The Role of Pashtuns in the Afghan Political System and Effects on Afghan Nationalism, 1880-1929

Pashtun dominance is one of the most popular themes in the discourse on historical and contemporary Afghanistan, along with associated terms such as tribalism, ethnic conflict and Pashtunwali. Most historical studies on Afghanistan have been conducted by scholars who have studied the country while outside Afghanistan. In turn, the voices of those inside Afghanistan have systematically been muted and muzzled as the discourse on Afghanistan perpetuated an Orientalist and westernized conception of Afghans and Afghanistan as a whole.23

In this paper, I will critically examine the historical role of Pashtun tribes in the Afghan political system beginning with Abdur Rahman Khan’s reign as Amir of Afghanistan. To establish a framework for my historical assessment, I will first give a conceptualization of ethnicity and nationalism based upon the theories of Anthony D. Smith. From there I will review the history of the Pashtun role in the Afghan political system and argue that nationalism based on an ethnic past has been detracted from in light of the historical disunity of Pashtuns in the political system from the time period 1880-1929.

According to Anthony D. Smith, the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism is one that is not exactly a modern phenomenon yet has not always existed.4 In fact, he rejects traditional ethnicity-nationalism paradigms of the nationalists, perennialists, modernists, and post-modernists. He instead adopts the view that the concept of a nation is derived from a

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melding of ethnic past and modern civic elements. The modern civic elements that Smith cites are outside the scope of this analysis and therefore will be omitted, possibly for future research. When viewed through the lens of nationalism, a peoples’ ethnic past is largely what drives the push for a nation’s unity. According to Smith’s argument, Afghanistan’s ethnic diversity presents a preliminary obstacle in the formation of a coherent ethnic past. The largest ethnic group in Afghanistan is Pashtun so in order to piece together some semblance of an ethnic past, an Afghan ethnic past would need to run parallel to the Pashtun ethnic past. As my research indicates, a coherent Pashtun ethnic past for the designated timeframe is poor at best. Thus, the prospects for nationalism in Afghanistan based on an ethnic past are largely negative. If modern civic elements were to be taken into account, this conclusion may be altered to some extent.5

Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, also known as the “Iron Amir,” ruled Afghanistan from 1880-1901. Abdur Rahman had far-reaching effects on the political, economic, and social landscape of Afghanistan. For the purpose of this paper, I will confine my analysis to the political arena. The centralization of political power in Kabul at the expense of local tribal sardars, or leaders, is one of the most significant and well-known developments during this time period. With this development, a more robust government bureaucracy formed in Afghanistan’s capital. In one of his recent publications, Hasan Kakar claims that Pashtuns were privileged by Rahman during his reign, Muhammedzays elevated even higher, and Muhammadzay descendents of his grandfather Sardar Payanda Khan elevated above all others.6 His assessment principally aligns with the Pashtun domination theory. In one of his earlier publications, though, Kakar’s data supports a more nuanced, less Pashtun-dominated conclusion. According to Kakar’s 1979 book,

5 Ibid.
senior positions within the Afghan bureaucracy were divided among different cross-sections of the Afghan ethnic fabric. Such groups included Qizilbashes, Tajiks, Hindus, and Muhammadzay sardars. A few positions were given to non-Muhammadzay Pashtuns and Indian Muslims as well.7

_Mirzas_ formed another layer of the bureaucracy and it is this layer which served as the backbone of the bureaucracy, addressing the majority of day-to-day government tasks. They played an important role in the Durrani state’s financial operations, overseeing audits and investigations of other offices within the bureaucracy. _Mirzas_ performed much of the quotidian bureaucratic and clerical work of the state but could also be assigned or tasked with more sensitive projects.8 The Qizilbash traditionally held a monopoly on these positions but that monopoly dissolved under Rahman’s reign as he incorporated Tajiks, Pashtuns and even _mirzas_ of Laghman and Herat into his Kabul bureaucracy.9

Pashtuns clearly did not have a monopoly of power within the state political apparatus.10 Pashtuns and particularly Muhammadzay Pashtuns were no doubt prominent in the bureaucracy but to say that Pashtuns dominated the political system at the expense of the other ethnic minorities is simply ignoring the reality of the political system’s ethnic composition.11 Segments of the Pashtun ethnic group were incorporated into the political system largely in the same way as other ethnic groups.

