

**Understanding Afghanistan's Politics through
the Lens of Ethnic Division**

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Abstract

It is difficult to understand Afghanistan's politics without looking into its ethnic divisions. Ethnicity has become so prominent in Afghanistan's politics that every political act is driven by ethnic factors. This 'ethnicization' of Politics or politicization of identities had brought the country in the verge of collapse into its various constituent parts only recently and is a critical factor complicating the present situation. It has also created an atmosphere of crisis of trust amongst Afghanistans.

The political system is framed in a way which contributes more to the problem rather than solving it. Given ethnic diversity of the country, opting for a strong centralized presidential system is proving to be disastrous. The system has made the local provincial governments (wuluswali and wilyat) not responsible and accountable to the people. It has led to the immense degree of corruptions.

This paper tries to explain how ethnicity has become politicized and how it has become so prominent today.

Key words: Afghanistanis, Pashtun, Ethnic-division, Centralization

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Background

Afghanistan is a much debated country in academia and it has attracted the attention of various scholars from different fields of the academic world including: anthropology, sociology, ethnology, topography, demography and political science. They have tried to analyze and understand Afghan society from their respective fields. They have emphasized the effects of religion, ethnicity and geography of the land (i.e. geopolitics) on politics. Some scholars have given more attention to religion than others and some have given more emphasis to ethnicity. Undoubtedly Afghan politics are influenced by the interplay of these factors, but as political developments in last two decades show, ethnicity has played and continues to play a much greater role in influencing Afghan politics. Now the role of ethnicity has become so prominent one cannot bypass and ignore it and still make sense of Afghan politics.

This ethnic division has forced political analysts to use terms such as Pashtun and Non-Pashtun, south and north and ethnic majority and minorities. It shows that ethnicity has become the dominant factor in Afghan politics. South and north division is also based on an ethno linguistic division. The North is mostly inhabited by Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmans and a limited number of Pashtun migrants (naaqileen), who have been relocated to the north by various Pashtun governments to change the demography of the region. This policy started at the last decade of 19th century. The south is predominantly home for Pashtu speakers. Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazars are the four main ethno linguistic groups and there are dozens other smaller ethnic groups as well.

To understand better this ethnic division, it will be helpful for us to look into the reign of three successive regimes-the Communists, the

Mujahidin and the Taliban. These three regimes operated on the basis of two hostile “universal” ideologies-Marxism and Islamism (Political Islam). These two ideologies are usually known for their emphasis on internationalism and universalism and have proclaimed that they can overcome ethnic boundaries and divisions by applying their “universal” principles. But those who have subscribed to these ideologies have failed to overcome ethnic divisions in Afghanistan. The ruling communist party i.e. People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (Hezb-e-Democratic Khalq Afghanistan) were divided into two factions-Khalq and Parcham. Khalq was mainly dominated by rural educated Pashtun nationalists and Parcham was mainly composed of urban Pashtun elites and Non-Pashtuns. It shows that the communists were divided on ethno linguistic lines.

This division was more apparent among the Mujahidin. When the Mujahidin took power in 1992 from the Marxist regime, they entered into a civil war amongst themselves. This war was mainly fought on ethnic lines. There were four main political parties involved in the war which were mainly representing the interests of the four major ethno linguist groups-Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek. Hezb-e-Islami was a Pashtun dominated party, Jamiat-e-Islami was mainly a Tajik dominated party, Hezb-e-Wahdat was exclusively a Hazara party and Junbish Milli Islami was predominantly an Uzbek party. The fighting resulted in the emergence of the Taliban movement in April of 1994 in the south. This movement was predominantly a Pashtun movement. It initially emerged as an Islamic fundamentalist movement but was inherently driven by Pashtun identity. The emergence of the Taliban intensified the already existing Pashtun /Non-Pashtun and South/ North divisions. That is why the Northern Alliance formed as a resistance force to prevent further penetration of Taliban into the northern territories.

It is important to note that all these political forces and parties usually attempt to deny their utilization of ethnics and pretend to

show themselves as national parties and forces. They formally reject ethnic politics but in reality ethnicity is the driving force behind their political decisions.

This paper raises the following questions and attempts to answer them:

Why has ethnicity become politicized?

What are the reasons that ethnicity has become so important in Afghan politics in recent times? Yet, why is its importance denied in the national and international political discourse about Afghanistan?

