



## Afghanistan: An Overview

by  
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### General information

#### Location and Terrain

Afghanistan is a mountainous country centered primarily around the Hindu Kush range of mountains. Nearly three quarters of the country is covered by mountains that range in height anywhere between 3,000 to 4,000 feet. Afghanistan is bound to the north by the three republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan; to the east by Tajikistan and China; to the south by Pakistan; and to the west by Iran. The inhabitants of the kingdom live in the river valleys created by the Kabul, Harirud, Andarab, and Hirmand rivers. The economy of Afghanistan is based on wet and dry farming as well as on herding.

## **Topography and Climate**

The weather in Afghanistan is varied depending on climatic zones. Generally, the winters are cold to mild (32 to 45 F.) and the summers (75 to 90 F.) are hot with no precipitation. No doubt Afghan topography and climate greatly impact transportation and social mobility and hampers the country's progress towards independence and nationhood.

## **Ethnic Mix**

In 1893, when the Duran line was drawn and modern Afghanistan was created, the region of present-day Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was populated by two main ethnic groups: Indo-European and Turkish. Some pockets of Arab nomads, Hindus, and Jews also lived in the region mostly close to the Panj River valley.

The Indo-European population was a continuation of the dominant Indo-Iranian branch in the north and west centered in the cities of Bukhara and Tehran, respectively. The Hindu Kush mountain divided this Indo-Iranian population into four ethnic zones: Pushtuns to the south and southeast; Tajiks to the northeast of the Hindu Kush range; Parsiwans to the west; and Baluch to the southwest

The Pushtuns, who later (1950's) made an unsuccessful attempt at creating a Pushtunistan, numbered about 13,000,000. They populated what is present-day southern Afghanistan and the Tribal Agencies and Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan. The Tajiks, over 10,000,000, populated what are the present-day republics of Tajikistan, southern Uzbekistan, and northeastern Afghanistan. The Parsiwan, about 600,000, populated the western region of present-day Afghanistan. And the Baluch, numbering 100,000 populated southwestern Afghanistan.

The Turkic population lived in the north. Ethnically, they were Uzbeks, Kyrgyzes, and Turkmens who had entered Central Asia some as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, others during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. In addition, there was a relatively large population of Hazarachs who lived in the central highlands of present-day Afghanistan. The Hazarachs and Aimaq are usually regarded as remnants of the Mongol hordes that invaded Central Asia in the 13th century.

The Afghanistan that emerged from the Russian/British agreement of 1893 consists of partial populations from among the groups mentioned above, especially after the expansion of the Uzbek group at the expense of the Tajik.

Afghanistan's present-day ethnic mix includes some 8 million Pushtuns; 5.6 million Tajiks; 1.5 million Hazarachs; 1.5 million Uzbeks; 60,000 Parsiwans; 125,000 Turkmens; and 200,000 Baluchis. Several thousand Kyrgyzes, Arabs, and other ethnic groups also make Afghanistan their home.

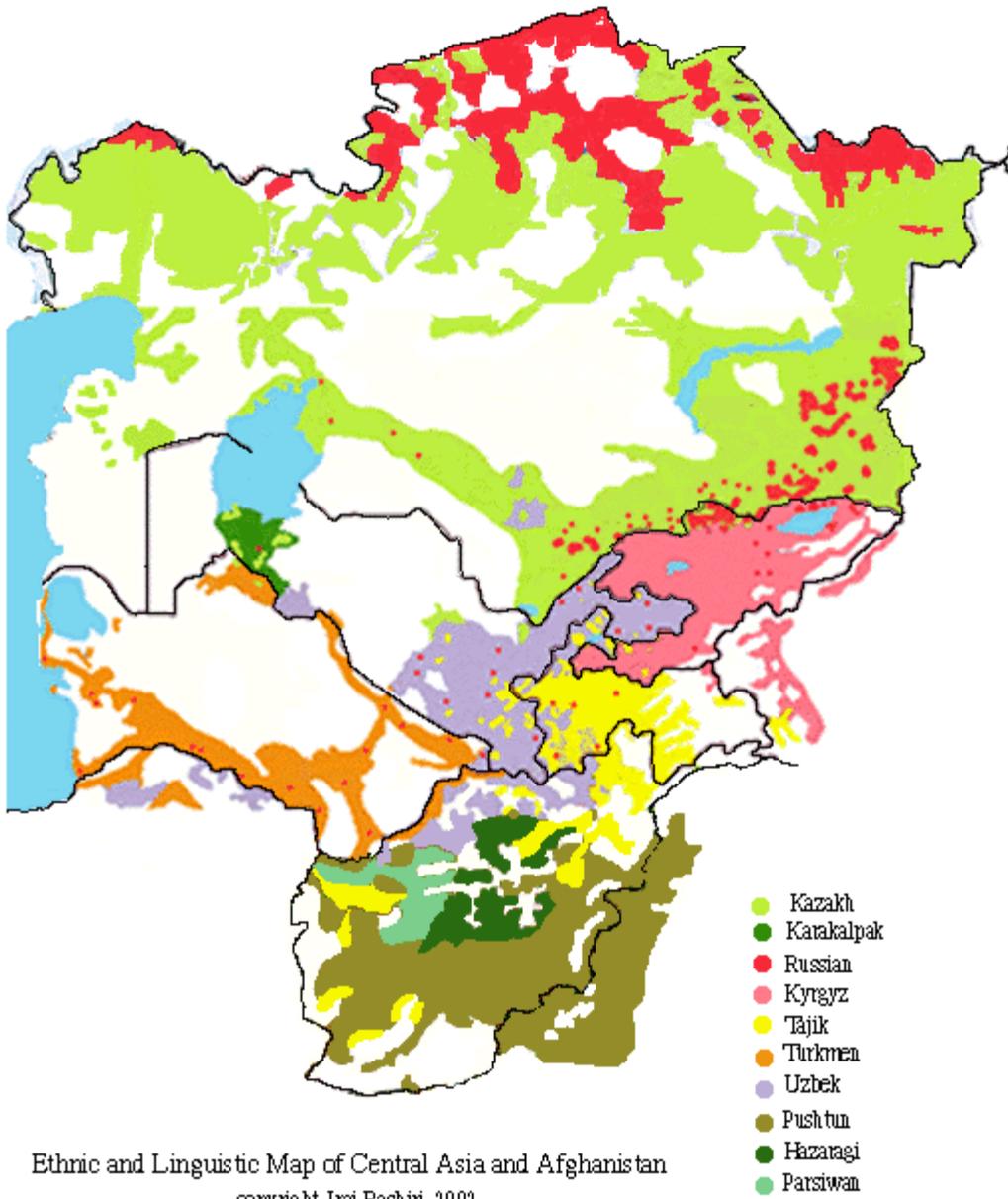
## **Languages**

Afghanistan accommodates a diverse number of linguistic groups. Most of them are small as far as the number of speakers is concerned. The predominant language family in Afghanistan is Indo-European. The other major language family is the Ural-Altaiic. There are also speakers of Hindi and Arabic among the urban population.

### **The Indo-European languages**

The Indo-European languages of Afghanistan include: Pashtu, Dari, and Baluchi. Pashtu is spoken by some 8 million speakers in the south and east; Dari is spoken by 5,600,000 speakers comprising the Tajiks; Hazaragi is spoken by 1.5 million in central Afghanistan by the Parsiwans, Hazaras, Aimaq, as well as by the urban Qizilbash populating the cities of Herat, Qandahar, and Ghazna; and Baluchi which is spoken by 200,000 nomad Afghans in the northwest. Some Baluch nomadize between Sistan and Herat.

Although Indo-Iranian at base, these languages are not mutually understandable. So when, in the 1960's Pashtu became the official language, orders originating with one Tajiki-speaking Afghan, say in Kabul, for another Tajik-speaking Afghan in Qandahar, had to be first translated into Pashtu and then re-translated into Dari before the transmission was complete.