Abdur Rahman sought to legitimize himself as the Afghan Amir by claiming Islamic divine sanction. It was this claim that Rahman used to justify strengthening the defenses of

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Afghanistan through a new military conscription system and a re-vamped military’s funding through a new system of taxation. Departing from traditional taxation practices of previous Afghan rulers, Rahman ignored any special tax status or exemptions of Pashtuns. He imposed different levels of taxation on different tribes, ethnic groups and provinces, though evidence of the specific numerical differences in levels of taxation could not be found and present a gap for future study.\(^\text{12}\)

In order to consolidate his absolutist power, Rahman wielded considerable state-produced violence against Pashtuns (suppressing numerous Pashtun rebellions) and other groups.\(^\text{13,14}\) It took him roughly ten years to pacify the eastern Pashtuns by force. Thereafter, he relied upon subsidies, or allowances, to Pashtun elders and mullahs, co-opting them for his purposes of keeping the tribes at peace with his government.\(^\text{15}\) Their role was to keep the Pashtun tribes in check. It seems Rahman’s treatment of Pashtuns took away some of the possible “special privileges” that they might have previously received from the state. Those who adhere to the traditional Pashtun domination theory are faced with contrary evidence that detracts from their theory.

Amir Habibullah (1901-1919) had different ideas of what the future of Afghanistan should look like. While Rahman sought and largely achieved absolutist state power, Habibullah sought a more pacific governmental approach along with mild modernization of the Afghan state, though the latter wasn’t solidified until later in his reign. A new class of intellectuals emerged in Afghanistan during Habibullah’s reign because of his decision to allow some prominent

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Muhammadzay exiles to return to Afghanistan. Their return brought modern and foreign influences into the country and gave way to the country’s first real political movement, modernization. These certain Muhammadzay (Pashtun) families had been exiled by Abdur Rahman while keeping in mind that other Muhammadzay Pashtuns were integrated into Rahman’s political bureaucracy.

After Habibullah’s assassination during a hunting expedition in 1919, Amanullah became amir. The third Anglo-Afghan war began shortly thereafter because Amanullah sought to divert popular disapproval among the various tribes from his new role as Amir to the threat of foreign invaders (British infidels). The war quickly subsided and Afghanistan gained formal independence, though Amanullah was compelled to accept the legitimacy of the Durand Line, the line demarcating the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and “abandon his claim to the tribal areas beyond.”

Amanullah sought a much more intense modernization of Afghanistan than his predecessor did. With Mahmud Tarzi as his Foreign Minister, close relative and right hand man when it came to the push for modernization, Amanullah embarked on a journey which would prove problematic in Afghanistan. He instituted series of reforms including a written constitution which promulgated a secular governmental framework separating Islam and the state among others. Amanullah instituted two political changes which caused the eastern Pashtuns to harbor resentment: taxation and conscription. Higher taxes on some irrigated lands, the requirement that taxes be paid in cash, and a cut to stipends for Muhammadzay elites and religious leaders caused significant alienation. The new military conscription system no longer exempted certain tribes (Barakzais, Mangals, Zadrans, and Ahmadzais) and conscription became universal, chosen by lottery instead of by tribal leaders. Because of these reforms, the eastern

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Pashtuns began to feel that their traditional way of life was being threatened. Led by local clergy, the Mangal tribe rose up in what is known as the Khost rebellion in 1924, followed by other eastern Pashtun tribes after the government’s failure to repress the Mangals. It took approximately nine months for Amanullah’s new military to suppress the rebellion, signaling its weakness but also costing the government substantial amounts of money and thus weakening the legitimacy of Amanullah’s reforms and his stature as ruler.

Amanullah convened a loya jerga in 1924 in order to broaden his political base in confronting the rebels. Tribal leaders, urban ulema, and landowners were summoned by Amanullah as delegates to the assembly. Two issues arise in dealing with the loya jerga: first, the origins and co-optation of the concept of loya jerga and second, the outcome of the assembly. Jerga is a traditional Pashtun arrangement for resolving conflict. It is assembled by local individuals or groups, not usually by the state and convenes for a certain period of time until the conflict is resolved at which point the jerga is dissolved. Decisions of the jerga are arrived upon by consensus, typically of no more than 25 male members. Opposition is discouraged and rarely permitted. The decision of the jerga is final and enforcement of its decision is the responsibility of the Tsalwextai, “a contingent of forty,” though this number varies depending on the size of the community. Amanullah’s assembly of a loya jerga grossly misrepresents the true Pashtun concept, giving it a Pashtun name while treating it as a Western constitutional convention. Furthermore, the ethnic composition of the 1924 loya jerga reveals only 32% of delegates was Pashtun. Secondarily, the urban ulema resisted Amanullah’s socio-cultural

