

With the new constitution ratified by the Constitutional Loya Jirga (CLJ) in January 2004, attention turned towards Afghanistan's first democratic elections. Afghanistan's emergence as a democracy was one of the key achievements of the Bonn process that conclude with the successful completion of the first round of presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004-05.<sup>32</sup> However, keeping in view the parliamentary and local elections of September 2005, Karzai didn't completely marginalize the Northern Alliance leadership especially the Panjshiri faction. He appointed Uzbek leader Dostum as chief-of-staff to the commander-in-chief of the Afghan armed forces,<sup>33</sup> and granted a life time special privilege to the leader of the Tajik militia, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, allowing him to retain his military rank of a Marshall throughout his life.<sup>34</sup> It was clear from the presidential election that the parliamentary elections too would also be fought along ethnic lines, with several alliances, combinations and permutations emerging.<sup>35</sup>

In 2009 the Obama administration and NATO allies have scaled back expectations for a democratic form of government in Afghanistan, at least for the time period in which the international presence might be sustained at its current level.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, despite renewed emphasis on security and a downplaying of Afghanistan's prospects for democracy in 2009, intense preparations for the 2015 presidential elections demonstrate that the international community had not discarded its intent to leave behind at least the seeds of participatory government.<sup>37</sup> However, according to the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, an independent research organization, in the eyes of most Afghans, "elections are being used to legitimize or 'rubber stamp' the control of the powerful", and "elections are compounding a distrust of institutions."<sup>38</sup>

Preliminary election results released by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in October, 2010 revealed that, despite the fact that Pashtuns are the majority ethnic group in Ghazni Province, not a single Pashtun was elected; all of the Wolesi Jirga seats went to Hazara candidates. This is due at least in part to the fact that most of the polling stations that remained closed on election day were in communities in which Pashtuns were the majority. Many of the people Democracy International (DI) interviewed say also that intimidation by the Taliban kept them away from the polling stations that remained open.<sup>39</sup> President Karzai called for a re-vote in the province, but the IEC resisted this measure.<sup>40</sup> The Hazara candidates selected in the initial tally claimed that a re-vote was tantamount to ethnic discrimination and stated that any change in results not only would be illegal, but also would be met

with serious resistance.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, candidates from Ghazni who had not won seats staged protests in Kabul, decrying the elections as illegitimate and fraudulent.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, the IEC excluded Ghazni Province when it announced the final election results due to the controversy.<sup>43</sup> The ongoing conflict became a symbol of many of the social and ethnic tensions facing the country.

Ghani and Abdullah signed an agreement on 21 September (2014), promising a “genuine and meaningful partnership” that would allow them to govern together.<sup>44</sup> Later the same day, the IEC announced Ghani as the winner, although it declined to officially publish results.<sup>45</sup> The only information the IEC formally released was inscribed on an engraved wooden plaque given to Ghani, congratulating him for receiving 55.27 per cent of the 7.12 million valid votes.<sup>46</sup> The conflicts and compromises of Afghan political and tribal heads are obvious and the recent post-presidential election is a case in point. The Abdullah team protested the IEC’s decision to inscribe the tally on the wooden plaque, among other complaints, and threatened to boycott the inauguration ceremony.<sup>47</sup> The inauguration proceeded smoothly, however, with Ghani sworn in as president and immediately appointing Abdullah, a Tajik, as chief executive officer.<sup>48</sup> Reaction among ordinary Afghans was mixed, with some expressing relief that the process had finally reached a conclusion and others worrying about the durability of the new government.<sup>49</sup>

Violence between the presidential camps remained comparatively rare throughout 2013-2014, although armed clashes increased during the second round; however, as ethnic and tribal groups supporting different camps became visible, Abdullah’s slate was dominated by Tajik figures and support from Mohaqeq’s powerful Hazara faction, the Ghani camp emerged as heavily Pashtun and Uzbek in character, along with some Hazara support.<sup>50</sup> Afghans were apprehensive that this election may lead to full blown ethnic conflict. But once the deal was struck with Abdullah things started looking normal.

Ethnic conflicts which we are witnessing in Afghan society are considered crucial challenges to national politics and are often accompanied by a gradual collapse of state authority. Regardless of ethnicity, many Afghan politicians and policymakers from across the country favor a strong central state in order to curb powerful local figures, as well as to reduce the danger of criminal influence over the structures of local government. Research has also consistently shown that many Afghan citizens favor a strong central government as a means to undermine the power of local commanders at whose hands they suffered for so many years.<sup>51</sup> Although there is now growing disillusionment with the corruption and criminalization of central government, current structures reflect the understanding that a strong central state can act as a countervailing force to local power holders. One of the ironies of the situation in Afghanistan is that, despite the strong power influences exercised at the local level, the country is not only politically centralised, but also, in theory, fiscally and administratively one of the most centralised countries in

the world. All budgetary and most staffing decisions are made in Kabul, and provincial departments of line ministries, as well as the governor's office, have virtually no discretionary spending power and limited input into planning.<sup>52</sup>

A country which had been at war for three decades, with hardly any functional state institution in place and ethnically highly diverse country cannot be transformed into a stable thriving democracy in a short span of time. Progress on all fronts, social, economic and political is bound to be gradual, fragmented, restricted and strained by severe challenges from within and without. The strength of nascent democracy in Afghanistan is being clearly put to test. How indispensable or dispensable is the current political system and the constitution for various stakeholders in the Afghan politics, would largely determine the future of democracy in the country.

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