



Afghanistan: A Study in Internal Conflict and National Cohesion

Ghulam Mustafa¹; Adil Khan^{2*}

¹ Department of Pakistan Studies, Government Post Graduate College, Mansehra

² Department of Pakistan Studies, Hazara University Mansehra
Email: adilseemab@gmail.com

Abstract

Conflicts are caused by various reasons. When competing groups' goals, objectives, needs or values clash the aggression and violence is a result. Afghanistan as multi ethnic state enjoyed internal flexibility till socialist revolution (1978) that changed its social fabric due to ideological clash. In bipolar world this conflict invited the involvement of external actors (USSR & USA). Even after the withdrawal of Soviet troops this conflict sustained till 1992. The Mujahidin who had become new masters of the war torn country added fuel to the fire by converting an ideological clash into an ethnic one. Taliban replaced the Mujahidin but their religious orthodoxy also failed to bring national cohesion.

The long sustained conflict has direct bearings on national and individual life of people of Afghanistan who have lost their ability to work together. All attempts made on national cohesion and integration so far have failed. People do not rely and trust each other and they have lost their motivation to work together and to rebuild their institutions and economy. It is the legacy of the long war that is still going on. A closer look at the last 35 years traumatic history of the country clearly illustrates the complexity of the problem due to clash of divergent aims and objectives of several parties.

KeyWords: Internal conflict, National cohesion, Marxist ideas, Mujahidin, Taliban, Ethnicity, Afghanistan

Introduction

Afghanistan shares with most developing countries the problem of having to find national unity and cohesion in a heterogeneous population. The difficulty of Afghanistan, however, is further compounded by the fact that disparate groups have been brought together by historical accident and not by any shared historical experience or urge to live together.

Ethnically and linguistically Afghanistan has mixed population: Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group (38%) of the population, followed by Tajiks (25%), Hazaras (10%), Uzbek (6-8%), Aimaq, Turkmen, Baloch, Noristanis and other small groups (Hussain, 1984, p. 28). Dari (Persian) and Pashto are official languages. Dari is spoken by more than one-third of the population as a first language and serves as a lingua franca. Pashto is spoken throughout the areas of eastern and southern Afghanistan. Tajik and other

Turkic languages are spoken widely in the north. Smaller groups throughout the country speak more than 70 other languages and dialects. About 80% of the population is Sunni, following the Hanafi School of jurisprudence; the remainder of the population--primarily the Hazara ethnic group-- predominantly is Shi'a (www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5380.html). Islamic religious tradition and codes, together with traditional tribal and ethnic practices, play an important role in personal conduct and dispute settlement.

Afghanistan's mixed population reflects its location extending across historic trade and invasion routes leading from Central Asia into South and Southwest Asia. In 20th century the entry of new ideas influenced Afghan society. It led to internal strife and polarization of the society. The focus of this paper is the same period of division and polarization. An attempt has been made in the paper to enumerate major internal conflicts and to mention the efforts made to achieve national cohesion. The central question addressed in this article is: what domestic and international factors have been responsible for sustained internal conflict and why have attempts on national cohesion failed? The paper also focuses on impacts of the conflict and future prospects of national cohesion.

Origin of the Conflict

Modern influences had started entering Afghanistan during Amir Amanullah Khan's reign (1919-1929). Afghan society was conservative and tradition ridden where arrival and acceptance of new ideas was termed as infidelity. The traditionalists reacted against the entry of new ideas under Amir Habibullah (also known as Bacha Saqao) who ousted Amanullah Khan from power and himself became the new Amir. He could not stay in power for long. Nadir Khan (1930-1933), with British support, defeated him and ascended the throne in 1930. He discontinued Amanullah Khan's reforms policy. But the Afghan youth managed to import new ideas to their country. These middle class intellectuals were mainly influenced by Marxist ideas (Anwar, 1988, p. 22).