The conclusion of this paper will suggest a political solution to this problem through the creation of a political mechanism that aims to govern this multi-ethnic society through democracy. It will hope to prevent Afghanistan from being Balkanized.

Why Has Ethnicity Become Politicized?

Afghanistan the name itself is controversial. Afghan is a synonym for Pashtun. It literally means land of Afghans or Pashtuns. In common speech in Afghanistan we use the term 'Oughan' or Afghan to refer to Pashtun. Therefore, the name is exclusive. In the words of Michael Mann "*when demos and ethnos become fused, problems result for other ethnic groups living in the same territory*". (Mann, 2005, 55-69) The nation state produced out of this combination becomes discriminatory towards others. Mann's thesis will help us to understand the politicization of ethnicity in the process of nation building in modern Afghanistan.

After the death of Nadir Shah Afshar, his loyal Afghan commander, Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1747 created an independent government in Kandahar. There was nothing called Afghanistan at this time, his polity came to be known as Saltanati Durrani. He was ruling the country indirectly through various tribal and community

leaders by forming a confederation of tribes. Through their help he created the Durrani Empire. He was always busy fighting to expand his imperial territory. He did not attempt to create a modern nation state. Historians are divided into two camps whether to call him the founding father of Afghanistan or not. One camp of historians regards him as the founding father of the state today called Afghanistan, but the other group opposes this argument. They argue that no doubt he was the first Pashtun king to create an empire but he did not found a state called Afghanistan. The boundaries of his empire were constantly in flux and there were not any politically recognized boundaries. For this reason, it is evident that he was not the founding father of the Afghan state in the modern sense of the word 'state' but was the founder of an Afghan or Pashtun Empire, i.e., Durrani Empire.

The first attempt to build an Afghan modern nation state was undertaken during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901). He extensively relied on coercive forces to build a strong centralized state by suppressing dissenting communities and ethnic groups. He did so by financial and military support from British Empire. The Amir used Islam and ethnicity as tools to establish a relatively strong centralized state. He relied on Sunnis to suppress Hazara Shiites. He recruited his troops mainly from Pashtuns especially from his own clan, the Durrani. He then sent the Pashtun troops throughout the entire country to suppress community leaders of various ethnic groups. He followed British policy of divide and rule. He favored Sunnis over Shiites and Pashtuns over Non-Pashtuns. The other discriminatory policy of Amir was to give the pasture lands of the Hazaras in Hajarajat and Uzbeks and Tajikis in Turkistan and Qataghan to the Pashtun nomads. (Shahrani, 1986, 23-74) & (Newell, 1986) Amir Abdur Rahman's discriminatory policies were the first among the rulers of Afghanistan to politicize ethnicity in their attempt to establish, in the words of Shahrani, "a strong Kabul-

centered” and “person-centered” modern state in Afghanistan.

Until late 19th century beginning with the reign of Iron Amir (the title given to Amir A.R. by British historians for his brutality) the name Afghanistan was only confined to the southern and eastern part of the country- a mainly Pashtun dominated area. The north-eastern part of the country used to be called Qataghan and the North and North-western areas were called Turkistan. It was only during the reign of Iron Amir that the name Afghanistan became the only name for the entire territory today known as Afghanistan. Iron Amir is thus regarded as the founding father of the “modern” Afghan state. The process of creating this modern state was accompanied by bloodshed, looting, taking hostage the sons of various chieftains in his court in order to prevent a rebellion against his rule. He was the one who planted the seeds of ethnic hostilities by giving the Uzbeks’, Tajiks’ and Hazaras’ pasture lands to the Pashtun nomads and calling for Jihad against Hazara Shiites. The later Pashtun-kings and Presidents followed the same policies and practices in more or less the same way. According to Nazif Shahrani it is the policies and practices of the Amirs, Kings and Presidents of Afghanistan that contributed to the ethnic divisions and politicization of tribes and ethnic communities. This ultimately led to three decades of war. To explain the ethnic divisions and their politicization, we have to briefly examine the various policies and practices of the successive governments and how they contributed to this end.

