

Ethnic Factor in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Ethnicity as an issue has been faced by all multi-ethnic societies. But it is a matter of great apprehensions and graver outcomes in those societies which are going through post-conflict reconstruction, like Afghanistan is today. The paper will discuss in detail the ethnic groups, which exist in Afghan society along with the country's ethnic history. This paper attempts to analyze the fact how social and political objectives of ethnic groups are liable to be accommodated in the new structure of Afghan State. It will also argue about the composition of ethnic groups, impact of war on ethnic communities, and why the ethnic fault lines may continue and under what circumstances, they may fade away?

Keywords: Ethnicity, communist regime, Mujahideen, multi-ethnic state, racial homogeneity, post-colonial states, Treaty of Rawalpindi

Introduction

Afghanistan is the meeting place and centre of four ecological, cultural and strategic areas; the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian Sub-Continent and the Far East, for the Pamir Mountains intrude into Chinese Sinkiang (Marwat, 1997: xiii). Devastated by wars over the last three decades, Afghanistan has strived for peace and solidity regardless of grave internal and external challenges, together with its history, demography, geography, geography and global power politics. Like most of the post-colonial states, through out the history, Afghanistan has remained a "multi-ethnic state", having more than "one ethnic group, speaks too many languages, and has multiple and multi-layered identities" (Shahrani, 2002: 715-722). The questions of ethnic identity and group cohesion has achieved the political worth as the 28 years long war has immeasurably tainted the population landscape of the country (Rais, 2008: 34).

The origins of the various ethnic groups in Afghanistan are the subject of much speculation and legend. Though having few indigenous ethnic groups, yet Afghanistan is neither a "self-contained ethnic unit", nor its national

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culture is “uniform” (Dupree, 2010: 57). The diversity has undermined Afghanistan’s attempts at nation-building. Within its borders, there is no ethnic majority, there are two ethnicities composing at least a quarter of the population, and as many as five composing at least 5 %. The diversity is as a result of Afghanistan’s location at the peripheries of the world’s great empires. *Proto-Aryans, Persians, Turks, Mogols, and Indians* have all conquered Afghanistan and their descendents fill the land. Thus it is common to find Afghans who look Northern Europeans, South Asian, East Asian, and Southern European all in the same province. The four major ethnicities of the country are *Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras* and *Uzbeks*. The lines between ethnicities are distinct, based either on language, religion or race.

Ethnic History of Afghanistan

Dubow (2009) states that during the old times, the “North half of Afghanistan has been firmly a part of Persia”. In the period preceding the Durrani Pashtun ascendancy in 1747, the ethnonyms of ‘Afghan’ and ‘Afghanistan’ denoted a particular ethnies (Smith, 1981: 66). The term “Groupe Ethnique” for Afghanistan was first time used by the French researcher and anthropologist, named Dolot (1937: 47), who “categorized Afghan people in several ethnic units”. There had been no term of “Ethnic Groups” till 19th century and more realistically, the “foreign academicians and the governments began to divide Afghan society systematically into ethnic categories by the differences in language, sect, culture etc” not before the mid 20th century (Boboyorov; Poos & Schetter, 2009).

The creation of the *Durrani* monarchy in 1747 triggered a dramatic turning point in the history of the vast region wedged between the river Oxus and Indus, when the ethnic group, called “*Pashtun*” constituted an overwhelming majority. After the Achaemenid period, multiple states rose and fell on the territory of what is now Afghanistan (Saikal, 2006: 17). The ethnic diversity of Afghanistan has led it to “one of the major dynamics of civil war in the country”. The Afghan ethnic groups have lived together” for more than 5000 years in this region and have united mutually many times against the Great Empire of Britain and Soviet Union and crushed them and preserved their freedom”. The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan has attracted many world powers time and again and for their very vested interest, they have used these ethnic groups by raising conflicts among them. Owing to this reason, “multi-ethnicity” of the country itself has held back its progress as a nation. The ethnic diversity has been well-built while the other considerable divergences like “religious, ideological, economic, geographic and linguistic” emphasize the peculiarity between “one ethnic group and another”. Even though Afghanistan is a multifaceted country in terms of ethnic composition, the significance of ethnicity in elucidating the differences has varied considerably throughout its history.

