

National Integration and Ethnolinguistic Polarity in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper overviews the historical causes of ethnolinguistic polarity in the contemporary Afghanistan. Significant political events are focused to find the genesis and evolution of schism in the multiethnic and multilingual Afghanistan. This paper finds the roots of ethnolinguistic polarity in the faulty process of nation building. The different ethnic groups in Afghanistan are geographically concentrated and they consider their ethnolinguistic identity as an important part of their existence. However, the ruling Pashtun elite considered this diversity as a threat to integrity of Afghanistan. The campaign of integration was viewed by the non-Pashtun ethnolinguistic groups as an attempt of their extermination. This paper proposes that respecting the diversity is the best way possible for the integration of Afghanistan.

KEY WORDS: Afghanistan, ethnolinguistic polarity, integration, language policy

INTRODUCTION

Arnold Toynbee (1972) proposes that disintegration of nations and societies results from a conflict within the society. At such point from the ash of the disintegrating society originates the resurrection of a new society. He writes, "Breakdowns are not inevitable and not irretrievable; but, if the process of disintegration is allowed to continued, I find that it seems to follow a common pattern in most instances. The masses become estranged from their leaders, who then try to cling to their position by using force as substitute for their lost power of attraction. I trace the fragmentation of society into a dominant minority, an internal proletariat, and external proletariat consisting of the barbarians on its fringes; and I sketch the social reactions of these diverse groups to the ordeal of disintegration. I also find a corresponding psychological schism in the souls of people who happen to have been born into this unhappy age. Discordant psychic tendencies which are perhaps always latent in human nature now find free play. People lose their bearings, and rush down blind alleys, seeking escape. Greater souls detach themselves from life; still greater souls try to transfigure life into something higher than mere life as we know it on Earth, and sow the seeds of a fresh spiritual advance." (Toynbee, 1972, p.211). When we study the history of Afghanistan in the light of this statement, then we find the process of disintegration which took thousands of years in Egypt and Greece, takes not more than a couple of centuries to reduce it to a very small part of its initial form.

Ethnolinguistic polarity in Afghanistan stems from the faulty process of nation building. In Europe, in the historical perspective, the current concept of nation building started with the promotion of a single nation within a single state (Wright, 2000, p.14). If in Europe, Germany, Britain, France and Spain emerged as national state through a process of evolution, ethnic elements did not evolve to form a national state but remained forever a mosaic of ethnic groups juxtaposed along each other through conquests and empire building, what Henry Walter Bellow succinctly puts as they were, "only brought together as nationality by the accident of position and the bond of common religion" (Bellew, 1880, p.11). The mosaic of ethnicity did not become cooperative. The competition for power polarized ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Protection of the interests of one group posed threat to the interest of other ethnic groups. In absence of political will to cooperate in solving internal problem that was added by the arbitrary use of force of coercion resulted in increased polarization in conflicts. Further, use of the political identity of the dominant Pashtuns in nineteenth and twentieth century increasingly alienated other ethnic groups, forcing them to resist substitution of their ancient ethnic identity. It formed to the process of historical development of the nascent national identity of Afghanistan after 1747.

Historically, Afghanistan remained part of larger regional empires in the past (Reshtia, 1990, p.1). The conversion of Khurasan (proper and greater), into Afghanistan did not take place gradually but, suddenly, through the conquests of Ahmad Shah Abdali. As was the case with earlier dynastic empires, Afghanistan also incorporated a large numbers of ethnic groups. In the medieval frame of politics, rulers of Afghanistan did not attempt the formation of a consolidated state with a single national identity. They remained content with putting down rebellions and assuring the loyalty of masses to their rule. When talk about national identity of Afghanistan starts, naturally Afghans as the nationals of this state comes to mind. Is Afghan a nation? This question brings with it the implication of homogeneity, which despite the wish of the rulers of this country, fails to get legitimacy of acceptance, among the majority of its population and scholars. Sir George MacMunn