King Zahir Shah's (1933-1973) promulgation of new constitution in 1964 provided the Afghans an opportunity to form political parties. The Marxists formed PDPA (Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan) in 1965. PDPA was broad based nationalist party. Its top brass was consisted of those deprived sections of the society who had little role in state affairs. Soon the party was divided into Khalq and Parcham factions. The former was led by Noor Muhammad Taraki (a Ghilzai Pashtun) while the latter by Babrak Karmal (non-Pashtun) (Ahmad, 1990, pp.301-04). Parcham faction of the PDPA was more active in pursuit of constructing Afghan Nationalism and overthrowing the monarchy. Parchamis forged alliance with Sardar Daud (Zahir Shah's cousin and former prime minister) and played key role in overthrowing monarchy and declaring Afghanistan a republic in 1973 (Male, 1982, p. 41).

After forming coalition government Daud patronized nationalist forces. The rulers of the past used to rely on religion or force to achieve national cohesion but Daud started encouraging nationalists to attain the same by legal and administrative reforms and by giving representation to all factions of society in the government. This change was a sign of danger for the traditional tribal structure of the society. The traditionalists took refuge under the banner of Islam to protect their interests. Daud declared them retrogressive forces and came with heavy hand on them. In those days Afghanistan had unfriendly relations with Pakistan so Daud's opponents fled to Pakistan and campaigned against his regime from there (Ibid, p. 53).

In those days the Parcham faction of the PDPA was in ruling coalition while the Khalq worked as opposition. Both enjoyed contacts with military but the latter had secretly developed deeper links (Ibid, p. 60). On Daud's invitation Soviet experts had come to work in various departments. Due to their presence the socialist ideology almost infected every branch of national life. In exasperation Daud purged the PDPA and decided to come out of Soviet influence. To attain this objective he improved relations with Pakistan and visited those Muslim countries that were allies of US in international politics. Daud's quest

for closer links with the non-socialist world and moves to eliminate PDPA made his local and non-local socialist friends uneasy (Anwar, 1984, pp. 93-4).

Evolution of the Conflict and Quest for National Cohesion Phase-I

Fearing the heavy hand of Daud both factions of the PDPA united under the leadership of Taraki in 1977. He became General Secretary while Babrak Karmal was made Deputy General Secretary of the party (Male, p. 59). It is said that Soviet Union had facilitated its unification. Due to influence in the army PDPA leadership could seek its support whenever the need arose. Daud finally struck by arresting the whole leadership of PDPA. Hafizullah Amin, the rival of Babrak Karmal and second tier leader of PDPA, gave green signal to the army for *Saur Revolution* of 27 April 1978. The army acted swiftly and made the revolution a success. Daud was murdered along with his family members. Later, in an interview, Karmal told that Daud's change in foreign policy had taken his life (Ibid, p. 62).

Taraki became President and Prime Minister in the new set up while Karmal and Amin were made deputy prime ministers respectively. The revolutionary government announced reforms in various sectors. This was an attempt to erect a new state structure in a tribal cum feudal society. The society was not ready for such reforms. Rather reforms were considered interference in personal life. The government was very careful in implementing these reforms but failed to convince the clergy and the feudals.

The revolution could not build mass support base in the Afghan society especially in rural areas where clergy had its influence. The aim of the PDPA was to transform and modernize the tribal and feudal structure through a series of radical reforms. The task was to abolish and eliminate a feudal and pre-feudal social structure and make it fit for a non-capitalist development of Afghanistan.

Furthermore, Afghan society was divided on ethnic lines. PDPA officially recognized Afghanistan's ethnic, cultural and linguistic pluralism. Along with Dari and Pashto all other minor languages were declared as official languages. The PDPA failed in attaining its objective because Afghan society showed stiff resistance to economic, political and social transformation (Minkoy, 2013). The PDPA government adopted radical approach towards this transformation. But the clergy, in rural areas, failed social reforms declaring them a move against their religion. PDPA's nationality policy and its propagation threatened the orthodox clergy and tribal elite (Ibid).