### **The Ural-Altaic languages**

The Ural-Altaic languages are spoken in the north and northeast. They are Uzbeki spoken by about 1.5 million sedentary agriculturalists; Turkmeni spoken by 500,000 semi-nomadic inhabitants in the northwest; and Kyrgyzi spoken by 500 speakers of the Afghan Pamirs.

## **Other Languages**

The outline presented above, however, is a simplistic look at the linguistic situation in Afghanistan. Badakhshan is divided between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. So are the following languages spoken across the Amu Dariya: Wakhi (14,000), Darwazi (10,000), Ormuri (50), Parachi (600), Sangalach-Ishkashemi (2,000), Shughni (20,000), and Munji (2,500).

## **Religion**

The official religion of Afghanistan is Islam. The majority (84%) of Afghans are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafite School. The Pushtun majority as well as most Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmens are Sunni. The Shi'ite of Afghanistan live in the central highlands known as the Hazarajat as well as in the northwest around Herat known as the Parsiwan. There are also large Isma'ili communities in the Badakhshan and Nuristan regions. The Shi'ite population is estimated to comprise some 14% of the total population. There are also some 20,000 Hindus living in Afghanistan. These and adherents of Marxist and other ideologies form about 1% of the population.

## **Tribalism and Regionalism.**

Afghanistan is primarily a country of nomads. There are two major tribal confederations in the south. Both Pushtun: the Durrani and the Ghilzai. Both confederations seek to rule the Loya Jirgah or the Afghan Assembly. In the past the Durrani have provided leadership. Increasingly, however, the Ghilzai are asserting themselves, as are the over 100 lesser tribal chiefs.

Similarly, the country is divided among regional warlords. These regions include Herat, Mazar-i Sharif, the Panjsher Valley, Kabul, Hazarajat, and Qandahar.

## **Social Structure**

As mentioned above, Afghanistan is primarily a rural kingdom with about 80% of the population engaged in agriculture. The other 20% are nomads still traveling long distances to their yaylaqs (summer quarters) in the highlands and returning to their qishlaqs (winter quarters) in the lowlands. The agriculturalists are divided into landed gentry and farmers. Individuals who own between 50 and 500 acres of land are called the landed gentry. Members of this group are

also involved in commerce. Some members hold relatively high governmental positions. The farmers fall into four distinct classes. The well-off farmers own anywhere between 20 and 50 acres of land while moderately rich farmers might own between 8 and 30 acres. Petty landowners possess between 3 and 8 acres and might, if necessary, rent from the above groups. The landless peasants who work for all the above groups populate the bottom layer. Nearly 85% of Afghan farmers fit into this last category.

### **The Bourgeois Class**

Industry in Afghanistan is barely above the level of a cottage industry. It has not developed to the level where feudal lords feel obliged to share their land with the industrialists. There are, however, many workers who work in factories and in commerce. A large body within this group serves as the liaison between major foreign merchants, wholesalers, and retailers.

### **The Labor Class**

Before the advent of the Soviets, a labor force of over 60,000 was engaged in the industrial centers. This was a rapidly growing class just beginning to form organizations, parties, and movements. The Soviets capitalized on this new development in Afghan society and, as we shall see, engaged the Afghan youth in industry and politics. The latter proved to be the most damaging legacy of this enterprise for the Afghan society.

### **The Religious Class**

This was a most influential class in pre-Soviet Afghanistan. Even though only about 100,000 in number, this class administered all religious rituals as well as supervised education, the judiciary and, in some cases, health care. The clergy lived among the people. They were able to manipulate peoples' mindset quite easily. When the struggle between the Afghan masses and the Soviets begins, as we shall see, the clergy will have a prominent role to play. Traditionally, too, they have played a major role in distancing Afghanistan from modernization and westernization.

### **Intellectuals**

Afghan intellectuals, like elsewhere in the Islamic world, came from among all social classes. They worked in newly established civil administration offices dealing with social and economic affairs of the kingdom. With the growth of education, the number of intellectuals increased, enabling them to demand an

ever-increasing role in the social and political affairs of the country. Once these demands were not met, they turned their attention to new sources of power and prestige.

## Social Order

Although industry and capital had been introduced into Afghanistan by the early 1960's, the country was still predominantly feudalistic. The smallest unit in the social order was the family but the lifestyle of the families differed drastically. This difference played a major role in the eventual modernization and industrialization of the country and is a major factor in the country's ability to become independent and to form a nation.

The Afghan family unit fits into either a settled lifestyle or a nomadic lifestyle. The settled families form villages which are administered by *maliks*. Larger villages become townships and eventually cities are formed. This is the segment of society that understands modernization and, to a degree, abides by its rules. Divided into a center and several provinces, this population can easily be ruled by a king or a president.

The nomadic families form lineages, clans, and tribes. The family is administered by the head of the extended family under the supervision of a person assigned by the lineage head. Similarly, chieftains appointed by the heads of clans administer the lineages. The heads of families, lineages, and clans all form an assembly that is administered by the chief of the tribe.

As can be seen, two totally different systems of government operate side by side. Each has to be cognizant of the needs of the other and take those needs into consideration. Deviation from this rule brings two major segments of the society into conflict. The tribal chief is as powerful as the feudal lord. In order to regulate the affairs of the tribes and the settled populations, ancient Afghan rule appoints a number of *rish safids* (elders) as arbiters of the needs and rights of both populations.

Breakdown of this system gives undue power to clan heads and regional warlords who would easily carve a portion of the country as their territory and, with the help of their allies among the other social classes in the region, especially the military and the clergy, become independent rulers of those regions. Often they contend for the highest position be it the position of a grand khan or that of a president.

The most difficult part of this coexistence is in the area of legislation and enforcement of laws. In both societies the *Shari'a* or Islamic law takes precedence over civil law. This shows that the clergy have the enviable ability to swing the fortunes of the country depending on the social and political dynamics of the time. The *Shari'a* court and the Islamic police are usually the enforcers of the laws. In matter of sexes men are given power over women. Women receive half the amount of inheritance received by a male and the testimony of two women is equal to the testimony of one man. In marriage and divorce cases, the man makes all decisions.

Pushtunwali is practiced by the tribes as yet not affected by Islam. The rules of Pushtunwali are strict. Louis Dupree summarizes the rules as follows:

To avenge blood.

To fight to the death for a person who has taken refuge with me no matter what his lineage. [Example: If a man, rich or poor, kills a man of another lineage, he can force anyone outside the slain man's lineage to help him simply by killing a sheep in front of that individual's hut or tent.]

To defend to the last any property entrusted to me.

To be hospitable and provide for the safety of the person and property of guests.

to refrain from killing a woman, a Hindu, a minstrel, or a boy not yet circumcised.

To pardon an offense on the intercession of a woman of the offender's lineage, a Sayyid or a mullah. [An exception is made in the case of murder: only blood or blood-money can erase this crime.]

To punish all adulterers with death.

To refrain from killing a man who has entered a mosque or the shrine of a holy man so long as he remains within its precincts; also to spare a man in battle who begs for quarter. (Dupree, Afghanistan, pp. 126-127)

## **Early History**

Afghanistan is an ancient land. Its early history, like the early history of the republics of Central Asia to the east of the Caspian Sea, is virtually the same as the history of ancient Iran. Iranian cosmology and mythology, in other words, are also the cosmology and mythology of the Afghan people. So is the history

of the Achaemenians, the Alexander interlude, and the pre-Islamic history of Iran. It is with the advent of the Arabs, and later on of the Turks, that Afghan history, and for that matter Central Asian history, take decidedly different directions. This brief look at early Afghan history, therefore, presupposes the shared history of Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan.

In AD 962, Alptekin, a major slave general of the Samanids of Bukhara rebelled against his masters and established the Ghaznavid dynasty in the city of Ghazna in the eastern parts of present-day Afghanistan. After the fall of the Ghaznavids, until the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the Mongols devastated the region, the Ghurid dynasty ruled Afghanistan. Marco Polo who, in 1271, passed through the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan reported that even though half a century had elapsed since the onset of the Mongol invasion the region had not begun to recover. Another traveler, Ibn Batutah, visited the cities of Herat and Kabul on his way to China and India in 1333. He echoes, as it were, the assertions of Marco Polo, testifying to the irreparable destruction of what had been a most glorious civilization by the standards of the time.

