

State And Society In Afghanistan

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It is not for the first time that procedure to draft the Constitution and conducting of elections through democratic means has taken place in Afghanistan. Experimenting with various political processes in Afghanistan in order to provide it with the atmosphere of political culture for its stability in the socio-political framework leading to development is an old phenomenon. Although these experiments continued to fail due to varied intrinsic and extrinsic factors, the world community is still hopeful to see Afghanistan emerging a successful and a stable nation with its sovereignty intact.

In this regard it is important to look into the history of Afghanistan, which has been a witness to the various processes to achieve the goal of reforms in society. It is generally recognised that in Afghanistan society, diversity cuts across its culture, language, ethnicity, and religion. Thus, accommodating their diverse demands is a great challenge. It may be noted that Afghanistan finds it hard to come out of its old feudal set up in most of its areas, where warlords played a determining role in controlling the local community but did not come out with a centralised institution in order to face the outside world especially the British, the Russians and later on the Americans.

Afghanistan has seen various political set ups starting from tribalism, feudalism, monarchy, democracy under communist regime to totalitarian form of governance under the Taliban but none could provide the long lasting and stable socio-political set up. This consequently leads us towards the assumption that for any kind of experiment, the intrinsic factors (social set-up, public opinion, legitimacy) as well as extrinsic factors (free from foreign interference in the internal affairs of the country) must be taken into account.

It is important to understand the equations that were formed internally within the state or imposed from outside. The disintegration of USSR in 1990s led to the weakening of its hold in Afghanistan. As a result the state was in a state of anarchy. This continued till the extremist ideology came to the fore front in the form of Taliban. Although initially it was welcomed, due to its extremist policies and methods it became unpopular within the society and the entire world went against it with the exception of those countries which were providing support to it for their own vested interests. Consequently, the fall of Taliban paved the way for fresh initiatives to make Afghanistan a viable state.

The Challenges

The processes of turning Afghanistan into a viable, modern and democratic state have been initiated for quite some time now. However, it is important to discuss the challenges which these initiatives are facing in Afghanistan.

Ethnicity is one of the major factors in contributing to in-fights between various factions in their struggle to capture seats of power and control society. It is difficult to categorise Afghanistan either as a theocratic or democratic order. It is being argued that entry of Islam as a religion in Afghanistan society is a recent development. However, it gradually became a dominant feature in Afghanistan society. It raises an interesting issue of interface between religion and primordial culture in Afghan society.

Understanding Afghan society through its various components and how they play a determining role in the political process of the state is of utmost importance. In this connection it is important to understand its political geography whose influence is reflected in the behaviour of the people and their culture.

Location

The location of Afghanistan is an important factor in making it a vulnerable state. Afghanistan is a land-locked country with a land area of approximately 647,500 sq. kms. The extreme length of the country from northeast to southwest is 700 miles and extreme breadth from Herat frontier to the Khyber is about 600 miles. Afghanistan has no outlet on any ocean and the communication is overland[1]. Hence it is totally dependent for outside help in order to become a global player. Geographically, Afghanistan remains a land of diversity with mountain ranges, plains, plateaus and deserts. Consequently, it has a great impact on the cultural development of its people who mostly lead a life of hardships. Dupree has defined Afghanistan as a meeting place of four ecological and cultural areas. In his opinion it was partly created as an imperialist venture but never as a colony.[2]

Out of its total population, 20% lives in urban areas and the rest in the rural areas[3]. Hence development and modernisation remained restricted to a few areas, predominantly enjoyed by elite groups. Rural population still leads a hard life relying on subsistence agriculture and pastoral practices.

Economy

Afghanistan is basically an agrarian economy and a tribal society in which loyalties are oriented locally and not nationally[4]. It has huge reserves of natural resources viz. Copper, iron, lead and several other minerals like gold and silver in the neighborhood of Kandahar. Its Panjsher valley region contains aluminum, sodium,

silica and sulphur[5]. Afghanistan is a land of fruits and is famous for its wool, rugs, tobacco, spices and cotton. The oil and crude petroleum have been found in the northern belt of Afghanistan[6].