Since 1747 until today all rulers of Afghanistan except Amir Habibullah Kalakani in 1929 and Burhanuddin Rabani (1992-1996, 1996-2001) were Pashtuns. The liberal reformist King Amanullah (1919-1929) the grandson of Amir Abdur Rahman was ousted from power by Habibullah Kalakani. Amir Habibullah Kalakani was the first Tajik ruler of Afghanistan and he ruled the country for nine months. The demise of King Amanullah’s government and the

ascendance of Amir Habibullah Kalakani in power was seen by most Pashtuns as a challenge to their political dominance. This takeover of power questioned their self-claimed birthright to rule Afghanistan. Nadir Khan started campaigning against the Tajik ruler and attempted to take the throne from him. His cause was supported internally by Pashtun tribes and externally by British India. There was an ethnically based motivation behind Pashtun support for Nadir Khan. The British support of Nadir Khan can be explained best due to Amir Habibullah Kalakani's opposition to British Imperialism. Finally Nadir Khan with the help of Pashtun tribes such as Jaji, Mangal, Jadran, Ahmadzai from Paktya and Wazir tribes on the other side of the border managed to overthrow Amir Habibullah Kalakani's regime and established the Musahiban dynasty in Afghanistan (1929-73). (Newell, 1986, 112) He ruled the country from 1929-33 until he was shot to death by a Hazara student named Abdul Khaliq. His son, Mohammad Zahir, succeeded him as the king of Afghanistan. Zahir Shah ruled the country for forty years. The Musahiban dynasty came to an end by a military coup led by the cousin of the king, Sardar Daoud.¹ In 1973 Daoud declared Afghanistan a republic and brought an end to the monarchy. Daoud ruled the country as a dictator president for five years until the Communist coup in 1978.

Now we will turn to the major policies of the forty nine years rule of Musahiban dynasty and its role in intensifying ethnic antagonism. This period is a critical part of modern history of Afghanistan. Musahiban rulers attempted to complete the unfinished project of 'Pashtunization' of the "Afghan state-nation" laid down by Amir Abdur Rahman.

Pashtunization of Turkistan and Qataghan

¹. He had previously served as Prime Minister from 1953-63.

The Pashtunization of northern of Afghanistan started under Amir Abdur Rahman in the late 19th century and continued into 20th century by his son Amir Habibullah (1901-1919) and his grandson King Amanullah (1919-29). It intensified during the rule of Musahiban family (1929-73/78). As previously mentioned, Amir Abdur Rahman opened the pastoral lands of Hajarajat and Turkistan and Qataghan to nomad Pashtuns. He also started resettling Pashtuns from southern and eastern parts of the country in the northern part by taking away the best agricultural lands from Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks and giving these to the Pashtuns. Before the resettlement of Pashtuns in north in late 19th century, the region had no Pashtun residents. This unpopular act of Amir changed the demography of the region. The native residents see Pashtuns as occupiers of their land and call them as the Naaqileen (relocated). This policy of resettlement favored Pashtuns and caused great suffering of Non-pashtuns, by depriving them of their best agricultural lands. Consequently it turned the rich land owning non-Pashtuns into poor peasants overnight. This policy of Pashtunization of the north was justified by Amir Abdur Rahman and his successors on the grounds of nation building.

Nationalization of Pashtu

The Persian/Tajik/Farsi language has always been the lingua franca of Afghanistan. All inter-ethnic communication takes place in Persian. For instance, an Uzbek and Baluch, a Turkman and Pashtun or Hazara and Pashtun would communicate with each other in Persian. Although the first constitution of Afghanistan promulgated in 1923 during the reign of King Amanullah, recognized Pashtu and Persian as the two official languages of Afghanistan, during the Musahiban rule, several serious attempts were made to nationalize Pashtu. In 1936 they declared Pashtu as the only official language of the country

and a serious program was carried out by the government to teach Pashtu to all government officials. In an interview in 1937 Hashim Khan (Uncle of Zahir Shah and ruled Afghanistan as a PM from 1929-1946) told a reporter that *“from next year Pashtu is to become the language of our officials, doing away with Persian. Our legends and our poems will then be understood by everyone. We shall draw from them a pride in our culture of the past which will unite us”*. (Shahrani, 1986, 56)

Now supremacy was given to Pashtu over Persian by Musahiban dynasty. The Pashtu Tulana (Pashtu Academy) was created to promote the Pashtu language and Pashtun culture. The Musahiban family tried to promote the Pashtu culture, language and values and present them as national. This policy was propagated through the education system. Louis Dupree, in his famous most quoted book Afghanistan, has explained the failure of this policy in the following words:

“An attempt to Pashto-ize all governmental inter-office memoranda came to disaster during the 1953-63 prime ministry of Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan. Some non-Pashto-speaking high-ranking officials found it necessary to have clerks translate their Farsi communications into Pashto for transmission to another office. The recipient, often a non-Pashto-speaker as well, handed the report to an assistant for translation back into Farsi. The scheme collapsed in a welter of translation and retranslation.” (Dupree, 1973, 66)

However, the constitution of 1964 again named both Dari (Persian) and Pashto as official languages of the country and designated Pashto as the “national language”. All these policies and practices present a clear picture of the process of politicization of ethnicity, language and tribes.

Why Is Ethnicity So Important Today?

Today ethnicity has become so prominent in Afghanistan’s politics and one cannot ignore it. It is the driving force behind political

appointment, decision making, developmental programs and appointment in civil services. During Marxist rule of Khalq/Parcham (1978-1992) some initiatives were undertaken by Marxist regime under the Soviet patronage to win support of non-Pashtun minorities.¹ It recognized languages of Uzbeks, Turkmens, Baluchis and Nuristani as national languages. Non-Pashtuns were appointed in the revolutionary council and cabinet. For the first time classroom materials in the minority languages were distributed by ministry of education into the non-Pashtun regions. But these efforts failed to gain the non-Pashtuns' support and non-Pashtuns were the first to rebel against the Marxist regime.

The first fighting between Marxist regime and people took place in Nuristan carried out by Nuristanis in summer of 1978 and followed by an Uzbek/Tajik uprising in Badakhshan province and later the liberation of Hazarajat from Marxist regime in 1979. During winter of 1978-79 Pashtuns also started revolting against Marxist regime. (Newell, 1986, 118) & (Glatzer, 1998, 171) There are several reasons behind the failure of Marxist regime's attempt to win the support of the non-Pashtuns:

- 1- Afghanistan is a country where 99 per cent of populations are Muslims and majority of them live in rural village areas and are conservative. Most Afghanistans² saw the Kabul regime as an atheist and anti-religion government. Therefore, any policies and programs (even if progressive) undertaken by

¹. Some people argue that there is no majority in Afghanistan and it is a country of minorities and there has never been a census to show the exact number of each ethnic group and the nation in general.

². The term Afghan means Pashtun, therefore it is a mistake to use this term to refer to all inhabitants of Afghanistan. Therefore, I prefer to use the term Afghanistani instead of Afghan in referring to all inhabitant of Afghanistan in this paper.

this regime had no legitimacy in the eyes of Afghanistans and were looking at them with suspicion.

- 2- These initiatives taken by Marxist regime were not apprehended by majority of ethno linguistic groups living in villages and remote areas due to the low rate of literacy and lack of electricity to watch state-run TV to become aware of regime's initiatives. For common people the face of a regime is always represented by its local officials. Non-pashtuns could still see that most of the government officials in their region are Pashtuns and nothing has changed for them.
- 3- The most important reason for resistance against the regime became the invasion of the country by the Soviet Union. Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to defend its satellite or puppet regime in Kabul. Majority of Afghanistans saw them as occupiers of their land. Therefore, every ethnic group started mobilizing forces to resist the Kabul regime and its patron, i.e., soviets.

The invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet Union resulted in arming of various ethnic and tribal groups to resist the Soviets' invasion. Afghanistan's people called for Jihad (Islamic resistance struggle) against the Marxist regime and its foreign backer, i.e., Soviet Union. The resistance took religious form and Islam became the mobilizing forces for Mujahidin (Muslim resistance fighters). But ethnicity, language and region had played their role in forming Mujahidin's political and military organizations. Each ethno-linguistic group had its own military organizations. The minorities challenged the central authority through Jihad. Their aim was to drive soviets out of the country and defeat the Marxist regime and establish an Islamic state which has to be inclusive and representative. The Afghanistans resistance almost took fifteen years and it created ethnic consciousness amongst Mujahidin. One of the major consequences of

Jihad was the creation of a new class of military-political leadership amongst various ethnic groups of the country. This new class is known as Mujahidin. They have now turned into the politicians. They are the main players today in Afghanistan's politics.