A significant event in the past history of Afghanistan is the rise of Muhammad Shaybani Khan (1451-1510), the conqueror of Transoxiana. Shaybani Khan, claiming descent from Genghiz Khan, forced the descendants of Tamerlane out of Central Asia. The future Mughals sought their fortunes first in Afghanistan and, eventually, in India where they established the Mughal dynasty. In AD 1500, Shaybani Khan established the Uzbek nation that constitutes the core of the present-day Republic of Uzbekistan.

Between 1526 to 1747 the territory of present-day Afghanistan was divided among the three major powers of the region. The Safavids of Iran ruled the western province of Herat, centered on the present-day town of Herat; the Mughals of India controlled Kabul and some regions that now are part of Pakistan; and the Uzbek rulers to the north controlled the area between Balkh and Badakhshan along the Panj River.

Iran, took control of Afghanistan in 1622 and remained in control until 1707 when Mir Wais, a Ghilzai chieftain, gained the independence of Qandahar. Soon after, in 1723, Mir Wais' son, Mahmud, invaded Iran, put the Safavid Sultan Hussein to death and forced the Safavids to move their seat of power from the center of the plateau (Isfahan) to the northern provinces of Mazandaran and Gilan. At this time a major part of the Iranian plateau was under the political hegemony of the Afghans.

In 1730, Nader Quli, a Safavid commander from the Turkish Afshar tribe, defeated Mahmud's successor, Mir Ashraf, and pushed the Afghan invaders out of Iranian territory. Soon after, as Nader Shah, he went on to annex Afghanistan, Central Asia, and northern India to the Iranian crown. Nader Shah's rule, however, was ephemeral. He was murdered in 1747. His death became a major turning point in the histories of both Iran and Afghanistan.

Upon Nader Shah's death, his Abdali commander, Ahmad Durrani, returned from Iran to Qandahar. There, with the help of an Afghan *Loya Jirgah* (assembly), he promoted himself to king and established the kingdom of Afghanistan. For the next 26 years Ahmad Shah Durrani ruled Afghanistan from Qandahar. In 1773, Teymur Shah moved the capital to [Kabul](#).

### **Amir Dust Muhammad**



**Amir Dust  
Muhammad**

The next significant phase in the historical development of Afghanistan is the struggle of the Afghans against British India. In the course of three wars, the Afghans defended the territorial integrity of their kingdom against British might. The first Afghan War lasted from 1839 to 1842. In the course of this war, Britain temporarily dispossessed Afghanistan of Qandahar, Ghazna and Kabul and deported Afghanistan's ruler, Amir Dust Muhammad, to India. British plans for a total domination of Afghanistan through the installation of a puppet Afghan ruler, however, did not come into fruition. To the contrary, the British lost almost all their troops in Afghanistan before they could extract themselves from the kingdom. Soon after the British left, the exiled Dust Muhammad returned as king and ruled for another 21 years.

Dust Muhammad was the type of charismatic ruler with whom most Afghans could easily identify. He unified the disparate Afghan tribes by employing his own brand of tribal statesmanship. Rather than through imposing a highly centralized government, he employed the assistance of Afghan tribal chiefs and regional

warlords who, gradually, implemented his reforms for him.

### **Amir Sher Ali**



**Amir Sher Ali**

Amir Sher Ali, Dust Muhammad's son, continued his father's efforts. Using the political knowledge of Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi (usually referred to as al-Afghani), he organized a large, modern army, established state-controlled civil and military schools, created a consultative assembly, expanded the bureaucracy, reformed the tax system, and respected the tribal, as well as the individual rights of the chiefs within the state. Thanks to Asadabadi, under Amir Sher Ali, Afghanistan discard some of the vestiges of its ethnic and tribal past and came a step closer to the formation of a nation.

Amir Sher Ali's reforms were disrupted by the Second British invasion of Afghanistan in 1878. And once again, the British were unsuccessful in bringing Afghanistan under their control. In 1880 they were forced to remove their troops from Afghanistan.



**Al-Afghani**



### "The Great Game"

What fueled British desire to annex Afghanistan to India was an intense rivalry that had existed for quite a while between the Russian Empire to the north of Afghanistan and the British Raj to the southeast. Behaving like two giant chess players (hence the term "The Great Game"), Russian and British politicians in their St. Petersburg and London offices respectively, moved their troops, and with them their respective power, ever closer to each other. The British, beginning in Madras in southern India, toppled the many kingdoms obstructing their progress towards Afghanistan. Similarly, the Russians subjugated the tribal and settled populations of Central Asia on their way south hastened to meet the British before they captured Afghanistan. Needless to say, Afghanistan became the prize for the victor to take.

In this war of nerves, the Russians relied on diplomacy and political intrigue, while the British added military might to the mix. Both strategies proved to be relatively unsuccessful. Then a novel idea was introduced. The two super powers of the time decided to make Afghanistan a buffer state to keep their mighty empires apart. In the bargain, it should be added, the British gained control over Afghanistan's foreign relations. An asset that, in 1893, helped them draw the Durand Line between Afghanistan and British India. They also helped Afghanistan's king, Abdur Rahman, centralize the government and consolidate his rule. The following achievements of king Abdur Rahman mark what can be termed the factors contributing to the gradual emergence of modern Afghanistan.



**Amir Abdur Rahman**

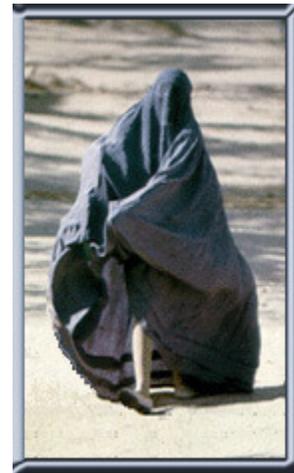
To begin with, Abdur Rahman decided to settle the affairs of the 15 tribes (340,000 members) of the Shi'ite Hazarah who occupied the Hazarajat. Between AD 1229 and 1447, thirteen of the tribes had recognized governmental authority but not the 44,000 strong Uruzgan tribe. In fact, once Abdur Rahman Khan set out to reform the affairs of the kingdom, including the affairs of the tribes, the Uruzgan tribe rose in revolt. Frustrating the Khan's attempt at segregating the elders of the tribe and taking census for tax purposes, they created untoward confusion and anarchy in the land. In retaliation, the Khan fielded 100,000 troops and tribal levies against the Uruzgan. He also incited his Sunni followers to wage a Jihad against the Shi'ite Hazarahs. Even more than that, he took the Hazarahs' pastures and flocks and divided them among the Durrani and Ghilzai tribal confederations. As a result, by 1893, most of the Hazarah were enslaved. The rest went into exile in Iran.

Free from the problems of the Hazarajat, in 1895, Abdur Rahman Khan attacked the independent Kafiristan (land of infidels) region. So far this region had been inaccessible to all Amirs and rulers. The 60,000 inhabitants of the region fought with bows, arrows, spears, and rifles. But, eventually, the region was reduced to central (Afghan) rule and its inhabitants were Islamized in 1901.

This, however, was the military and political wing of Abdur Rahman's reforms. The waves of modernization and westernization coming east from Egypt (early 1800's), Ottoman Turkey (middle 1800's), and Iran (late 1900's) were reaching Central Asia and Afghanistan as well. These reforms were tasking on the Amir of Afghanistan in particular because, to begin with, Afghanistan did not have a judicial system. A woman's life was worth 12 Kabuli rupees (half a day's wages) and a man's life was worth 300 Kabuli rupees. Marriages were not registered and women could not sue for divorce. Additionally, the customary law (levirate) tied women not only to their husbands but also to the family of the husband. Additionally, the laws of inheritance favored sons, the eldest the most, depriving women of all their economic rights.

Child marriages were prevalent to the point that often infants were betrothed. Rules of veiling or purda (wearing the paranja) were strictly enforced, blocking the way to the education of girls above the age of twelve. Even cutting a girl's hair was forbidden as the hair was cut only when a girl shamed. Polygamy was practiced alongside the rules of the *Shari'a*, i.e., every man could have four legal wives and as many concubines as he desired.