However, these rich resources remain untapped due to lack of infrastructure. Moreover, due to prevailing civil war for decades now and in view of the interference of external forces, the existing infrastructure, whatever was existing, has been destroyed. Afghanistan falls in the category of countries with Lower Income Groups (\$765 or less).[7] Now the country is deemed as aid dependent in which 90% aid provides financial support to its various developmental works[8].

Two models for financing and implementing reconstruction work were developed in Afghanistan[9]. One is the State supportive model which works through UNDP, WB and ADB. It works under strict accountability rule. And the second model works directly through UN agencies and NGOs. This model is posing some problem because it is not accountable for its proposed projects and the resources to be invested in it. It is leading to distortions in the labour market and drawing public sector staff away from their core functions.

Society

The Afghan society is heterogeneous and its diversity spreads along region, religion, language, and ethnicity. Customs and traditional Laws play a significant role in deciding predominantly local issues. Jirga is one such local institution which has played dominant role in deciding issues at societal as well as state level.

This institution has been in existence before the Afghan state took its final form. Life expectancy at birth is very low at 43-44 years and mortality rate is around 257. About three-fourth people live below poverty line[10]. Dupree has convincingly generalised Afghanistan as an 'inward looking society'[11] with various attributes like non-literacy, economy engaged in basic food production, lack of mobility, villages building a 'mud curtain' for protection against out-side world. Villagers fundamentally are non-cooperatives at least for those who are outside their kin groups. He aptly describes that these attributes perpetuate an inward looking society where a man is born into a set of answers[12]. Perhaps this is reflected in the development of society itself. When we look at social indicators of human development we find the average annual percent growth of population (1990-2003) at 3.7 and population density-44 per sq.km reflecting regional disparity[13].

Bernt Glazer has identified three categories of norms in Afghan society, viz. Shariat, traditional laws and tribal laws in which force of tradition has always held sway over the other two[14]. Arpita Basu Ray maintains that Afghan society is a complex product of thousands of years of imperial policies, conquests, state building and political decay. This position is corroborated by the views of other writers on Afghanistan[15].

Glazer illustrates with the examples of treaties of 1885, 1895 etc. that Afghan tribals went through the experience of the concept of nationhood with a definite territory through the British and the Russian occupations during the 19th century[16].

Loya Jirga

Glazer quotes the role of *Loya Jirgah* as noteworthy in establishing social control and collective action within Qawm[17] (loosely translated as Nation). Loya Jirga is generally called in situations like national crisis, matters of urgent importance etc. Dupree disagrees with most Afghan historians in whose opinion the year 1747A.D. (Ahmed Shah Durrani) is the beginning of modern Afghan state. Since until 1880, the processes of fusion and fission dominated the political scene[18], Durrani created an empire and not a nation state.

Ethnicity

Dupree has conducted an indepth study on Afghanistan describing it as not a self-contained ethnic unit and its national culture not being uniform. He illustrates with illustrations that all Pashtuns are not Afghan citizens[19]. He describes two physical types viz. Caucasoid (mainly Hazaras, Aimaq, Turkoman, Uzbek, Kirghiz) and modified Australoid (Brahui), present in Afghanistan[20].

Afghanistan has often been described as a tribal confederation where Pashtuns constitute around 38% of the total Afghan population; the Tajiks form the second largest nationality constituting 25% of the total population. Smaller groups like Hazaras and Uzbeks constitutes 19% and 6% respectively. Minor ethnic groups like Aimags, Farsiwans, Heratis, Turkmans, Brahuis, Baluchs and Nuristanis are around 12% of the population[21]. All these groups maintain their own distinct culture and sense of identity.

Bernt Glazer describes four main ethnic groups in Afghan conflict viz. The Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Hazaras and the Uzbeks[22]. He has differentiated tribes from ethnic groups. Tribes in Afghan context are sub-units of ethnic group. An individual may be a member of many tribes, each of which is a sub-unit of a larger one.