answers the question by proposing as initial hypotheses of Afghans as the “dominating and dynastic” race of Afghanistan. Discrediting the claim of Afghans as the descent of the Biblical tribe of Israel, he proposes the viable theory of migrant settlers forming larger body of Afghans. Linguistically, Pashto is spoken by the majority of Afghans, but history of ethnicity tells a different story of convergence and assimilation of different ethnic groups mostly speculated and dimly known into the ethnic Pashtun/Afghan political identity. Around the core of Afghan as early settler of the area, a conglomeration of races, mostly remnant of invaders in earlier part of their history and migrant settlers in the later periods, grew in numbers but never succeeded in becoming majority. These developments, left Afghans as the majority in the regions. Afghans themselves divided into three branches Durrani, Ghilzai and the Pathans inhabited the region along Hazara, Turkomans, Uzbeks and Tajiks. All ethnic groups despite vigorous attempts of assimilation, successfully retained their identity formed out of their ethnicity, language, culture and to some extent religious and political affiliations (MacMunn, 1929, pp.18-20).

Formation of ethnic polarity in Afghanistan is based on historical developments. Afghanistan lacks ethnic and linguistic unity. Ethnic groups in Afghanistan harbor a long standing enmity to each other. Their mutual polarization form a barrier in their unification into one nation. In fact besides common religion in Afghanistan, there is nothing in Afghanistan that could offer to keep it together (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007, p.xii).

Geography of Afghanistan instead of offering natural barrier in Afghanistan, made it an easy passage for people to march across its terrain. The terrain of Afghanistan actually makes internal communication difficult. As the mighty Hindukush sweeps through the middle of Afghanistan, it divides Afghanistan into two, making contact between the northern and southern regions difficult (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007, p.viii).

Languages of the majority are closely related to Iran. Here the Shiite adherence of Iran does not go well with the Sunni people of Afghanistan. People in the northern parts of Afghanistan show ethnic continuity with the peoples living in central Asia. Eastern border divides the majority of Pashtun population into two that straddle across Duran line (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007, p.ix). This divide historically acted against the stability of Afghanistan, as Afghan with irredentist proclivity always wished to extend its borders to the time of conquests by Ahmad Shah Abdali.

When Ahmad Shah Abdali carved out the present day Afghanistan from the Moghul and Persian empires in 1747, this region was never ruled by the indigenous people, but always was torn between competing empires of the region (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007, p.xii). Here we might ignore the effect of Ghaurid and Suri dynasties which for brief time created fragile kingdoms that collapsed as quickly as they were formed (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007, p.xii). Lack of local rule and migration contributed to the hotchpotch (Sykes, 1981, p.vii). Ahmad Shah combined to form a kingdom which found an opportunity to be ruled by kings hailing from its soil which initiated search for a collective identity.

Afghanistan always faced the threat of invasions- which in fact took place three times by the British India in the history of modern state of Afghanistan (O’balance, 1993, p.vii). Rulers of Afghanistan desisted from building roads and railway line across the country that might make the conquest of Afghanistan easy for Russia and Britain. Lack of access, aided Afghanistan in the repulsion of foreign invasions (Gregorian, 1969, p.127). This aided the Afghan paranoia of invincibility but resulted in the isolation of ethnic population. The state of Afghanistan due to lack of communication did not provide an opportunity of integrating the population into one national identity (O’balance, 1993, p.6). Rule of the king would be limited to the urban centers, whereas the larger rural areas devoid of any modern communication remained isolated in their own ethnic milieu (Gregorian, 1969).

Literacy and education provide to a modern state tools of building a national identity that integrates the diverse ethnicities in to single national identity. Modern states therefore, emphasize compulsory education. In Afghanistan well into the middle of twentieth century literacy rate remained abysmally low (Gregorian, 1969, pp.3-4). Education remained in the hands of almost illiterate mullahs who did not care about literacy. Therefore, written communication was limited to a very small number of educated people (Gregorian, 1969, p.20). Ethnic groups being concentrated in different areas of Afghanistan remained isolated from each other. National integration did not take place in the absence of communication and education. Ethnic conflict over scarce water and irrigation resources imprisoned members of ethnic group into a xenophobic isolation.