In his 1882 social agenda for change, Abdur Rahman introduced a series of mild reforms. He ordered that all marriages should be registered and he outlawed child marriages. According to the new ruling, no young woman could be forced to marry against her will. More importantly, widows did no longer have to marry their husband's next of kin as the law of levirate had prescribed. In fact, they could file for divorce for such causes as cruelty and lack of proper support. And the law of inheritance was changed so that the eldest son inherited the same amount as the others. In other words, women were given the right to inherit.



## Amir Habibullah Khan

Amir Abdurrahman Khan's oldest son, Amir Habibullah Khan (ruled 1901-1919), ascended the throne in 1903, at the age of 32, without opposition. Somewhat stout and short, Habibullah Khan looked quite like his father, more genial and tolerant, however. He was also better educated than his father, especially in knowledge of languages. He was a sensual man with over 100 offspring.



**King Amanullah**

Although short and stocky, Amanullah was an excellent horseman. He was also a good shot and, like his father, very fond of hunting. At court, he received a very good education and was well informed about world affairs, especially about the role Britain in Afghanistan's foreign affairs.

Amanullah married twice. After his first wife died, he married the daughter of Mahmud Beg Tarzi. As Queen Soraya, Tarzi's daughter proved to be worthy of her name. She exerted a great deal of influence not only on the Amir but also on all those who worked for him as well as on the work that was carried out for king and country. The fact that she was educated, quite beautiful, and of noble birth helped her move Afghan society ever closer to catching up with Iran and Turkey of the time.

Unlike his father, Amanullah Khan was open minded and pro-reform. In fact he headed the committee in the palace that sought the institution of a constitutional monarchy in Afghanistan. Predictably the clergy were not happy with his actions as either prince, amir, or king. They simply thought that the king's upstart son was placing their faith in jeopardy and the resources of the country in the hands of foreign competitors.

Upon ascending the throne of Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan promised his subjects to revenge the death of their king, gain the independence of Afghanistan from the British, and abolish corvee work that exploited the labor of most non-Pushtun Afghans.

Amanullah's rule can be divided into three phases: consolidation of power and achievement of Afghanistan's independence; introduction of reforms, first in 1921 and later on in 1928, after returning from his world tour; and an era of unrest resulting in his abdication in 1929.

Amanullah Khan's first step was to consolidate his rule and prepare the way for his reforms in a way that they could not be undermined by the British Raj. Hence, rather than setting his reforms in motion, he took on the British Raj. He made it clear to the British Viceroy in India that Afghanistan intended to use the post-world War I atmosphere to its advantage and seek complete independence from Britain. Once the British countered that they would welcome any new commercial enterprises that satisfied the needs of Afghanistan, Amanullah responded by attacking the British posts to the east of Afghanistan and by freeing the Afghan areas that were supervised by British forces. In time the British, realizing the futility of getting involved in a Third Afghan war, gave in. Thus, in 1919, the British gave up their control over Afghanistan's foreign policy and accepted Afghan independence, a major triumph for the new king.

The next step was to find allies that would fill the vacuum created by the departure of the British. The newly-formed Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics emerged as a major ally of the future Afghanistan nation, a role that Russia continues to play to this day as far as the development of Afghanistan's natural resources and Afghan cultural and military needs are concerned. Vladimir Ilich Lenin's foreign policy with regard to the East redefined Afghan attitude towards Britain. The Soviet policy affirmed the right of all Muslims of Russia and the East. It specified that all Muslims will become masters of their own fate.

While Amir Habibullah had refused to meet with Soviet envoys on two occasions in 1918; in March 1919, Amir Amanullah welcomed the Soviet Union to become the first state to recognize the independence of Afghanistan. Other nations followed and, slowly but surely, an independent Afghanistan found its place among the nations of the world.

The second phase of Amir Amanullah's rule was given to reforms. These reforms were more outreaching than those by either Abdur Rahman Khan or Amir Sher Ali. They included reform of the government that entailed adoption of a new constitution in 1923. Under that constitution then both the independence of Afghanistan and the supremacy of the power of the Amir were solidified. Additionally, a State Council, an Assembly of Tribal Chiefs and

Clergy (*Loya Jirgah*), and a Council of State Officials (*durbari ali*) were instituted to sort out matters of state and report to the king.

There were also certain economic changes. Payment of taxes in kind was no longer acceptable. All tax debts had to be paid in cash. Live stock taxes were unified and private ownership of land was legalized. Some nomads to the north were settled, and religious endowment in land (*waqf*) was abolished. Modern agriculture and industry were promoted.

The cornerstone of Amanullah's social reforms was the elevation of the status of women whom he regarded as partners, companions, and friends of Afghan society. "Women," he said repeatedly in his speeches, "are the builders of homes, founders of families, and holders of the inviolable honor bond for the nation. To them we must entrust the responsibility for the education and the upbringing of the daughters of Afghanistan. They should, in no way be treated as second-class Muslims." And, of course, this reform could not be carried out without implementing a full-fledged overhaul of the educational system of the country.

In this regard, elementary education became obligatory. In addition to the Habibia School, a number of other schools taught by French, German and Afghan teachers were opened. Similar schools were opened in Herat, Qandahar, Mazar-i Sharif, and Qataqan. These schools offered a variety of courses on medicine, agriculture, architecture, home economics, and music, even though the clergy discouraged the study of the latter subject. Altogether, in 1927, there were 322 high schools with 51,000 elementary level students and there were 3,000 high school students registered. During the 1927 academic year, 133 textbooks were published. In addition, a large number of students were sent to Germany, France, Italy, and Turkey to further their studies. The group included a number of girls who went to the Muslim nation of Turkey to further their education.

King Amanullah began his reform of family relations with the introduction of what came to be known as the Family Act of 1921. In the same year, under the patronage of Queen Soraya, his wife, he opened a public school for girls. Between 1921 and 1928, over 800 girls attended this school in Kabul. During the same time, Afghan women were sent abroad--mostly to Turkey, France, and Switzerland--to further their education. Five more such schools were projected to meet the needs of Kabul.

Amanullah's other reforms included regulation of marriages and engagements and abolition of child marriages and intermarriages among kin (levirate).

Furthermore, restrictions were placed on wedding expenses, including dowries. Women were given the right to appeal to courts for their rights against their husbands. In this same atmosphere, the first women's magazine was published under the supervision of the Queen. It was called *Irshad-i Niswan* (The Guidance of Women).

King Amanullah's reforms were more far-reaching than either Abdurrahman Khan's mild reforms or King Habibullah's cosmetic reforms. When fully implemented, Amanullah's reforms would have included a total emancipation of women, including unveiling and voting rights; land and water reform; and introduction of European life-style, especially clothing, for both sexes. All of this within the context of an independent Afghanistan.

Amanullah's programs of reform began in 1921 and moved ahead in spite of staunch opposition. In fact, to indicate his devotion to the cause of modernization and to show the level of interest that he thought the wider world had shown towards his reforms, in 1927, accompanied with his wife, he went on a tour of Europe. On all occasions, his wife appeared in European dress and without a *burqa*. In addition to the Soviet Union, Afghanistan's main supporter, the tour took the royal couple to Britain, Italy, France, Germany, Belgium, Poland, Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. In each country the king gave a speech and made several purchases. From Italy, France, and Germany, he bought a large amount of arms and ammunition and signed treaties for training Afghan officers to use the weapons in case of need. In Iran and Turkey, he signed protocols of friendship and good will and in Moscow, he signed treaties of economic and cultural cooperation.

In spite of the situation that his reforms had created in Afghan society and in spite of the visible divisions that had appeared since his departure for his world tour, King Amanullah was more steadfast now in his determination to make his reforms work than ever before. In fact, in 1928, he further curtailed the authority of the tribal chiefs and diminished the influence of the clergy. He created secular courts of justice and insisted that all mullahs must be recertified before they are allowed to attend to the affairs of their followers. He attempted to modernize family and marital relations.