Given the existence of diverse ethnic groups, majority of them follow Sunni sect of Islam and have their own customs to observe. But it is important to note that none wants the interference of the other tribe or ethnic group in their own community affairs.

For instance, Pashtuns are always at odds with the Hazaras. In this case, ethnic group is helpful in strengthening the feeling of belongingness to an ethnic identity but doesn't play a key role in bringing about a feeling of belongingness to a nation.

Religion

Religious followers in Afghanistan account for 98.1% Muslims, Hindus 0.4% and Zoroastrians 1.5%[23]. Out of the total population in Afghanistan, Sunni Muslims constitutes 84% of the population, Shia's constitute 15% and others constitute only 1%. Hence more than 99% of the population in Afghanistan believes in Islam following Hanafi School as well as Shiite creed [24] and has its own codified system of rituals. Islam fulfils the need for homogeneity and binding the people of Afghanistan into one nation.

In the opinion of Dupree, Islam arrived in the region by the mid Seventh century A.D. and remains an important element in modern cultural and political patterns of society[25].

The Afghan mullah belongs to a village and not to any nation-wide body of clergy. He as a religious leader and is respected by the tribal people for leading the prayers and teaching children. He is the lowest member in the hierarchy of the orthodox Islamic leaders who derives authority from the mastery of the Islamic laws, Islamic texts and tradition. Islamic scholars, the Ulema, known as Maulawis, become Qazis when they act as judges[26].

Languages

Dupree in his work, *Afghanistan*, discusses the possibility of three to four major language families (viz. Indo-European, Uralic- Altaic, Dravidian and possibly Semitic) which are spoken in Afghanistan. The literature uses a modified Arabic script and most Hindus and Sikhs write in the Arabic script of Lahnda (Western Punjabi) dialects[27]. The two principal languages of Afghanistan are Indo-European: Persian (or Farsi) and Pushto. The 1964 constitution names both Dari (or Afghan Farsi) and Pushto as official languages[28].

In reality Dari serves as a *lingua franca*, although the constitution designates Pushto as the 'national language'[29]. According to CIA book of World Facts, Pushto speaking population constitutes 35% and Dari 50%. Other minor languages like Uzbek and Turkmen is spoken by 11% and Baluchi and Pashai is spoken by 4% of the population[30]. Dupree has imperatively identified the majority of the population as non-literate as distinct from illiterate[31]. Hazaras speak Hazaragi, Aimaqs speak Farsi, Tajiks speak Tajiki, Farsiwan speak Iranian Farsi. Heratis have an urban dialect of their own. The difference between Dari and Pushto is analogous to the range of differences between English and German, or French and Spanish. Farsi and Pushto generally use the same script as Arabic[32].

Duoree is of the opinion that Afghanistan like most Muslim (and other developing) nations has 'a literate culture but a non-literate society'[33]. Thus, it may be concluded

that despite the efforts made by various innovators as mentioned in his works, Afghan literature is described as a sterile and unimaginative due to mutual antagonism between Dari and Pushto writers. The literacy rate is accounted at 28.7% with gross enrolment ratio at 44.93%.[34]

Statecraft

Afghans lacked the coherent political machinery to run the affairs of the government until the constitution in post-Taliban period was drafted. The affairs of the country were run by warlords who have their own administrative/feudal machinery. Pashtuns being in majority dominated the scene for long and emerged as a response to inter-factional fights amongst the warlords which resulted in weakening of state and brought political instability which provided a rationale to foreign powers to interfere in their land.

Initially, Taliban were welcomed in Afghan society because it provided a respite to society from instability and provided a modicum of security to people. However, in due course of time a strong opposition front in the form of Northern Alliance emerged to balance the power equations among various ethnic groups and to do away with the radicalisation agenda of Taliban and their extreme conservative policies. Therefore, it may be mentioned that, recognising 'others' with their culture and assimilating them in their own is a dire necessity when we talk in terms of nation-building.