The grim picture of non-existence of modern education and means of communication was made darker by the tribal structure of all ethnic group. Tribal structure did not permit the members to discard the tribal/ethnic identity in favour of the modern national identity (Gregorian, 1969, p.3). The fact that rule of the country always remained within the Pashto speaking Afghan tribes caused deep grievances in other ethnic groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkomans and Hazara. Deprivation of the minority ethnic groups further increased when the rulers would discriminate against them in the imposition of taxes (Gregorian, 1969, p.48-9).

Though majority of the inhabitants were Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims also lived in Afghanistan and they belonged to minority ethnic groups such as Hazara. Traditional harsh treatment of the ethnic minorities in the name of religion alienated these groups from the majority in such a way, that when civil war broke out in

Afghanistan in 1992, Afghanistan witnessed divide along ethnic grounds. In recent time, when Pashto speaking Sunni Afghans took refuge in Pakistan, Dari speaking people preferred Iran.

Ruling class, depended on the support of ethnic Pashtun tribes. This increased their political role in Afghanistan at the cost of other ethnic minorities (Sykes, 1981, p.353).

Modernization which could have helped in dissolving ethnic polarization was alarmingly suspected by the rulers and conservative Ulema. They equated modernization with the lifestyle of the west. Distrust of modernization was further increased by the Anglo-Afghan wars. Besides education other essentials of modernization such as radio, TV and newspaper did not appear in Afghanistan. Poverty and the landlocked geography made Afghan rulers dependent on the British India, whom they always suspected as potential colonizers. Therefore, modernization was blocked for a long time. The failed attempt of Amanullah, instead of initiating a strong movement for modernization resulted in distrust and hate for modernization as a threat to their faith and traditions.

People of Afghanistan are referred to by the terms reflecting warrior and aggressive nature, such as Marshall Race, warring people (Nyrop & Seekins, 1986, p.xxii). Local poetry, legends and myths aggrandize the Afghan valor. Success in expelling the British army from its soil in nineteenth century added to this illusion of invincibility. The warring tribes showed unity only when there was a call for Jihad (Sykes, 1981, 356). However, as soon as the external threat ended, they reverted again to settle their old scores. When faced with popular discontent, and ethnic polarization Afghan rulers often resorted to Jihad. When jihad with external enemy was not possible because, they happened to be too powerful to engage in military campaign, internal campaigns were started. The campaigns against people of Hazara, Kafiristan, and Turkoman were aimed to extend the rule of the king to these areas, which often resulted in resentment and ended up in polarization of the minority ethnic groups against the dominating Pashtuns.

Forced internal migrations, especially in the time of Abdur Rahman caused polarization among the new settlers and indigenous people. Though this strategy successfully diffused the pressure of opposing Pashtun tribes, who in the new land faced other ethnic groups against their larger Pashtun ethnic loyalty, this resulted in further ethnic polarity as the local non-Pashtun ethnic groups found relocation of Pashtuns as a threat to their existence.

To the ongoing discussion, we can add some more causes, which can be related to the ethnic polarization in Afghanistan. First, the geography that facilitated invasions and settlement, and lacked natural barrier to the use of this land as a natural conduit for the conqueror to go south. These conquerors, constantly changed the demographic and ethnic composition of the country (Sykes, 1981, p.vii). Mongol invaders, first under the leadership of Genghis Khan and later Timur laid waste the countryside by killing the population wholesale. This led to aggregation of aggregation of people, who had little to do with each other and only were there in Afghanistan due to the historical events of conquests.

The war like people in Afghanistan paid little attention to education, therefore, lack of education, communication and mass media resulted in the isolation of ethnic groups in to pockets of their concentration areas without any opportunity of integration.

Tribal structure of the ethnic groups did not allow for administrative structure to effectively cut across the tribal loyalties and enmities which resulted adherence to traditions which bode ill for other tribes and ethnic groups. History of Afghanistan has been replete with instances of wrong doings arising out of the tribal loyalties and enmities. Further, it resulted in the tradition of subsistence on war, made people prone to wars instead of peaceful negotiations. The barren terrain of Afghanistan did not yield enough for the people to engage in peaceful means of economy. Especially change of trade route from the silk route to sea badly affected the prosperity of the people. Indian riches, always presented a temptation for militarism.