Even though these were troublesome changes by themselves. Yet, King Amanullah was not satisfied. He introduced a series of reforms that, due to their sensitive nature, he had kept for the very end. These included mixed education for boys and girls; sending students, especially girls without chaperons, abroad; a ban on polygamy; and the total abolition of the *burqa*. But perhaps the most dramatic event happened in 1928 when 100 Afghan women in

Kabul took off their *burgas* and when a group of women were taken for an airplane ride over Kabul.

Predictably, King Amanullah's reforms damaged the position of the clergy, undermined the authority of tribal chiefs, and reduced the purchase power of the conservative segment of the population. At the same time, these reforms failed in bringing change to the difficult situation in which the Afghan peasants found themselves. Peasants remained tied to the land and were increasingly at the mercy of the landlord and the tax collector. Many found themselves selling portions of their land each year just to pay their taxes.

Opposition to Amir Amanullah's reforms emerged early on from the region of Khost. Only two years into the reforms (1923), the mullahs of Khost called the reforms against the *Qur'an* and the *Shari'a* law and labeled the Amir "an enemy of Allah." The following year, the tribal chiefs joined them, especially the chief of the Mangal tribe. Together they demanded full authority over their wives and daughters and the closure of all schools, especially those for girls. They also demanded that the mullahs should not be held to any particular level of education as the new code had prescribed.

Unlike his contemporaries, Reza Shah of Iran and Ata Turk of Turkey, King Amanullah was facing a major ideological challenge at a time when his own government was divided on the subject of reforms, their extent and direction. In 1929, these oppositions surfaced in the person of a brigand from the north, a former Tajik officer from Kala Khan, northeast of Kabul. Interestingly enough, this brigand who championed the cause of the Afghans and Islam did not have a proper name. He was casually referred to as the Bacha Saqaw (the water-carrier kid). The mullahs and the tribal chiefs that had the pulse of the south in their hands supported the northern brigand. Britain, too, lent its support by fomenting uprisings in the regions adjacent to its northwest frontier.

Attacked from all sides, on January 9, 1929, King Amanullah issued an order and cancelled a number of his major reforms, especially those dealing with social affairs, family practices, military conscription, and clerical education and certification. He even proposed the formation of a parliament the membership of which would include the prominent members of the clergy and some of the tribal chiefs, intellectuals, landlords, and government officials. But none of that gained him any support.

On January 14, 1929, King Amanullah abdicated and left Kabul for Qandahar. As king of Afghanistan he installed his elder brother, Inayatullah Khan.

On January 19, 1929, Bacha Saqaw stormed the capital of Kabul, forced Inayatullah Khan to move to Qandahar and installed himself king.

**King Habibullah (Bacha Saqaw) (Jan. 1929 - Oct. 1929)**

Upon ascending the throne, Bacha Saqaw assumed the title of Habibullah (friend of God--not to be confused with Amir Habibullah whose rule preceded King Amanullah's rule). Illiterate, uninformed about internal and external affairs of the state, and advised by equally benighted and self-serving clergy and tribal chiefs, Habibullah established a fundamentalist government the like of which history would not have witnessed were it not for the rule of the similarly misguided Taliban at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Habibullah's main concern was to satisfy the demands of his constituency, i.e., his northern supporters, the clergy, the tribal chiefs, and the rank and file of the army. What were these demands and could the new king meet them?

The clergy demanded that the new-method schools be closed. Furthermore, they required that education in general should be placed in their hands as it had traditionally been the case. They also demanded that the secular courts be disbanded and that judicial matters be referred to the *shari'a* courts. They also asked for the repeal of the Family Act of 1921 that allowed men only one wife and gave women the right to sue for divorce for cause.

The tribal chiefs asked for the abolition of conscription for military services and for canceling all debt arrears. In addition, they wanted Bacha Saqaw to honor his promise that taxes would be cut and that the salary of the rank and file in the army would be increased. They also demanded payment for their effort in defeating King Amanullah and for bringing Habibullah to power.

As for Habibullah himself, he intended to become wealthy and to help his northern supporters become rich. How could all of this be accomplished while King Amanullah's trip



**Bacha Saqaw**

around the world and his purchases of arms had already emptied the treasury?

Some of the demands were easier to meet than some of the others. For instance, certain demands of the clergy and the tribal chiefs could be met right away. These included the closing of all new-method schools; placing both the education and the judiciary under cleric control; repeal of the family act of 1921; abolition of compulsory military service; forcing all foreign nationals, consultants, and teachers to leave Afghanistan; and abolition of cleric proficiency testing. Implementation of these demands meant retrogression for Afghanistan as a nation, but that was not a concern of any of the individuals involved.



**King Habibullah  
(Bacha Saqaw)**

Some other demands, especially those centered on economic factors, however, could not be as easily met without taking drastic measures against the wealthy, the noble, and the powerful. These demands included cancellation of all debt arrears, payment due the tribal chiefs for their participation in wars against Amanullah and installation of King Habibullah on the throne. To satisfy these latter needs as well as their own, King Habibullah and his cohorts had no option but to force the merchants, land owners, and bureaucrats who had supported King Amanullah to give up their best buildings in Kabul and their best farms and pasturelands throughout Afghanistan. In fact, they were required to give up their most beautiful girls and boys for the pleasure of the tribal chiefs and officials of the new king.

As expected, before long the merchants, peasants, and landlords who had helped Habibullah seize the government became his ardent enemies. After all Amanullah had treated them as a king does while Habibullah (Bacha Saqaw) had treated them like the bandit he was.

Due to various factors, Habibullah 's rule did not penetrate beyond Kabul. He brought some of the southern and northern tribes within the fold but major parts of the country inhabited by the Pushtuns and Hazarahs remained outside his

control. Furthermore, the Amir was oblivious to foreign affairs, an aspect of his policy for the neglect of which he paid dearly.

In 1929, with the help of the British, Nadir Khan (ruled 1929-1933) returned from exile in Germany and prepared the ground for Bacha Saqaw's ouster. Bacha Saqaw tried to buy the famous general off by offering him such lucrative positions in his government as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, but Nadir Khan did not accept the offer. In fact, he did not even respond to the request. Instead, he rallied the southern tribes and, within a short time, dethroned the brigand king.

### **Nadir Shah**

Upon ascending the throne, partly because he never liked the reforms of King Amanullah and partly because he was mindful of the reaction of various segments of society, Nadir Shah proceeded with caution. There was no question that the mullahs and the tribal chiefs would continue to safeguard the advantages that they had regained during the rule of their puppet Amir. Similarly, he was sure that the enemies of Amanullah were more aligned with him than, for instance, with the national minorities. A balance, therefore, was necessary in the implementation of reforms that would satisfy both the followers of Amanullah and Habibullah. On one side of this balance would be most tribal chiefs and a considerable number of the clergy as well as many landlords and merchants. On the other end would be the supporters of Amanullah who were not satisfied with the middle-of -the-way reforms of Nadir Shah which included reinstatement of the customary and religious laws regarding the social position of women; mandatory heavy veiling; and strict purda and seclusion whereby girls were prevented from acquiring an education. Additionally, Nadir Shah recalled Afghan female students from abroad, reinstated the laws of polygamy, and outlawed consumption of alcohol. More difficult issues such as land and water reform, which King Amanullah had reserved as the last items on his list of reforms, were not even broached. European lifestyle, and women's suffrage also were reexamined, some less provocative items were retained.



**Nadir Shah**

After the events of 1928 and 1929, Afghan economy was in a shambles. Rural economy was devastated by neglect if not by ravages of inter-ethnic, inter-tribal, and religious conflicts. Neither was there an end to these conflicts most of which were severely suppressed, some of them with the help of the British who controlled the Pushtuns in their territory and by not allowing them to participate in the conflicts across the border. The Soviets, as had been the case over the years, continued to assist the Afghans by allowing Afghan traders use their communication and transportation systems as well as by sharing their market.

Within Afghanistan itself, Nadir Shah allowed the tribal chiefs and the prominent among the clergy a free hand. They could confiscate the property of the supporters of King Habibullah as a compensation for the efforts that they had expended during the turbulent year when he sought to overthrow the rule of Bacha Saqaw.