Whether it is a matter of ethnic identity or national identity both require inculcation of feeling of belonging to same nation. To put it in the words of Max Weber that 'State as community of sentiments which could adequately manifest itself in a state of its own...'. Afghans are in the process of inculcating the feeling of solidarity amongst themselves. Nationalism in Afghanistan seems to be fragile as different communities are living together for a common cause, which seems more to be socio-economic in nature.

Afghanistan, has witnessed wars-civil and international, for the last two decades. Being a feudal order, war between warlords was more to control society for socio-economic reasons than the political one. The concept of 'state' or 'nation' emerged as a response to the presence of foreign power in their country which is the feature of most third world countries where nationalism emerged as a response to colonial domination. Being situated at the crossroads of four ecological and cultural zones, viz; the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian sub-continent and even the far-East because the Pamirs extend up to Chinese Xinjiang, western powers fought amongst themselves to form the buffer state without bringing it under colonial rule. The reason being that warlords in power in Afghanistan which would be friendly to them was the major concern so that they could pursue their political and economic objectives without any hindrance.

Women

Traditionally, women in Afghanistan have been treated as inferior to men, both economically and legally. Under the Shariah, daughters received half as much inheritance as sons and female testimony counted half as much as that of a male in a testimony in court. Women have less access to money, less recourse to divorce and little freedom in terms of their sexuality and family planning. Attitudes towards *pardah*, (veiling) and female seclusion varies in groups[35]. The first woman as a composer of poetry, both in Arabic and Persian, was Rabia'h Balkhi, according to Dupree's writings. Though twentieth century witnessed the gradual improvement in the status of women primarily in Kabul and in some other urban areas owing to modernising reforms of Amir Habibullah Khan (1901-1919), King Amanullah (1919-1929) who introduced the reforms to educate women, to control discriminatory marriage practices and free the women from the veil.

King Zahir Shah (1933-1973) continued with the modernising reforms which enabled women to work in the public sphere, particularly in government offices. During the period of the communist rule (1978-1992), women in Kabul and other government controlled large cities such as Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad and Mazar-i-sharif enjoyed greater freedom than ever before. They constituted majority of the student population at Kabul University. They were serving in Para-military units and working in all professional sectors and serving in high-ranking government position[36]. The role of women in society can be ascertained by their participation in the development of society and that of the state. Less mention of the societies controlled by women is made in Afghanistan reflecting their vulnerable position as well as the threat of insecurity.

The RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women in Afghanistan) which has been existing since 1977 is based in Pakistan and was founded in Kabul by a group of academics and intellectuals led by feminist poet Meena (1957-87) initially to campaign for democratic reforms in the old regime and later turned to resistance against it after Soviet occupation. The journal *Women's Message* was released under her leadership but she was later assassinated.

This group has been instrumental in starting much needed schools and hospitals for women and children in Quetta but it lacks support from international NGOs and other countries for their various relief works.[37]

History of Political Processes

Afghanistan has witnessed various forms of political processes with some failures during short durations. Their existence very much depended on support they could elicit within society along with military backing as well as ideological support from outside the country as witnessed during 1978 coup. The political processes in

Afghanistan are not a recent phenomenon as Afghanistan has witnessed the rise of indigenous empires like the Ghaznavids (10-12th A.D.).

Empires couldn't exist for long as political instability resulted due to Mongloid's invasion in 13-14th centuries A.D. Asian imperialists fought over the Afghan area in the 16-17th century A.D. and as Dupree maintains, the 1747 A.D. witnessed the last great Afghan empire under the leadership of Ahmed Shah Durrani[38]. He aptly marks nine-teenth century as period of fratricidal tribal wars and intrusion of European imperialism characterising the period.

There is a difference of opinion among scholars regarding Afghanistan becoming a modern state. Some are of the opinion that it started in the year 1747 but according to Dupree, the creation of modern Afghanistan began during the reign of Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901)[39]. Since the social fabric was weak, the British and Russian imperialism deposed Abdur Rahman Khan and replaced Asian imperialism with European imperialism[40].