Unequal distribution of political and economic resources resulted in the domination of Afghans (or Pashtuns) over Tajik, Uzbeks, Hazara and other minorities. Distribution of resources exaggerated the role of Pashtuns which was considered unfair by other ethnic groups. The unequal distribution of resources, and political power was further aggravated by the tactics of the rulers to rely on tribal animosity and instead of developing a modern national army use the medieval method of compulsory conscription on tribal level, institutionalized the ethnic differences. Lack of census in Afghanistan might be a cause for ethnic group in over representing their numeral strength (Magnus & Naby, 1998, p.9).

Urban rural divide, and inaccessibility of rural areas limited the unifying power of kings to urban centers only. In rural areas, the political power remained in the hands of tribal chiefs for whom internal political struggle for power resulted in polarization (Magnus & Naby, 1998, 11).

Spillover of ethnic groups into neighboring countries, provided opportunity to the neighboring powers to have a say in the internal politics of Afghanistan for their interests. Such conditions increased proclivity for ethnic violence as reportedly Uzbeks received help from central Asia, some of Dari speaking non-Afghans from Iran and Pashto speaking Afghans received help from the Pakistan.

Failure of the formation of a single political identity was caused by the fact, that instead of respecting the rights and separateness of other ethnic groups, recourse to coercion and exploitation resulted in polarization.

Most of multiethnic states when faced with ethnic polarization, adopted federal system of governance where the rights of ethnic groups remain secured. However, in Afghanistan the existence of unitary system with concentration of all powers in Kabul, the likely result is always deprivation of minority as the ethnic majority monopolize everything. Policy of supporting Pashtunistan, resulted in the fragmentation of the combined Afghan identity. This policy resulted in sudden projection of Pashtuns which raised concerns in ethnic minority and added to their polarization.

Sectarian violence. Though religion was promoted by the rulers as device to integrate peoples of Afghanistan the divide and animosity along the sectarian line between orthodox Sunni and heterodox Shia sect happened to be so fierce that it became a potent cause of polarization (Bellew, 1880, p.13). Majority of the population of Afghanistan has been Hanafi Sunni. With few exception almost all tribes of Pashtuns belong to the Sunni sect. Some of the minority ethnic groups like Hazara happened to belong to the Shia sect. Sectarian and ethnic difference coupled and ultimately resulted in the ethnic violence (Magnus & Naby, 1998, p.36).

Pan-Islamism and the predominance of religious identity acted as a neutralizer of national state. Largely illiterate people of Afghanistan were not exposed to the Western concept of nationalism stemming from the myths of common race, language and culture. The presence of Caliphate, and the ideological stance of the influential Ulema in Afghanistan were more in favor of Pan Islamism. Pan-Islamism weakened the appeal of retaining a distinct Afghan identity. Afghanistan surrounded by Muslims, was not perceive a permanently distinct entity in the European sense. Under the umbrella of Muslim brotherhood, the ethnic groups of Afghanistan saw more vitality in their old ethnic identity in comparison to the relatively new national identity. National identity formation thus failed in Afghanistan and did not fulfill the promised role of dissolving ethnic polarization due to the presence of overarching Pan-Islamism. When threat to the sovereignty of Afghanistan would take place, appeal to Jihad against infidel was more potent tool of mobilizing masses against oppressor in comparison to the weak national identity. The temporary unity would soon dissolve as soon as the external threat ended. Then internal competitions based on ethnic allegiance would resume one again.

Competition also existed between tribes in the same ethnic groups. The classical example is the rivalry between Durrani (Abdali) and Ghilzai tribes in the ethnic Pashtuns (Sykes, 1981, 383). However these ethnic rivalries would vanish once the conflict between other ethnic groups and Pashtun took place. When Abdur Rahman forced the opposing Ghilzai tribes to migrate to the places in north, their they faced other ethnic groups and preferred to remain loyal to the king belonging to their ethnic group instead of cooperating against another ethnic groups in the overthrow of the king.