Finally commander Masoud's troops entered Kabul in April of 1992 and Mujahidin came in power. Islam in Afghanistan's case has always played a great role in unifying all ethnic and tribal groups to fight against foreign enemies but have not been able to overcome ethnic divisions. Now Mujahidin had defeated their common enemy and had to form a new unity government. While forming the government the ethnic divisions resurfaced. The challenge was that who should head the new government. The fifteen years of Jihad had changed the ground reality and non-Pashtun ethnic communities had emerged powerful.

The modern history of Afghanistan shows that no ethnic group alone can rule the country on its own. There was a consensus amongst Afghanistnis to have an inclusive government representing all ethnic groups. The Seven Mujahidin Political parties in Peshawar, Pakistan in 24th April of 1992 reached an agreement regarding the formation of the new government which is known as the Peshawar agreement. The agreement set the formation of an interim government headed by Sebghatullah Mujadidi the leader of a small Pashtun-dominated party for two months, followed by the transitional government of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the leader of Jamiat a predominantly Tajik party for four months. After that a 'Council of Solution and Pact' (Shura-i ahl al-hal val-aqd) had to be created to form an interim government for eighteen month as a prelude to an election. When Mujadidi finished his two months terms, Rabbani took charge of government in June of 1992. The council endorsed the continuation of Rabbani government for eighteen months. (Sikal, 1998, 29, 32, 33) The appointment of Rabbani

as the President of the Mujahidin government and the extension of its tenure by the council once again challenged the political dominance of Pashtuns.

When Mujahidin took power, the civil war started as the means to bargain for more power. There were lots of factor behind this war. I mainly focus on ethnic factor. This war was mainly fought on ethnic lines. There were four main political parties involved in the war which were representing the interests of the four major ethno linguist groups i.e., Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek. Hezb-e-Islami was a Pashtun dominated party, Jamiat-e-Islami was mainly a Tajik dominated party, Hezb-e-Wahdat was exclusively a Hazara party and Junbish Milli Islami was predominantly an Uzbek party.

The ethnic divisions became more apparent in the civil war. The civil war amongst Mujahidin resulted in emergence of the Taliban movement in the south in the summer of 1994. The Taliban movement was predominantly a Pashtun movement. The emergence of Taliban coincident with the frustration of Pashtuns who felt that powers were taken away from them by non-Pashtuns. As Oliver Roy has rightly stated,

“The striking fact is that the ‘revenge of the Pashtuns’ took the appearance of a fundamentalist movement, the Taliban, who, although they are exclusively Pashtuns, discarded any ethnic claim and pretended to represent the Afghan Muslim mellat (nation).” (Roy, 1998, 208)

It is also interesting to note that all Pashtun commanders irrespective of their political ideologies either joined the Taliban or approved it; for instance, former communist General Tanai, Jalaludin Haqani, the pro-Iranian Moazzen Bashir Baghlani and for a while Hamid Karzai (the current President). But no well known non-Pashtun Islamist figures joined the Taliban. (Roy, 1998, 208) The emergence of Taliban intensified the hostilities between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. The first democratic presidential election in 2004 showed that how deep Afghanistan’s society has been divided on

ethnic lines. The four main candidates of election were from four main ethno linguist groups; Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek. The controversial 2009 presidential election was a validation of the importance of ethnicity in Afghanistan's politics.

What Is the Way Out?

Ethnicity has become more prominent in Afghanistan's politics today than any time before. What is the way out? How can we reverse the politicization of ethnicity?

“Afghanistan, like many other post-colonial states, began its “modern” nation-state history on the basis of the old dynastic person-centered model of sovereignty in which the rulers claimed the rights to exercise absolute sovereign power... the concentration of power at the centre and its abuse has led to serious trust deficit in Afghanistan. That is, pervasive and continuous abuses of power has resulted in the mistrust of the government leaders, commoditization of loyalties due to corruption, nepotism, and cronyism perpetuating a political economy of dependency and patron-client ties, exploitation of Islam and other convenient ideologies, especially Pashtun nationalism for instrumental purposes to preserve neo-patrimonialism and the privileges of a small number families, lineages, clans, tribes or a few members of some ethnic groups.” (Shahrani, October 22-23, 2009, 23)

As we discussed in the earlier sections, it became clear to us that the former regimes were responsible for the politicization of ethnicity in the process of creation of a failed nation-state. The former rulers of Afghanistan misunderstood the notion of nation building and they “created” a nation state on false assumption. In a multi-ethnic society like Afghanistan, the identity of a particular ethnic group cannot be backbone of its nation building. The modern history of Afghanistan itself is a proof of this statement.