Ethnic Groups in Afghanistan

At the dawn of the 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 (Saikal, 2004:18). The ethnic groups in Afghanistan are “solid, cultural units which have been divided by boundaries and have been engaged in conflict since years’ (Shahrani, 1986: 26-29). Ethnically Afghanistan is truly a very “diverse country that has been under the control of the *Pashtun* majority at the top level as all the kings come from this group”. However, ethnicity had never remained a very strong factor in Afghan politics before the *Saur Revolution* (Rais, 1999). The war in Afghan has vastly changed the traditional balance of power among the ethnic groups. Non-*Pashtun* minorities are more powerful today than they were 20 years back.



Source: Dupree, Louis. (2010). *Afghanistan*. Oxford University Press. p. 58.

The population statistics for the major ethnic groups are highly controversial in the absence of an accurate official census.

Ethnic Group	%
Pashtun	42
Tajik	27
Hazara	9
Uzbek	9
Aimak	4
Turkmen	3
Baluchi	2
Others	4

Source: Youngerman, Barry & Wahab, Shaista. (2007). *A Brief History of Afghanistan*. InfoBase Publishing, New York. P. 14.

While the population of main ethnic groups of Afghanistan in 1979 has been as follow;

Pashtun	7,000,000	Concentrated in South and South-East but settled in most regions
Tajiks	3,500,000	North, North-East and Kabul region
Hazaras	1,500,000	Centre (Hazarajat) and Kabul
Uzbeks	1,300,000	North
Aimeq	800,000	West
Farsiwan, Heratis	600,000	West and South
Turkmen	300,000	North
Brahui	100,000	South-West
Baloch	100,000	West and North-West
Nuristanis	100,000	East

Source: Hyman. Anthony. (1984). *Afghanistan under Soviet Domination: 1964-83*. London, Macmillan. p. 11.

Few Afghan groups maintain racial homogeneity outside the *Pashtun* areas of the South and East, and even there breakdowns appear on closer analysis (Debets, 1966c; Maranjian, 1958: 63). Many groups have practiced miscegenation for centuries and composite communities exist in broad bands of ethnic gray zones. When long contact has existed between Caucasoid and Mongoloid groups, particularly in North Afghanistan among *Tajik* and *Uzbek*, red or blond hair, blue-or-mixed-eye combinations occur in association with epicanthic folds and high cheekbones. Many darker-skinned *Baluch* and *Brahui* also have blue, green or mixed eyes (Dupree, 2010: 65).

The origins of various ethnic groups are subject of much speculation and legend (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007: 15). Afghanistan has been facing the political intricacies in “developing a coherent state on nationhood”, owing to the complications of ethnic, religious and linguistic multiplicity of the country. Barfield (2010: 23) says that “Afghanistan consists of 5 major and dozens of minor ethnic groups and many of which have not been even studied well”

- **Pashtuns**

They are known to be one of the “largest tribal societies” in the world. Even though “Kinship is a key factor within the tribal social organization, Pashtuns are quick to acknowledge that this age-old bond is not as cherished as it was in the past” (Ruttig, 2010).

Concentrated in the Southern and Eastern part of Afghanistan, they are the largest ethnic group in the country, comprising of “50% to 54%” of the total population. They have been dominating since the mid-eighteenth century

(Hanley, 2011, April 8). Their main tribal confederations are *Durrani* and *Ghilzai* whose territorial domain extends to South and East of the country. Both have enmity against each other. The other major tribes of *Pashtuns* are *Mohmand*, *Afridi* and *Yusufzai*. All of them follow a strict code of honor, called *Pashtunwali*. *Pashtuns* are notorious for their strict role division, and women are often kept isolated in their home compounds (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007: 15). As a result of the war (Soviet invasion), and its accompanying political fragmentation among the tribes and empowerment of other ethnic groups, the role played by the *Pashtuns* in the Afghan society and the emerging power structure has somewhat declined (Newell, 1989: 1094).

- **Tajiks**

Better educated and skilled, *Tajiks* are the second largest ethnic group followed by *Pashtuns*, ranging from 26 to 30%. The Soviet war and the civil war with *Pashtuns* in Afghanistan has brought *Tajiks* into scene. They have remained influential in “Post 9/11” period.

- **Uzbeks**

As an ethnic group, *Uzbeks* occupy an important geopolitical landscape between the Hindu Kush and the Central Asian region beyond the Amu darya. Comprising about 8% of total population, *Uzbeks* are one of the smallest ethnic groups in Afghanistan. When Turkish invasion took place, they settled in the country at that time and later as the “refugees and fighters escaping the Russian armies and subsequently the Soviet forces in Central Asia” (Rais, 2008: 32). Though they have much common with the people of Uzbekistan yet they speak *Dari* as a second language (Smith et al; 1969: 75).