The new government gave birth to an ideological conflict in the country. She confronted the resistance of Islamist parties which were divided into political conservatives and hard-liner fundamentalists. The former wanted status quo while the latter wanted to implement a peculiar brand of Islam and the radical restructuring of the Afghan society based on explicit Islamic mandate. So they resisted the change and started armed struggle against the new government. The conflict would have been resolved by the Afghanis themselves, had there been no external interference. (M Ali and M Naseem, personal communication, June 25, 2013). Apparently it was the conflict of the Afghanis but in fact they had become proxies of the cold war rivals (USSR & USA).

The Afghan government had signed a security pact with Soviet Union in 1978. Through this agreement Afghanistan could ask for military help against any threat. Taking refuge under that pact Soviet Union sent its troops to Afghanistan in 1979. The reasons of her intervention were:

1. Power struggle between the factions of PDPA.
2. Incapacity of PDPA to control the state apparatus.

3. Fear of US direct involvement after its loss of Iran in 1979.
4. Direct support from Pakistan to Afghan rebels.

During this move Hafizullah Amin, successor of Taraki, was murdered and replaced with Babrak Karmal. The countries outside the Soviet bloc did not recognize the Karmal government. Direct involvement of regional and extra-regional actors changed the character of resistance. Afghan rebels were declared Mujahidin and their activities were recognized as national resistance (Anwar, 1984, p. 237). United States, Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia and Iran became active supporters of the resistance. US objective was to turn the Afghanistan adventure into a costly and humiliating operation for the Soviet Union and to rebuild US influence in the region after the fall of Raza Shah and establishment of a hostile government in Iran. Pakistan wanted strategic depth through establishing friendly government on its western border. Saudi Arabia followed Pakistani line with objective to propagate its own traditionalist Islam and to counter Iranian influence there. Iran's involvement was due to its desire to stay relevant in the regional politics. China had resolved its problems with US decade ago; therefore, she supported US cause against USSR.

Soviet intervention made Afghanistan a battlefield of cold war rivals. The tussle intensified due to US generous support and supply to Mujahidin. Exchange of fire and encounters made common man's life difficult. The PDPA government could not protect its citizens who were either threatened or persuaded by Mujahidin to leave the country. Thus large number of refugees entered Pakistan and Iran where they were trained and sent to Afghanistan as guerilla fighters (Khan, 1994, p. 39). The intervention of cold war players prolonged the conflict.

In the meanwhile UN started bringing the conflicting parties on the negotiation tables. The talks commenced in 1982 but could produce no results till the willingness of the USSR leadership (President Gorbachev) to withdraw with guarantee of reconciliation and neutral set up in Afghanistan not hostile to USSR or neighbors. Gorbachev announced that Soviet forces would withdraw after interim government was set up in Afghanistan (Ibid, p. 54). The United States and Pakistan rejected this precondition and asked for withdrawal.

For cessation of hostilities and bringing peace in the region UN had kept its efforts continued. At last the parties met at Geneva to settle the conflict. They reached an agreement known as Geneva Accord on April 14, 1988. It was signed by the representatives of Afghanistan and Pakistan while the US and USSR signed it as guarantors. Instruments of the accords were:

1. Withdrawal of Soviet troops.
2. Non-intervention and non-interference in internal affairs of Afghanistan.
3. Return of Afghan refugees to their country.
4. International guarantees of non-interference.

The ideological conflict that emerged in the 1970s could not live long. Soviet Union withdrew its troops but even then peace could not be brought. This prolonged internal strife of Afghanistan.

Phase-II

After the withdrawal of Soviet troops, UN worked for establishing broad base government in Afghanistan to bring peace and achieve national cohesion. Even the option of ex-king, Zahir Shah, was considered but Pakistan and Mujahidin rejected it. Mujahidin wanted to get control of Afghanistan through

force. Now onwards the conflict took a new turn. Till Geneva Accords the conflict predominantly reflected a clash of two ideologies. In those days Mujahidin maintained sufficient operational cohesion. But later they lost their unity and gave ethnic colour to this conflict (Saikal, 1998, pp. 114-26).