In foreign policy, Nadir Shah advocated a policy of neutrality while staying on the good side of both Britain and the Soviet Union. In the case of the Soviet Union, he confirmed the treaties that had been signed in 1921 and 1923. He also established good relations with Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Establishment of relations with France and Germany did not go well and overtures for attracting United States capital to Kabul were not effective.

In the field of education, Nadir Shah expanded the efforts of previous Afghan rulers by adding a school of medicine. This school in time became the nucleus of the later University of Kabul. He also promoted the use of media by allowing the publication of newspapers and journals by importing books on subjects not available in the seminaries and theological schools administered by the clergy.

Nadir Shah's rule, however, was ephemeral. He was assassinated in 1933, possibly by those who were angry with his slow pace of reforms. His premature death left the resolution of the problems arising from the dislocation of people, their property and the restoration of rights denied as a result of the mistakes of Bacha Saqaw up in the air. It was now up to his nineteen-year-old son, Muhammad Zahir, to chart a new way for the modernization of Afghanistan.



**Zahir Shah**

### **Zahir Shah**

Zahir Shah, the only surviving son of Nadir Shah, was born on October 15, 1914. He was educated in France and upon the death of his father (November 8, 1933), at age 19, he became the King of Afghanistan. During the first 13 years of his rule, Muhammad Zahir was no more than a puppet of his uncle Hashim Khan who, as Prime Minister was, was the actual ruler of the kingdom. In fact, even though under his father Muhammad Zahir had held high positions in the education and the military divisions, Afghans like Shah Muhammad Ghazi, his other uncle, continued to consider him a junior.

Under Hashim Khan's supervision, Afghanistan was much better off than it had been before. The infrastructure that had been shattered under Bacha Saqaw was mostly restored and people were better educated and, altogether, better off. Some at court, as well as some among the public, were political conscious enough to form groups and question the status quo. At court, for instance, in 1950, Sardar Muhammad Daoud Khan, the king's cousin, formed a National Club. Intellectuals and students alike were attracted to Daoud Khan's circle. Similarly, more conservative religious groups were coming into existence, often opposing the intellectuals and the court at large. In 1952, for instance, when none of the members of the opposition won a seat in the parliamentary elections, Kabul became the scene of unprecedented demonstrations. Babrak Karmal, son of the one-time Governor of Paktia province, led one such demonstration. Within a short time the opposition was suppressed. Babrak Karmal was imprisoned and prominent members of the



**Hashim Khan**

opposition were either exiled or assigned foreign service posts.

In 1953, Zahir Shah asked Muhammad Daoud Khan, his cousin, to form a cabinet. Son of Sardar Muhammad Aziz, Daoud Khan had served as commander of the Eastern province (1934) and Qandahar (1935), as commander of Central Forces (1939-47), and as Minister of Defense (1946). He was now moving from the office of the Minister of the Interior to the office of the Prime Minister. As Prime Minister, Zahir Shah thought Daoud Khan could help in the modernization of the country, especially by devising a balanced assistance project that could attract both Soviet and American enterprises. This kind of cooperation on the part of the superpowers, Zahir Shah thought, would turn the Afghan economy around.



**Daoud Khan**

Daoud Khan initiated a five-year (1956-61) plan as a result of which women were permitted to abandon the veil (1959). At the same time, he controlled the publishing houses and the media, leaving no room for freedom of expression. Literature was limited to poetry, professional manuals, and history texts. A few small libraries with limited resources operated in the capital and several movie theaters operated in the major cities. The end of Daoud Khan's first five-year plan is a benchmark in Afghan social progress as indicated by the relative progress achieved in education and healthcare.

Between 1933 and 1961, the Afghan education system had developed solid institutions of advanced learning capable of training students not only to become teachers but also to become professionals in various fields. The following statistics indicate the level and the diversity of Afghan education at the time:

10	universities
22	colleges
31	professional schools
52	high schools
533	elementary schools
788	rural schools
26	Islamic schools

Altogether there were

1,436	schools
235,000	students (ratio of girls to boys: 1/7)
5,983	teachers
14,719	graduates
229	university graduates
907	professional school graduates
1,743	high school graduates

Additionally, 1,000 Afghan teachers were studying abroad and, overall, 2% of the population was literate. Similarly, the following statistics indicate the status of the country's healthcare system at the time:

59	hospitals
5	maternity wards
5	sanitariums for TB
19	laboratories
18	X-ray facilities
157	pharmacies
2,111	beds
250	doctors
69	assistant doctors

The patient-doctor ratio in comparison to neighboring countries was as follows:

Country	Afghan	Pakistan	Iran	India	Turkey
Ratio	50,000	14,000	8,000	5,000	4,000

This ratio may not look impressive elsewhere in the world, but either to the Afghanistan of Bacha Saqaw (1929) or to the Afghanistan of the Taliban (2001), it is a substantial step forward.

Daoud's ability to turn things around for Afghanistan owed a great deal to the contributions of the Soviet Union (see below). The payoff for these contributions came when Daoud was forced to support demand for independence by the Pushtun tribes. The issue had political as well as economic ramifications for Afghanistan. Politically, it put Afghanistan on the wrong side of Pakistan which could not support a move that would cost it half its land and population. (Northern Afghanistan, it should be added, as a spill over of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen, could easily be absorbed by the Soviet Union. The leftover Hazara could join their Iranian neighbor.) Needless to say, implementation of this destructive plan would have also spelled out the end of Zahir Shah's kingship. Economically, too, the plan spelled disaster for

Afghanistan. Once Pakistan closed its borders, landlocked Afghanistan had no recourse but to beg the Soviets for assistance. In other words, under Daoud's premiership, Afghanistan was becoming politically and economically a protectorate of the Soviet Union.

By 1963, Zahir Shah had to make a tough decision. Clearly Daoud Khan and his Soviet allies had helped Afghanistan reach a degree of prosperity. But at the same time, they had robbed Afghanistan's royal house of its wealth and power and, more importantly, had divided the country into pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet/Muslim camps. In 1963, in order to attend to the affairs of the nation freely, Zahir Shah demanded and received the resignation of Daoud Khan as Prime Minister.

Following the example of Iran that in 1906 had elected a parliament and formed a constitutional monarchy, Zahir Shah introduced a new constitution in 1964. According to this constitution, members of the royal house, like Daoud Khan, were excluded from certain governmental posts. It also provided for free elections to a bicameral parliament, formation of political parties, and a free press.

Hindsight indicated that both the parliament and the constitution and its provisions were introduced to the country prematurely. While the spirit of the constitution could not be implemented, its provisions were perverted by different groups and employed for the promotion of their own interests. Rather than Zahir Shah, the benefactors were the latent Islamic groups now seeking coalition and strength and the Soviet Union that had expended a great deal of manpower and funds bring Afghanistan up as a showcase of socialism in the East. It is to these two forces and their roots in the kingdom that we now turn.

### **Roots of Soviet-Afghan Conflict**

Recall that in 1930 Nadir Shah confirmed support for the treaties that had been signed between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union in 1921 and 1923 and that he promoted good relations between the two nations. The same kind of cordial relations flourished after the Second World War and, eventually, distinguished Afghanistan as the first non-Communist Third-World nation to receive Soviet aid. In fact, each aid package was accompanied with cultural fringes of its own. These included such contributions as the 1957 Radio Moscow's broadcasts in Pushtu, the official language of Afghanistan at the time, and the opening of an Afghan/Russian Friendship House in 1959.

Soviet contacts with the Afghan leadership during the fifties and the sixties were primarily of a political nature. They consisted of high level visits by the prominent heads of each state. In the case of the Afghans these were longer stays of two or three weeks while in the case of the Soviets, they were of much shorter duration. The objectives of the visits, on the part of the Soviets, were to locate Afghan needs, to assess strategic points and to propose to both the Soviet and Afghan governments ways in which they could cooperate in overcoming foreseeable problems. On the part of the Afghans these were mostly educational trips whereby they became familiar with Soviet technology and with ways that such technology could be utilized in Afghanistan.