- **Hazaras**

Not being natives like *Uzbeks*, they came as a “part of invading hordes of Genghis Khan in the 13th century”. They comprise of 7% of the total population, settled in Hazarajat and have adopted *Dari* or *Persian* as their language. They are the poorest and the most marginalized ethnic community of the country (Rais, 2008: 32)

- **Aimaq**

They are found in the areas between Herat in the West and the highlands of Hazarajat in the East and are Persian-speaking, ranging between half a million to three-quarters of a million. They are further divided into following 4 clans;

- *Jamshedis*
- *Taimani*
- *Taimuri*

- *Firozkohi* (Rais. 2008: 33)

- **Others- Turkmen, Nuristanis, Balochis**

They constitute 4% of the total population. *Turkmen* share a border, ethnicity and language with people across the border in Turkmenistan. Nuristani share culture and history with Kafirs (Unbelievers), of Kafiristan, a region in the north-west of Pkaistan. But when they converted islam in late 19th century, the area was renamed as Nuristan. While *Balochis* share commonality with the people of Pakistani province Balochistan (Rais, 2008: 33-34).

Civil Wars, Ethnic Discrimination and Ethnic Fragmentation

In the contemporary history of Afghanistan, it has dawned that civil wars in the country have been the product of “ethnic discrimination’ in the country as these ethnic groups believe themselves the contenders, for they aspire to attain power and control the country (http://www.intermedia.org.pk/pdf/pak_afghan/Naheed_Soleman_Ethnic_Discrimination_in_Afghanistan.pdf). Both internal and external factors have been involved in this. Wars, particularly long destructive civil wars among local groups, create or sharpen existing ethnic identities by an exasperating sense of loss among some groups, while inducing a real or imagined sense of empowerment among others. The wars in Afghanistan have drastically altered the balance of power and influence among the traditional social and political forces in the country. The ethnic and social forces of Afghans are more conscious of their separate identities today than any time in the history of the country. The responses to the Communist regime and the Soviet invasion were organized more or less on an ethnic and local basis. By ousting the Communist state and its functionaries from their regions, they established a sort of self-government under their own ethnic leaders. Ethnic considerations subsequently caused political polarization among the *Mujahideen* groups, locking them into a bitter struggle for power after the fall of the Marxist regime (Rais, 2008: 17). The multipolar confrontation acquired dangerous sectarian and regional dimensions and gradually transformed itself into an ethnic conflict between the *Pashtun*, fearing loss of power, and the coalition of *Uzbek* and *Tajik* groups from the North who had gained greater political influence in Kabul, which had been traditionally dominated by the *Pashtun* elite. In the absence of democratic institutions, the Afghan fractions were unable to resolve their differences peacefully or maintain stable coalitions, which undermined national unity. The differences between *Pashtun* majority groups and minorities on one hand, and the political rift between the parties professing traditional and revolutionary Islam on the other, widened the conflict within the resistance after the departure of common enemy, the Soviet Union from the scene.

The rise of Taliban movement, which sought reunification of the country through military conquest and established a highly centralized state

apparatus run by a rigid theocratic line, also had *Pashtun* ethnic undertones. Their military offensive pushed the ethnic minorities to margins, causing the worst human rights violations. The post-Taliban political arrangements were tilted in favor of the ethnic minority groups from the Northern parts of the country. With the new constitution and elections for the parliament and provincial councils, Afghanistan's political system is becoming more representative. The issue of ethnicity may get diffused with economic and political reconstruction. But the question of identity and regional interest will take a longer time to settle, depending on how the social groups of Afghanistan seek accommodation and live within a unified state like they had before the wars (Rais, 2008: 18).

Throughout the world, "ethnic tribal characteristics are similar in that kinship is a factor in establishing the group's identity". The ethnic groups have been significant factors in the history of Afghanistan when it is talked about "violence" (Hanley, 2011, April 8). The ethnic issues have great impact on the people of Afghanistan and "may lead to violence" in the society. Ethnic characteristics further exacerbate the division between *Pashtun* and Non-*Pashtun* tribes whose "insurgencies threaten Afghanistan". The "hostilities among ethnic groups tend to be more localized than nationwide". The persistent conflict among ethnic groups over land and water rights has plagued the history of Afghanistan (Isby, 2010: 189). As;

- In Kunduz, the relationship between rural *Tajiks* and urban *Pashtuns* has been tense, as far as agricultural practices are concerned.
- The *Uzbeks* and *Hazara* farmers are in conflict with *Pashtun* herders (Hanley, 2011, April 8).