The Mujahidin lost their operational cohesion when they felt that they would defeat Najibullah's, Afghan president of that time, forces easily. Shah Nawaz Tanai, Khalqi Pashtun general, defected and made alliance with Hekmatyar of Hizbi Islami to overthrow Watan Party's (former PDPA) government but failed and fled to Pakistan. This was an attempt to forge alliance between socialist and Islamist Pashtuns. Najib invited the Mujahidin to return and play their role in reconstruction of war torn country but no one listened to him.

USSR's disintegration in 1991 changed the shape of the world politics. The cold war rivalry came to an end. This also led to emergence of Central Asian republics as independent states, opening to the outside world "a new and resource rich region". In the meantime former rivals cut off all military assistance to their respective allies from 13 January 1992 bringing to an end the superpower competing role in Afghanistan.

During this time Mujahidin forged new alliances on ethnic lines and intensified their struggle against the regime. Ahmad Shah Masood, a Tajik leader of Jamiat-e-Islami (Mujahidin organization) and Abd-ur-Rashid Dostam, an Uzbek general of Watan Party, formed alliance and struck a heavy blow on Najib government. They took control of entire northern part of Afghanistan. Najib on 18 March 1992 announced his resignation, which was to be effective when UN would establish "Interim Government" to which he would transfer all powers. Outwitting Gul Badin Hekmatyar, a Pashtun leader of Hazbe Islami (Mujahidin organization), Masood captured Kabul. Despite Pakistani support Hekmatyar failed to dislodge him.

After the fall of Najib all parties gathered at Peshawar to form broad based interim government. Pakistan facilitated the dialogue that resulted in signing *Peshawar Accord*. Under this accord Islamic Leadership Council was established, Sabghatullah Mujadidi (Mujahidin leader) in chair for interim period of two months. On completion of his term he stepped down for another Mujahidin leader (Burhanuddin Rabani) whose term was four months but after completion of the term he refused to step down. Interim government could not consolidate its authority due to mistrust between Pashtuns and Tajiks. Instead of peace the mujahidin brought plunder, loot, oppression, disgrace and torture. For common Afghans this period had become disastrous. From the beginning the resistance movement was divided on ethno-linguistic, tribal and sectarian lines due to which after the fall of Najib it could not create any broad based representative government.

Pakistan hosted another meeting of the Mujahidin in Islamabad to end internal strife and achieve national unity and cohesion. Some eight military factions of Mujahidin came to Islamabad and signed *Islamabad Accord* in March 1993 (Khan, 2001, p. 47). Rabani and Hekmatyar got fresh mandate for the period of 18 months as President and Prime Minister respectively. Cabinet was to be formed by the PM in consultation with the President but this could not happen. Hekmatyar did not enter Kabul due to feeling of insecurity. The accord collapsed. Rival factions renewed fighting by May 1993 in order to control Kabul. The prime minister of the country bombarded his own capital. Both Peshawar and Islamabad Accords were attempts on national cohesion of Afghanistan but both of them failed. During the 1990s Russia and US kept away from direct involvement in Afghanistan.

Phase-III

A new phenomenon (Taliban) emerged in Afghanistan in the mid 1990s. Students of madrassas (seminaries) under Mulla Ummer launched their offensive against warlords who had made people's life

miserable in Afghanistan. Old Khalqis also joined Taliban ranks. Taliban were a militia force that conquered areas from ex-mujahidin and brought peace to the country. New realities led Pakistan to shift its support from Hekmatyar to Taliban. US and Saudi Arabia also considered them useful. UNOCAL, Delta Oil, and Bridas (oil companies of US, Saudi Arabia and Argentina) perceived them useful and a source of security to their bid to construct \$ 2.5 billion pipeline across Afghanistan to export gas from Turkmenistan to South Asia (Saikal, p. 119).

After their emergence in 1994, Taliban forced Pashtun war lords to surrender without much resistance. They propagated religious nationalism as a strategy to attain their objectives. But the non-Pashtuns who are 62% of the total Afghan population doubted Taliban and treated their move as an attempt to establish Pashtun domination in religious garb. That is why Taliban had to face stiff resistance of the non-Pashtuns in their struggle for power (M Ali and M Naseem, personal communication, August 25, 2013).