As a result of each trip, specially designed aid packages were shipped to Afghanistan. In the early stages, these packages included kits for building a combined flour mill-bakery-granary or a motor repair works or an asphalt factory. Later on equipment and trained personnel were sent for the building of major roads such as the famous Salang highway through the Hindu Kush. Although only 100 miles in length, this highway cuts a four-day Kabul-Mazar-i Sharif journey into about a day. A similar highway joins Kushka, in southern Uzbekistan to Qandahar in southern Afghanistan.

Improvement in the irrigation systems included not only canals and dams, but also mechanized farming, building of fertilizer plants and adoption of Soviet techniques to Afghan traditions of river valley farming. The most beneficial strategically located Soviet development projects in Afghanistan, however, included a gas pipeline spanning the Amu Dariya, a number of hydro-electric power stations and several airports, including an international airport at the capital city of Kabul. Smaller regional airports were constructed at Aq Chah, Mazar-i Sharif, Herat, Farah, Qandahar, Khost, and Bamiyan.

The objective of the Soviet Union in its cordial relation with Afghanistan was two-fold. One was Afghanistan's continuance of her neutral stance vis-a-vis the United States and the People's Republic of China, a stance that forced those powers to use Pakistan and Nepal respectively for listening posts; the other was maintenance of trade relations with the Afghan people. This latter was of special importance to Afghanistan, particularly during the periods of hostility with Pakistan on the question of Pushtunistan.

Under Daoud Khan, Soviet contribution became even more substantial. They assisted in creating a modern Afghan army, along with Soviet equipment and technical training. In fact, in the 1960's the Soviet Union contributed to the building of Afghanistan's infrastructure in a big way. During this time a number of large industrial enterprises were completed. These included the 680

kilometer long Kushka (in present-day Uzbekistan), Herat-Qandahar highway, the 750 kilometer Kabul-Sherkhan highway, the Naghlu hydroelectric station, the Jalalabad irrigation system, and the Kabul polytechnic, just to name a few. Thus, under Daoud, Soviet influence that had been developing since the independence of Afghanistan and the establishment of Soviet power, was on the rise.

During the post-Daoud era, the Soviets added, mostly clandestinely, to their activities in forming communist cells and recruiting intellectuals, students from the technical schools, and commanders as well as the rank and file of the army.

On January 1, 1965, a nucleus of thirty youth, led by Noor Muhammad Taraki, formed the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). In 1969, Babrak Karmal, Hafizullah Amin, and two other PDPA members entered the lower house of the Afghan parliament.

While the PDPA was growing in strength, the Afghan government continued its efforts at keeping a neutral stance vis-à-vis the west and the Communist world. Maintaining neutrality, however, became difficult when the PDPA split along the Khalq (southern, tribal Pushtuns) and the Parcham (northern, urban Dari speakers). Undaunted by the split, the Soviets worked with each faction separately, assigning them different tasks. The Khalqis, for instance could reach the lower echelon of Afghan military while the Parchamis reached the highest. The same was true for the penetration of the civil sector. On the surface, it was Karmal's Parcham that drew the most attention. But when it came to actual business, it was Taraki's Khalqis who received concrete support.

On July 17, 1973, when Zahir Shah was vacationing in Europe, his cousin Daoud Khan staged a coup and, with the assistance of the PDPA overthrew him. Daoud Khan then abolished the monarchy and declared himself the President of the Republic of Afghanistan.

The roots of Afghan dissatisfaction with western influence on their culture preceded the involvement of Russians and later Soviets in Afghan affairs. We have already briefly outlined the three conflicts, two of them major bloody conflicts, between the Afghans and the British, alluded to activities of Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi (al-Afghani), and the formation of a mujahidin core under Amir Habibullah. The aim of this core was to overthrow British rule in India and create a United Muslim India and Afghanistan. But, it only succeeded in gaining Afghanistan's independence from Britain in 1919.

When the Russians, as part of the "Great Game" moved into Muslim territories in Central Asia, the Muslims of the region rose against the Russians in defense of their land, property, and traditions. Known as the Basmachi uprising, the conflict began in 1916 in Khujand (in present-day northern Tajikistan) and spread throughout Central Asia. When the Amir of Bukhara was dethroned by the Soviets and fled to Afghanistan, Afghans, too, became involved in Muslim opposition to the Soviets' institution of a socialist way of life in the region. Soviet recognition of the independence of Afghanistan impressed some of the population in the urban centers, but it never affected the deep resentment that the Afghans bore against westerners.

As long as the Soviets were involved in building roads, airports, and irrigation canals, the Afghan Muslims tolerated their presence. During Daoud Khan's rule, however, when communist cells were being formed and when the sacred tenets of Islam--the divinity of Allah, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the authority of the Qur'an--were questioned, tolerance gave way to a lack of cooperation. Once Daoud and the Soviets ignored the cold shoulder and went about emancipation and education of women, the conflict took a violent turn. Neither was this the only conflict that plagued Afghanistan. The Parcham and Khalq factions of the PDPA battled for supremacy with the Khalq faction gaining the most ground.

While the conflict between the Afghan Communists and the Muslims remains unresolved, in 1978, the Khalq and Parcham factions of the PDPA unite and bring their full force on the government and the person of President Daoud. In a bloody coup, Daoud and the members of his family are assassinated (April 27, 1978) and Noor Muhammad Taraki becomes the President. Hafizullah Amin and Babrak Karmal become his deputies.



**Noor Muhammad Taraki**

### **The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan**

As is the case with these kind of violent changes of government, the takeover is followed by mass arrests, and torture. There are also many changes the most prominent of which was the change of the flag of Afghanistan. Taraki's first diplomatic step was to sign a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union. Then he went about the task of implementing reforms not only in Kabul and the other urban centers but in the countryside as well.

Noor Muhammad Taraki was born into a Ghilzai (Pushtun) family of nomads on July 15, 1917 in the province of Ghazni. He received his early education in Ghazni followed by further education in Bombay and Kabul. For a while, he worked in a Pushtun Trading Company in Qandahar and at the Company's offices in Bombay. Using his English as a means of elevating his status, he entered journalism. By 1953, he had landed the job of Afghan press attachŽ in Washington. Before he became a politician, he was the Director of his own business, the "Nor Translation Bureau."

As mentioned above, on January 1, 1965, he founded the PDPA. He was the editor of Khalq. When the party split in 1967, he remained with the Khalq faction. The centerpiece of the Soviet-inspired reforms in the new Democratic republic of Afghanistan as it emerged from the Saur revolution was land reform. Led by the "teacher and great guide," Taraki, the reforms went well as long as the Afghans were not knowledgeable of the full impact of the reform. Once the Afghans realized that not only the inviolability of ownership of land but also the inviolability of their ownership of their wives were at stake, they took action, of the same type that they had taken against King Amanullah's ungodly reforms in 1929. In June of 1978, the Mujahidin movement, dormant since the time of Amir Habibullah, was revived.

While the Khalq continued to purge the ranks of its opposition on the grounds of policy differences, a crack appeared within the Khalq faction itself over tactical and leadership issues. The Soviets and Hafizullah Amin had repeatedly warned Taraki about his harsh treatment of the Muslim masses. He had not been responsive; rather, he had added to his maltreatment of the clergy and the tribal chiefs. The issue eventually came to a head when the Khalq faction split into the "Red Khalq" faction, supporting Taraki's policies and the "Black Khalq" faction, following Hafizullah Amin. Then, on October 9, 1979, Hafizullah Amin's "Black Khalq" faction secretly executed Taraki and purged the faction of "Red Khalq" members.



**Hafizullah Amin**

Between September 16, 1979 and December 27, 1979, Hafizullah Amin served as the President of Afghanistan. Amin was born into a Pushtun (Ghilzai) family of Paghman, near Kabul, in 1929. He received his early education in Afghanistan and advanced education in the United States. Later on, he became a teacher and, for a time, served as a school principal. He became a Marxist in 1964 and represented Paghman in the 13<sup>th</sup> session of the parliament in 1969. Between 1973, the year Zahir Shah was ousted, and the 1978 Saur Revolution, Amin campaigned intensively to strength the Khalq faction at the expense of the members of the Parcham faction. During his short presidency, he continued to strengthen his own faction within the Khalq at the expense of the ex-Taraki "Red Khalq." In this connection, he also tried to put some space between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union by approaching the United States and Pakistan for assistance. The change of policy was swift enough for Amin to be marked as a CIA agent.