Role of Ethnicity in Nation Building

Traditionally, Afghan ethnic groups have co-existed with no main clash over "resources or on the question of representation". The ethnic balance subsisted along with the "majority and minority groups". This concept of balance stands on terms of synchronization, symmetry, and permanence of "relationships among the ethnic groups" and not in terms of any "social, economic, or political impartiality", which is scarcely doable in factual social state of affairs. The *Pashtun* groups that originated the Afghan state preliminary as a tribal confederation subjugated the superstructure of the state through its chaotic reality for more than two centuries (Rais, 2008: 35). The Afghan monarchs who despite being *Pashtun* in ethnic origin, were elated in taking up the social ethics, mores, and language other than *Pashto*, the "national language of the Pashtun, on both sides of the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders". They espoused *Persian*, which in Afghanistan with local difference of dialect and intonation is known as *Dari*. The "*Persian* language and culture through *Persian* imperial domination of the region for centuries in Afghanistan, and beyond into central Asia, has left lasting inscriptions on local populations, including *Tajiks* and the Afghan oligarchy (Herzig, 2004: 511).

It is debatable whether the Afghan kings in the 20th century made any serious and deliberate attempt to construct an inclusive and composite national identity representative of the ethnic cultures, folklores, and modern literary expressions. Ahady (1995: 622) writes that many historians and observers of the present society and politics of Afghanistan think that “Afghan nationalism and recognition of most of the ethnic groups with this thought, or a few might argue, ideal, subsumed other coatings of conflict-ridden distinctiveness and bestowed Afghanistan with a lucid sagacity of national identity. However non-*Pashtun* intellectuals and sub-nationalist rudiments have argued that the creation of a distinct national identity had a *Pashtun* social base, as it hinges on *Pashtunwali*, or the historical social code of the *Pashtun* tribes which are;

- Hospitality
- Giving Refugee
- Protection to fugitives
- Revenge (Rais, 2008: 53).

For this reason, *Pashtun* groups have identified themselves with Afghan nationalism more than other ethnic groups. Mainly *Pashtun* ethnic symbols and cultural expressions in dance and music were assumed as national culture. Ali (1990) states that since the affirmation of independence in 1919, after the Treaty of Rawalpindi between the British Indian government and King Amanullah Khan, Afghanistan used three diverse directions in order to conduit the creation of a single national identity. These were;

- Intensification and escalating the administrative capability of the central government to facilitate the entry into different areas of the Afghan society;
- Achieving a homogeneous structure of education that was rooted in the Afghan/*Pashtun* national culture;
- Propping up a general identity while paying no attention to ethnic and social diversity. *Tajiks*, *Uzbeks*, *Hazaras* and many other smaller ethnic communities didn't perceive themselves through the “*Pashtun*-based erection of a single national identity. They were offended by non-recognition of their individualities and their exclusion from the national identity-making process, but they had hardly any channels to put across their grievances or seek out access to power and resources beyond the contracted circles of ethnic elites tied to the Afghan oligarchy.

Anderson (1974: 462-550) states that the “script of state and nationhood is inscribed by the prevailing ethnic groups in any authoritarian system because this kind of politics is by nature exclusionary”. Afghanistan under the monarchy was no exception. As the institutions for “interest articulation or smoothing the progress of representation of diverse social groups in the power structure were missing from the scene, the monarch performing as the principal patriarch dogged “who got, what and why”. In this type of

political system, it is also easier to engender myths about national identity, nationalism, and nationhood, and maintain them in the absence of political participation” (Hobsbawn, 1990). The outside world did recognize Afghan nationalism and its strapping historical roots in confrontation against alien assailants, and the courage and feeling of enormous sacrifice which Afghans have established persistently in order to protect their country (Rubin, 1995). While a brawny sense of Afghan national identity has existed within Afghanistan, as a minimum in the urban areas along with the educated classes. But this sense did not reach to the countryside society because the question of bigger identity remains “immaterial to their every day reality, and their identification is with narrower communities of family, clan, sub-tribe, tribe, locality, and region” (Mousavi, 1998: 168-74).