We see in the political loyalty of Afghans a hierarchy of belonging to Muslim brotherhood, then their ethnic group, then their tribe and finally their clan and family. In this hierarchy the place of national identity as Afghan should have been on the top to govern and dilute other identities but it did not form in the modern European sense, and its absence became cause of strong loyalty to ethnic identity.

Saur revolution, which initially claimed to end social injustice, soon turned into a nightmare when foreign occupation by Soviet Union and subsequent migration of Afghan people into neighboring states took place. The working relation among different ethnic groups that were the result of political developments of more than two hundred years, suddenly crumpled under the revolutionary government that challenged their established views of social and economic life. The soviet influence posed a heavy threat to the existing distribution of social and political rights and responsibilities. Initial promise of bringing harmony among the ethnic groups was a sign of hope. However, this intended change translated into coercion when people who were not ready for the change, resisted. Weak central government, that was incapable of holding the Afghan people united faced serious threat from insurgents who threatened the writ of the government with the backing of USA and her allies.

Hazara as example of Ethnic polarization

Hazara people occupy the central region in Afghanistan and they claim to be the most ancient autochthonous group in Afghanistan. Their claim to be the original inhabitants of Afghanistan reflect their inspiration of their recognition and respect as a separate ethnic group (Mousavi, 1998, 19-43). However, this claim was felt by success kings of Afghanistan as a threat to their Pashtun backed domination and it was often reflected in their policy of oppression for Hazara. Policies of oppression gained great momentum when the process of centralization was initiated by Abdur Rahman. He used Pashtun population in the oppression of Hazara (Mousavi, 1998, p.92). Land and property was officially confiscated and re-allotted to Pashtun. In some cases Hazara people were enslaved as well. Killing of Hazara people was no great crime and dominating ethnic group continued this act under the official auspices with a degree of immunity. King would not restrain in expression of his hate for Hazara which would then be easily made a pretext of exploitation of Hazara. Some writhers called it the effort of ethnic cleansing and genocide. A lull to this outrage took place in the time of King Amanullah Khan. However, afterwards Hazara were systematically alienated from the mainstream of political and social life in Afghanistan. When afghan government was seeking an external cause of Pashtunistan, as a way of promoting national unity, Hazara people were ignored. When Saur revolution took place, initially government took measures to promote Hazara people. However, these measures usually remained limited in

scope and were intended more at improving the public image rather than bringing any real change in the lot of Hazara people. With the formation of resistance to the PDPA rule, mass migration took place. Pakistan received majority of Pashtuns and Iran received Tajik and Hazara. Inside Afghanistan schism in society widened along ethnic ground, though presence of external enemy kept them united for the time being. After the fall of Soviet backed government in Afghanistan, emergence of independent groups with recognizable concentration of one or the other ethnic group, absence of central authority and mutual distrust of these groups lead to a civil war, in which ethnic minorities suffered heavy losses. In the period of chaos, emergence of Taliban posed a great threat to the existence of Hazara. Their massacre at the hands of Taliban was one of the causes of the formation of northern alliance with strong non-Pashtun ethnic presence (Shoghla1213, 2014). Later, the operation enduring freedom ended the rule of Taliban and tilted the scale of power in favour of ethnic minorities including Hazara. However, there lack any permanent solution to the problem of distribution of power and resources in different ethnicities of Afghanistan. The existing system backed by the UNAMA, NATO and ISAF would not sustain if fundamental changes to Afghanistan were not introduced and given enough time to mature.

Conclusion

Area occupied by present Afghanistan remained for a long time pathway of conquerors, migrations and trade. This area being situated in ancient time hosted important location along silk route. Along trade this area served a conduit for invaders and migrations from central Asia to south Asia. Its unique position was enhanced by the ambition of the empire builders, with whom the ethnolinguistic composition of Afghanistan changed constantly, ultimately resulting in the present mosaic of races, languages and peoples. When modern Afghanistan was in the process of formation, the boundaries enclosed a variety of nations within, who had little choice in their inclusion and exclusion within the state. As Afghanistan consolidated as a state, the process of nation building started which due to internal and external factors did not succeed in complete unification of all ethnicities into one national identity. Exploration of such analysis reveals that ethnolinguistic equity is the best way forward for Afghanistan.

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