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reforms, such as his ban on polygamy, but the jerga supported his taxation and conscription reforms. The agreement by the tribal leaders, urban ulema and landowners could signal two things: 1) there existed to some degree an urban-rural tension or disagreement among the ulema and/or 2) some Pashtun tribal leaders were on Amanullah’s side while others were rebelling against him (divergent Pashtun positions).

Despite the jerga’s ruling, Ghilzai tribes joined the rebellion after Abdul Karim, the son of Amir Yaqub Khan, returned to Afghanistan from India. He then promised to govern the tribes justly with a council of forty ulema if they would join him against Amanullah. In turn, Amanullah shifted the discourse away from the merit of his reform laws and toward the notion of Abdul Karim being part of a British plan to take over Afghanistan (though this was a fabrication). The shift in discourse drew neighboring tribes to his side and helped him put down the rebellion.

Two years later in 1927, Amanullah took a world tour to the modernized countries of Egypt, the Soviet Union, Italy, France, Britain, Germany, India, Turkey and Iran. His tour convinced him of Afghanistan’s backwardness and need for modernization. Upon his return to Afghanistan, he instituted radical modernization efforts despite the rebellion they had caused just a few years earlier. Through another loya jerga in 1928, his new modernization plans were passed without much dissent. These reforms resulted in discontent among Pashtun border tribes but also to other Pashtun tribes and Kohistanis in the north. Habibullah Kalakani, the Tajik bandit from the north (also known as Bacha-i-Saqao) took control of Kabul after government troops begun defecting to the rebels. Amanullah subsequently abdicated and fled to Qandahar. Habibullah Kalakani kept control of Afghanistan for roughly nine months, aided by the initial

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willingness of Amanullah’s former government workers to work for him. They even arranged for his marriage to a Muhammadzay wife.21

Afghan loyalties were divided when Habibullah Kalakani declared himself amir. Both the Durrani Pashtuns in Qandahar and the Hazaras supported the re-institution of Amanullah as amir while some of the eastern Pashtuns began to come to the same conclusion. The Shinwari Pashtuns supported Ali Ahmad as amir but his aspirations were quickly scratched after a failed attack on Habibullah’s forces. A Ghilzai ambush near Ghazni crippled Amanullah’s hopes of a return to power, along with continued attacks from Habibullah’s forces and news that Habibullah had taken control of Herat. The eastern Pashtun tribes then turned to Nader Khan, who had joined them from France with his brothers to support them in their fight, to lead them.

Nader Khan was a former exile, sardar of the Musahiban family, and cut from the cloth of the Pashtun Muhammadzay clan. Even though Nader Khan was their leader, the Pashtun fragmentation prevented them from uniting to defeat Habibullah. Since Nader lacked money to pay the eastern Pashtuns, many were content to remain without a clear ruler. Finally, a group of Wazir tribesmen, led by Nader’s brother, Shah Wali Khan, took Kabul from Habibullah and returned home after looting the city. Nader Khan was then declared Amir of Afghanistan.2223

Pashtuns have without a doubt played a role in the political system from 1880-1929. Along with other social, religious, and ethnic groups, Pashtuns were integrated into Abdur Rahman’s political apparatus and some, particularly the Muhammadzay Pashtuns who were most closely related to him, were privileged more than other groups. This type of behavior is a spoils system whereby the family and friends of those in power are put in positions of power because of

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
their connections. Pashtuns as a whole ethnic group, though, were not privileged to this same degree, or even close to it. Throughout the roughly 50 years examined, Pashtun tribes were often in direct conflict with the Afghan state while others supported the Afghan state depending on different factors, and these loyalties shifted by circumstance. Individual and groups of Pashtuns had different experiences in relation to the Afghan state, thus having very different ethnic histories and pasts. The stark differences in the Pashtun ethnic past suggest a strong divisive effect on Afghan nationalism.

Bibliography