Role of Ethnicity in Political Reconstruction: Post Taliban

Rais (2008: 47) writes that the “United States, in its war against the Taliban after the 9/11 tragedy, tried the time-tested strategy of courting the enemies of the enemy”. Northern Front in Afghanistan came forward as the “Natural Ally” of the Superpower by offering every possible help as the interests of both the US and Northern Alliance were common in crushing the Taliban which increased the apprehensions among *Pashtuns* having Taliban background about their “representation in the post-Taliban power arrangements”. The Bonn Conference (December 2001) brought Hamid Karzai (a *Pashtun* from Kandahar, the hometown of the Taliban). But it has not wiped out the feeling that power has been confined by the *Tajik* warlords maintained by the US as Karzai is just like a puppet. It might have carried some weight in the beginning but with the passage of time things have transformed. Nagel and Olzak (1982: 127-43) have found diverse grounds for the increase of ethnic approaches, and according to them “it is not all the time minority that becomes politically divided and marginalized. Rather “any community or ethnic group that has the benefit of power for fraction of a country’s history but observed decline in its share of power as other social groups got better representation, had its ethnic identity become politicized” (Haq, 1995: 990-1004) There are five factors which have played their role in the decline of the *Pashtuns*, which are;

- Confining Kabul by the alliance of ethnic minorities
- Disintegration and clash of interest among the *Pashtun* groups
- Disengagement between the *Pashtun* resistance parties and the society at a grassroot level
- Negative Western approach towards the *Pashtun* community owing to its support and connection with groups like the one led by Hikmatyar.
- Power struggle in Afghanistan among its neighbors (Ahady, 1995: 621-34).

It goes beyond saying that even today Taliban remain active and so is the case with terrorism. The U.S. policy in a similar vein started with the cooperation of the ethnic minorities, and at least for three years, paid greater

attention to leaders of ethnic minorities than to the *Pashtuns*. The reasons for this tilt or choice were obvious. The ethnic minorities driven out of power by the Taliban militia were more open to welcoming and supporting the U.S. forces than the *Pashtun* community that provided a strong political and ethnic base to the Taliban. In every situation, like the post-Taliban conditions of Afghanistan, some of the tribal leaders and strong individuals with local and regional influence from *Pashtun* areas have sided with the central government and cooperated with the foreign powers.

Conclusion

The “genocidal acts, ethnic cleansing, and violence” against one another have been common feature in the multi-ethnic society of Afghanistan. Yet Afghanistan has tainted very much in terms of ethnic balance due to civil war, foreign intervention, and state collapse. As rebuilding is the “over-arching political topic in Afghanistan”, conceivably its identity politics calls for reconstruction by identifying the “veracity of ethnic empowerment of minorities and providing institutionalized balance and representation of all groups in the political, economic, and cultural life of the country”. Afghanistan and its majority community, the *Pashtuns*, must recognize the political reason of a reconstruction of identity as an amalgamated nationhood that would be “accommodative” and not “exclusionary”. Respect of ethnicity and legality of the assertion of each group for liberty in all areas of national life will have affirmative and encouraging political repercussions about rights, representation, sovereignty, and value and right to contribute in the power arrangements of the country. With the increase in the power of the state, as reconstruction projects in different fields of national life follow-up optimistic political effects, the ethnic groups might uncover a new balance among themselves.

As far as the internal composition or social structure is concerned, none of the main ethnic groups is homogenous. But even then historically, the ethnic loyalties have been stronger than any other fidelity and have had anecdotal degrees of power among diverse social groups. Arnold (1985) states that the “Regional and international environments determine the geopolitical fix that can either obstruct or make possible the progress of national assimilation. Afghanistan, being landlocked, having a poor resource base, and being on the margins of world politics was not lucky enough to obtain enough economic or political support. The change of its role from a historical buffer to an aligned state of the former Soviet Union further alienated her from alternative centers of world power. The process of national consolidation gravely suffered with political instability, political polarization, and creeping influence of regional powers and internal confrontations that took both ideological as well as ethnic shapes”. The violence can not solely be attributed to ethnic groups. There are surely numerous other factors which have contributed to the fragmentation of Afghan in society and persistence violence. No doubt, ethnic differences are a fact, but not the sole factor in triggering Afghan violence.

End Notes

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