The unfortunate part of nation building narrative in Afghanistan is that, there has never been an attempt to empower people to rule

themselves democratically. Afghan rulers have never learned from misconducts of their predecessors. They have always thought that Afghanistan needs a strong centralized state to maintain peace, law and order. This requires a powerful army. The creation of a strong army pushed the Afghan rulers to take loans or aids from big powers in the past and present. It led to compromise of national sovereignty and dependency on foreign powers. The history of nation building in Afghanistan has always accompanied with internal colonization of its citizens and external dependency of the country on big powers. For instance, Amir Abdur Rahman depended heavily on British supports to build a “modern” nation, Musahiban family’s depended on British, then on Soviet, later Afghanistan’s Marxist regime depended on Soviet and now the Karzai’s regime is heavily depended on western powers.

When Taliban was ousted from power in 2001, a new ray of hopes for peace and stability came to Afghanistan’s people. Everyone thought that Afghananistanis especially their ruling clique have learned from the mistakes of the past. Now Afghanistan’s people were expecting that their western educated “liberal” politicians with help of their western patrons will discard the old political model based, in words of Shahrani, on “*old dynastic person-centered model of sovereignty*” and create a new political model based on post-war realities. Unfortunately these western educated politicians also committed the misconducts of the past while drafting the new post-Taliban constitution of 2004. They adopted the provision for the creation of a strong centralized person-based presidency. The western powers particularly US supported this constitution. The US thought that the current crisis in Afghanistan is due to the alienation of Pashtuns from power; therefore, the empowerment of Pashtun elites will end the crisis. A decade of Karzai reign has proved that this judgment is wrong.

Today the Taliban’s insurgency (mostly Pashtuns) has reached its

peak and they are ruling almost half of the country, i.e. the Pashtuns dominated areas. The irony is that no one considers the current regime as their own. If one talks with Pashtuns in the south, they argue that this is a government of non-Pashtuns and does not represent their aspirations. It is interesting that one can find the same observation in non-Pashtun areas. They say it is a government of Pashtuns and run by Pashtuns. It does not represent our aspiration either. Therefore, there is a crisis of trust amongst Afghanistanis towards the Afghananistani state.

The reason behind this alienation is that when a Pashtun dominated province sees that their governor or Chief of Police is a non-Pashtun, they think, they are being ruled by non-Pashtuns. The same logic works in non-Pashtun territories. They feel alienated too. Therefore, the problem lies in the system of governance. The only way out is the democratization of power. Let the people rule themselves and let them decide what they need. The aspiration of every community is different from others. One cannot make policies sitting from Kabul without understanding what the people need in a village in Ghor, a district in Badakhshan. Let these local people rule themselves democratically by holding periodical elections. Let the rulers should be responsible and accountable to the people being ruled. It is only possible through decentralization of power. Until and unless people are not represented by themselves through election, the problem remains the same.

Now Afghanistan is in a critical situation, we have witnessed a controversial presidential election in 2009 charged by fraud and cheating. The legitimacy of the current regime under the leadership of Karzai is in question due to electoral fraud. This election fortunately exposed the weakness of the political system and unwillingness of the current rulers to strengthen democracy in Afghanistan. In a war-torn country like Afghanistan, where its

citizens have just started to practice democracy and trying to solve their problems through democratic means and by abandoning war, it is dangerous to play with their political faith and their rights to fair and free elections. Majority of Afghanistans feel betrayed that their votes have been stolen by Karzai's team. How can we establish democracy when self-claimed democrats are not committed to democratic principles?