It was in 1919 that Afghans gained the right to conduct their own foreign affairs after the third Anglo-Afghan war. This might be attributed to the preoccupation of the imperial powers in other areas of their interest. Moreover, Afghan society was not conscious enough of their exploitation at the hands of imperial power as the domination was indirect in comparison to other third world countries. The Afghans consider 1919 as the year in which they truly became independent of foreign domination[41]. Dupree has defined the third century of Afghanistan by three words, viz. non-alignment, independence and development. The Post World War II Afghanistan became an "economic Korea" with an interplay between the Soviet Bloc and the West.

Afghanistan is not for the first time experimenting with democratic system. In 1964, Afghanistan launched a new democratic experiment and tried to create a constitutional monarchy within a parliamentary framework. However, the real power remained vested in a liberal King backed by a liberal army elite[42].

Before 1950, the period defined by Dupree as 'Avuncular period' in which government was almost entirely in the hands of members of royal family. This changed after 1950 permitting some freedom of press which was a monopoly of state, (e.g., Afghan Millat papers appeared on the scene)[43]. This group was vehemently orthodox and irredentist[44] over the issue of Pashtunistan. Student Union was formed but in due course their criticism became increasingly intolerable and posed a serious challenge to the government.

This can be termed as the period when pressure groups, media, public opinion were given utmost freedom. The decade of Daoud's rule (1953-63) was significant owing in establishing control of central government at the local levels. It created loyal, well

paid, well trained army to enforce law and reforms and enable him to exercise authority. Second experiment in Democracy began during the period of Muhammad Zahir Shah who abandoned two hundred years of autocratic rule in order to give country a system of government that could survive[45]. The new constitution came into operation in 1965 followed by first elections witnessing women participation as well. However, the division between the legislature and executive was absolute which was the principal weakness of the constitution. The problems got compounded due to the absence of an organised political party[46].

The scholars argue that national politics started its formation resulting in developing a national ideology in Afghanistan. Larry P. Goodman opines that the historical code of national politics that has formed national ideology in Afghanistan consisted of nationalism, Islam and modernization[47]. Islam completed culturally the need for national unification of the numerous Afghan ethno-tribal groups.

Afghanistan passed through the period of uncertainty during the regime of Mohammad Daoud who came to power after overthrowing King Zahir Shah in a coup on July 16, 1963. He was joined in by Parcham faction of the PDPA[48]. Parcham faction pursued strict international Marxist ideology. He held Loya Jirga to institutionalise his revolution through a Republican constitution. Dupree has referred to Daoud's Marxism as expedient rather than ideological one that was witnessed when he barred PDPA from drafting constitution. Print media developed during his time namely *Khalq* (a magazine) and *Parcham* (a newspaper) whose editors viz. Taraki and Karmal respectively became Presidents later after Daoud was killed in a coup of 1978[49].

These developments enabled the entry of Soviet troops whose assistance had been repeatedly sought by the Afghan government. In opposition to Marxist regime, the deputy Amir of the Hizb-I-Islami parties along with other Islamic political parties took control of the anti-government uprisings and effectively "islamicized" the resistance[50]. The communists initiated national reconciliation policy in 1987 so that they could leave the country in peace. Their withdrawal in 1989 resulted in party polarisation and a severe infighting[51].

Thus, the country was left in a lurch with no financial or military assistance. It left innocent masses of the country to be exploited by the factions to extract the resources and eventually at the hands of extremists, creating inhuman conditions.

An overview of different components of Afghan society reveal that Afghanistan has all the components which are required in acquiring the statehood. But in order to consolidate the feeling of nationalism very much depended on the presence of colonial powers although Afghans had the feeling of belongingness to their tribe, community whose foundation had been laid on their age old traditions and customs.

However, tensions arise with the interaction among different tribes in their society. This is evident with the feudal wars within the communities in order to establish their respective hold on the society. They did not suffer colonisation as the other third world countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America suffered. Being at the strategic location with no outlet to sea made them very much vulnerable and dependent on other powers to meet their financial and economic requirements. Their situation continues to be vulnerable still because societal components continue to remain at rudimentary level. Thus, foreign powers find it convenient to establish their hold, overtly or covertly. This has led to the clashes amongst foreign powers to establish their hold in this land if not physically then at least ideologically.