Taliban tried to bring unity and peace to the country with US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's support. In spite of stiff resistance on the part of Northern Alliance (non-Pashtuns) the Taliban captured almost 90% territory in few years. Seeing this, regional and extra-regional actors became active to protect their interests in the region. Russia, India, Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan offered their support to Northern Alliance. The European Union helped Rabani to retain seat in UN and have embassies (Ahmed, 2000, pp. 50-73). These powers dominated the internal politics, which led the country towards chaos and anarchy.

Soon Taliban went out of the good books of the US. She blamed them for radical policies and human rights abuses. Later on she demanded Osama and Al-Qaida's expulsion from Afghanistan. The incident of 9/11 proved fatal for Taliban government. US attack on Afghanistan threw them out of power.

Ethnic strife and external interference not only destroyed internal fabric of the Afghan society but also caused the loss of national sovereignty and independence. Americans with the slogan of war on terror came here as conquerors. The Afghans themselves provided an excuse to the US for attack, which deprived them of their sovereignty. In both cases (ideological war of the 1980s and resources war of the 1990s) Afghans were losers.

After destroying Taliban a conference was convened at Bonn (Germany) of representative groups of Afghanistan. It was declared "A Conference for Peace and National Unity". The participants deliberated on interim government, security of the country and reconstruction. This was a serious effort of the international community who, along with warring parties, had invited regional players also. The successful participation of the neighbors, that had traditionally played a role in Afghanistan, was emblematic of Bonn's success, and indicated that players recognized that it was not a zero sum game.

An interim government was set up in December 2001. Hamid Karzai was chosen to preside over the country. This time broad base government was formed where every ethnic group was represented. The objective of that lengthy war in 80s and 90s was power and position. Its effective resolution lied in the distribution and institution of power among ethnic communities and participation in the country's politics that previous despotic regimes denied them.

To ensure security NATO and ISAF were sent to war torn Afghanistan. They not only maintained law and order but also started building national security forces. Little later Tokyo Conference was held to generate funds for reconstruction. The donors pledged big amounts for reconstruction of Afghanistan. In 1990s US had left the Afghans in the lurch after winning the war of ideologies in Central Asian Theater. This time US seems to have come to stay and rebuild Afghanistan. She is trying to win the war on terror to bring peace in the region. Resurgence of Taliban has complicated the situation but it is widely believed that their resistance would collapse even if US withdraws by 2014.

Conclusion

Afghan conflict is not simply internal. Regional and extra-regional actors have also been involved in it. This time international community has adopted better strategy to achieve national cohesion and peace. Taliban and Al Qaeda still resist but this resistance is believed to be eliminated in near future.

Afghanistan's internal weaknesses have historically facilitated foreign involvement. The 1980s and 1990s rounds of fighting have devastated the country. Afghanistan now can recover from that devastation with foreign help but its new leaders must also overcome their own rivalries lest foreign help turn into another round of traditional power politics. Internal conflict of the last two decades committed by all sides' ethnic rivals and forced displacement will make the task of rekindling the flame of nationalism more difficult. The urban Afghans have enough nationalistic fervor to overcome strong underlying sub-national sentiments. Political reconstruction is essential pre-requisite for the economic reconstruction of the country. The current set up of Afghanistan is showing some positive signs in spite of Al Qaeda and Taliban resistance. Now it is Afghans to do soul searching and make some difficult choices. Democracy and devolution of power to local level may help in attaining national unity and cooperation.

To win their friendship and cooperation Afghans have to decide which path to follow which allays the fears of immediate neighbors—Pakistan and Iran. The former supports the Pashtun cause in Afghanistan while the latter of non-Pashtun. The neighbors also need change their mind and avoid intensifying Afghanistan's internal strife. All regional and extra-regional actors exploit the situation when internal power players provide them such opportunity. The Afghans should utilize their energies for national reconciliation and rebuilding.

The peace in Afghanistan would make the region hub of economic activities. ECO's effectiveness and exploitation of un-tapped natural resources of Central Asia depends on the end of Afghanistan's internal strife.

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