During election campaigns Karzai made a strong coalition with non-Pashtun leaders promising them high portfolios in his next government. These leaders urged their supporters to vote for him. Indeed a huge number of non-Pashtuns voted for him in spite of his unpopularity amongst them. They voted because they were convinced by their leaders that they will receive some high profile portfolios in Karzai's next government. But when Karzai introduced his cabinet to Parliament, all key ministries were given to Pashtuns (ministry of finance, Defense, Interior and foreign affairs) and some low rank ministries were given to Non-pashtuns. Now majority of his cabinet's ministers are Pashtuns. His attempts are seen by his rivals especially by non-Pashtuns as the hegemony of one ethnic group i.e. Pashtuns over others. There was a fear amongst non-Pashtuns that there were some attempts to 'Pashtonize' Afghanistans state. This fear has been proved by Karzai's recent acts i.e. a fraudulent election, allocation of key ministerial posts to Pashtuns and negotiation with Taliban "brothers"¹.

All of these have contributed to an environment of fear, crisis of trust, alienation from the state and losing faith to the democratic practices. Ordinary Afghanistans especially non-Pashtuns are losing their patience and feel disenfranchised. They feel disenfranchised because their votes are not counted and their interests are not represented. Now there are two ways lefts:

¹ Karzai often calls Taliban as brothers

A. If the current regime keeps pushing for centralization and 'Pashtonization' of Afghanistani state, limiting the share of other ethnic groups in political powers. The likely outcome will be very unpleasant. There will be a possibility of balkanization of the country or yet another civil war. Keeping three decades of war in mind, no one in Afghanistan is in favor of war, they prefer to solve their problems through peaceful democratic means. But when they are passionate to fight democratically, the democratic institutions are not there, if there are, they are not strong enough. So people will be frustrated and will slowly lose their faith in democracy. They will be left with one option that is assertion of their rights through violent means.

The other reason which makes military movement appealing for them is effectiveness of violence carried out by Taliban against the government. Now government and its foreign patrons are giving lots of attentions to the Taliban's movement. So in a way the Taliban movement is inspiring other ethnic communities to rely on violent means to make the government listen to their demands. It is a dangerous trend. It needs to be addressed otherwise once again the country will be in chaos.

B. Alternatively, the statesmen shall understand the current political crisis and deficiency of political system, in order to ensure the broad representation of ethnic diversity of the country. Such understanding would lead to amend the current constitution from a strong centralized presidential system into a decentralized parliamentary one.

Why parliamentary democracy? In a centralized presidential system the one like Afghanistan's where any candidate who gets the majority i.e. fifty plus one, will be declared as winner. Keeping in mind the ethnic problem of the country where most of the people vote on ethnic line, certain questions arise. What about the rest of the

vote i.e. forty nine percent? Will their vote be counted? Do not they feel unrepresented? Unfortunately, dissent voices of 'others' are not counted and they feel marginalized.

Contrary to a parliamentary democracy, every community's votes will be counted and they will have their representatives in parliament according to their proportionate numerical strength. In parliamentary system, executive is part of the legislature. It makes government more representative and more responsible and accountable. The parliamentary system is one of the preferable political systems for Afghanistan, taking in consideration its ethnic diversity.

Why decentralization? It is a very contested term in Afghanistan's context. Now decentralization is one of the hottest debating topics among Afghansitanis. Most of the objections to the decentralization come from Pashtun elites. They object decentralization for obvious self-interests. They fear that they will lose their political superiority over other ethnic groups. That is why they keep attacking decentralization on the grounds that, it will lead to the partition of the country, merging of Northern provinces with other neighboring countries, rebellion of provincial governments against central government.

These are all false grounds to attack decentralization. Undoubtedly, Pashtun elites will lose their superiority, if decentralization of power takes place. These elites try to show to common Pashtuns that decentralization is against Pashtuns' interests. In fact decentralization of power first of all liberates common Pashtuns from the exploitation of self-claimed Pashtun leaders and will empower all ethnic groups in their respective regions. In the present system, local governments are not at all responsible for the local people. All governors are appointed by the president and are only responsible and accountable to the president. Governors try to keep president happy to stay in office rather than delivering service to their fellow subjects. It is very logical because president appoints them, not people. Therefore, there

is an urgent need to amend the constitution in favor of empowering common people against the hegemony of a few self-claimed community leaders.

Decentralization of power can reverse the 'ethnicization' of Afghanistan politics and it has the capacity to keep the country intact. Decentralization will empower ethnic groups in their respective regions and provide the space where the voices of marginalized can be heard. Thus it will overcome the crisis of trust, alienation of people from state and misuse of powers by few. It will also contribute to the strengthening of democracy in this war-torn country. In this way it will lead to the empowerment of people and shall transform them from subjects into citizens.

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