All this has created a situation in which whatever rudimentary infrastructure existed was ruined leading to unrest amongst people of the society who were aspiring for peace and stability at any cost. They experimented with various forms of political structures which eventually failed but made it clear that Islam was the binding force within multi-ethnic groups and could act as the unifying factor. In order to establish a successful political structure there has to be a consensus on a system that combines all the elements basic to the Afghan society along with the legitimacy provided by people rather than experimenting with Western systems.

Afghanistan has experimented with varied ideologies ranging from Feudalism, Monarchy to Marxist-Democracy. In order to set up a sovereign democratic state, Afghanistan needs an ideology suited to their state. The legitimacy has to be drawn from existing civil society complying with the needs and demands of the people in the society.

Notes and References

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4. Ibid.
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7. *World Development Report*, 2005, "A Better Investment Climate for Everyone", World Bank and Oxford University press, 2004.
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11. Louis Dupree (1993), op.cit., pp. 248-51.
12. Ibid.
13. *World Development Report*, (2005),op.cit
14. Bernt Glazer, 'Is Afghanistan on the Brink of Ethnic and Tribal disintegration', in William Malley(ed)(1998), *Fundamentalism Reborn: Afghanistan and Taliban*, London, Hurst&co., pp. 169-72.
15. Arpita Basu Roy (2002), *Afghanistan Towards A Viable State*, New Delhi, Hope India Publications, pp 18-19.
16. Glazer (1998), op.cit. p.167.
17. Jirga includes all adult males and rules by consensus and can be converted at any level of tribal organisation from the smallest lineage to an entire confederation.
18. Dupree (1973), op.cit.
19. Ibid, p.57.
20. Ibid.,pp.57-65
21. CIA, op.cit.
22. Glazer (1998), op.cit.
23. John W. Storey and Glenn H. Utter, *Religion and Politics*, ABC CLIO, California,2002,p.119
24. CIA,op.cit
25. Dupree (see Introduction), op.cit.

26. Glazer (1998),op.cit.
27. Dupree(1973),op.cit.,p.66
28. About the origin of 'Dari' there are two different opinions. Its being 'language of the court' (darbar or dar) and second meaning 'language of the valley' (darra). According to Frye (1966, 282) 'Dari' is derived from "Dari' i.e; the 'language of the court' appears to be more plausible. (Ibid.)
29. Ibid.
30. CIA, op.cit.
31. Dupree personally abhors the term 'illiterate' due to its pejorative connotation in literate countries. He uses the term non-literate to mean a society with a great body of literature but most of whose population are unable to read and write. (Dupree, op.cit.)
32. Ibid. Dupree has discussed in detail about the language, literature, folklore in his work Afghanistan.
33. Ibid p.74.
34. UNDP,op.cit
35. Bernt Glazer (1998),op.cit., p.167.
36. Larry P. Goodman, *Perverting Islam: Taliban Social Policy towards Women*, Central Asian Survey (2001), 20(4), pp.415-26.
37. *Encyclopedia of Women Social Reformers*, vol.1, by Helen Rappaport, ABC CLIO, California, 2001.
38. Dupree(1973),op.cit
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid
42. Ibid.
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44. By irredentist he imply that group of people belonging to the Pashtun tribe in the north-east as well as the similar tribe existing in north west of Pakistan were sentimental over the issue of making a united region by the name Pashtunistan .
45. Griffiths (1998), op.cit. pp.159-63.
46. Ibid.
47. Goodman(2001),op.cit
48. The 1960s witnessed the existence of two weekly magazines namely Khalq (the masses) under the leadership of Taraki and Parcham (the flag) under the leadership of Karmal.Later both had started having difference of opinion leading to factions. But in later period both became presidents of Afghanistan. See Yousef (2002),op.cit.,
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50. David B. Edward (2002), *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad*, London, University of California Press.
51. As discussed in International Seminar on Afghanistan on 2nd July 1997 organised by Department of International Relations, London school of Economics and Political science.