During Amin's short tenure as president, the entire geopolitical situation of the region changed. Islamic fundamentalists in revolutionary Iran were bound to strike out either in the direction of Iraq or of Afghanistan. If the latter, they were likely to join up with the Mujahidin of Afghanistan and move on the Muslim-populated Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union. Since the Afghan government was powerless in dealing with internal Muslim revolt, it was not likely to be able to withstand additional Islamic insurgence from the outside. The Soviet Union, therefore, made a preventative move. It moved its forces stationed in the southern republics into Afghanistan. Then, in order to have full control of the region without interference from Afghanistan's new friends, the United States and Pakistan, Hafizullah Amin and his followers were executed (December 27, 1979).

### **The Communist Takeover and Its Aftermath**



**Babrak Karmal**

If there had been any pretence of independence for the Afghan people during the presidency of Taraki and Amin, it was taken away with the installment of Soviet puppet Babrak Karmal (December 27, 1979). The change of the name of the republic into the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), was itself disturbing. Karmal was born into a military family of Kabul in 1929. After the Saur Revolution, when the Parcham ranks were purged, he was appointed Afghanistan's ambassador to Czechoslovakia (April 1978). Soon after that, accused of anti-Khalqi activities, he was stripped of his party membership, which meant also all his positions in the Afghan government of the time. He moved to Moscow, from where, after having been rehabilitated, he was brought to Kabul and installed as President, Party secretary, and Head of the Revolutionary Council.

As president, Karmal denounced the excesses of Amin, reorganized Afghan society along the lines of the Muslim republics--even though the Afghans lacked the half-century of dealing with the soviet system--and pretended that all was going well. Neither the Afghan upper classes, which found themselves forced to serve the system, nor the Muslim masses of Afghanistan were impressed. Although phrases such as "national unity," and "respect for Islam" were used to remold the outward appearance of the republic, the content of Soviet reform had remained the same. These included the curtailment of the power of the clergy, undermining of the authority of the tribal chiefs, destruction of the Afghan family unit, and the imposition of socialist values, economic exploitation, and political enslavement. In other words, Karmal's super-cosmetic efforts at masking socialist intentions backfired and the country became irretrievably divided along Communist and Muslim lines. The larger picture for the Soviet Union was even more disturbing as not only Iran, through

Afghanistan, was a threat to its republics but, gradually, Islam was appearing as a threat to its own very existence.

Leonid Brezhnev continued the hope that the Afghan situation that, by the way, was of his own making, would be resolved successfully. By the time of his death, the situation in Afghanistan was worse than it had ever been before. Mikhail Gorbachev, who took control in 1985 could not entertain a similar hope. Rather, he realized the difficult straight that the Soviet Union was already in and the abyss that the Union was approaching economically, ideologically, and, in terms of support for an unending war. On May 15, 1988, therefore, he announced the Soviet Union's intention to remove its forces from Afghanistan. This was also a clarion call to Babrak Karmal that his tenure as President of the Republic was coming to an end. It was now pretty much academic whether the Afghans would or would not comply with Soviet dicta. It was whether the Muslim Mujahidin would allow Soviet forces to withdraw without annihilating them enroute as their forefathers had done to the British at the end of the Second Afghan War.



**Mohammad Najibullah**

In order to create the appropriate link with the Mujahidin, in May 1986, the ineffective, actually despised, Babrak Karmal was replaced by Dr. Najibullah Ahmadzai. Najibullah was born into a Pushtun merchant family of Kabul in 1947. He received his early education at the Habibia school and his advanced education at the College of Medicine of Kabul University from where he graduated in 1975. He joined the Parcham faction of the PDPA in 1965 and, subsequently, was arrested and incarcerated a number of times. Between July and October, 1978, he served as the Afghan ambassador to Tehran. Due to continuous purge of Parchamis in Kabul, he remained abroad until the formation of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan under Babrak Karmal. During Karmal's tenure, Najibullah served as the general president of the Afghan secret police (KHAD). As his career indicates, he was the best choice as a secretary general of PDPA who can at once serve as a liaison between Moscow and the Afghan Mujahidin.

Soviet departure from Afghanistan in 1989 created a power vacuum in the region with grave consequences for the Soviet Union and the world. In this vacuum, Najibullah had to rule a country divided along ethnic, linguistic, regional, tribal, and ideological lines. As a first step, he purged the Central Committee of pro-Karmal members; then, in order to keep the government from stagnating, he reorganized the government in 1989 and again in 1990. When his Defense Minister, Shahnawaz Tanai tried to stage a coup against him, he survived the Khalqi attempt. Furthermore, realizing that he did not have the type of support that his predecessors had enjoyed, he annulled the more controversial reforms.

Dissatisfied with his refusal to step down and allow the Mujahidin to install a truly Islamic government in Afghanistan, his rule was one of constant strife.

Additionally, Najibullah who had been asked by the Soviets to take control and to defend Afghanistan using the leftover Soviet armaments never received any more assistance. The situation was not any different for the Mujahidin who had similarly hoped to receive assistance from the American Central Intelligence Agency, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Both groups were disappointed; they were left pretty much on their own. The United States made sure that there would be no more resurgence of Communist rule in Afghanistan. As for Pakistan, it achieved the control of the Pushtun population stemming the tide of Pushtun solidarity (cf., the 1950's Pushtunistan problem). And Saudi Arabia established its brand of Wahhabism with the assurance that it could penetrate Central Asia and beyond.

For defeating Najibullah's Sovietized army, the Mujahidin capitalized on the good will and the Islamic zeal of the Afghan masses. They promised that they would, after Najibullah is defeated, to usher in an era of tranquility under the green banner of Islam. Calling themselves protectors of the Shari'a and restorers of Afghan rights, they attracted large numbers of young Afghani warriors to their training camps. Surplus American armaments allowed them sufficient time for practice and for regrouping against the increasingly weak forces abandoned by the Soviets under Najibullah.

Additionally, since their cause was recognized as a just cause by the Muslim world, warriors from all Muslim lands poured into Afghanistan to participate in a Jihad against the infidels. These young Muslims fanned out into the remote parts of Afghanistan and refugee camps of Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran preaching the Wahhabi gospel and recruiting anti-Soviet and anti-Western soldiers. As the war with Najibullah dragged on, the Mujahidin became more organized. Their perspective on the war, too, was affected. With the entrance of

warriors like Usama bin Laden and institution of training camps, the focus began to change. Defeating Najibullah became a minor affair compared to the daunting task of defeating the West. Gradually it turned out that not only Najibullah but the Mujahidin as well must leave the scene. The latter had to be eliminated after it eliminates Najibullah.

In 1992, the Mujahidin defeated Najibullah entered Kabul and set up an interim coalition government. Najibullah took refuge in the United Nations Mission. The affairs of Afghanistan fell into the hands of Burhaniddin Rabbani and Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, rivals who, as early as 1976, had sought the leadership of the Afghan people. Due to their subversive activities they both had been living in exile in Pakistan. Hikmatyar, it should be mentioned, had tried unsuccessfully to topple the government of Daoud Khan as early as 1976.

In Mujahidin Afghanistan Rabbani was elected president by his party called the Islamic Society of Afghanistan. Hikmatyar, the Head of the Islamic Party of Afghanistan became Prime Minister. The two leaders differed on many issues. Within a short time Hikmatyar rose against Rabbani, using the might of the southern Pushtun tribes against the Tajik President. Day in and day out he bombarded Kabul devastating all that Afghans from the days of Dust Muhammad and Nadir Shah had accumulated in terms of Afghan civilization and culture .

At the same time, the Mujahidin were implementing a program of de-Sovietization of their own that pitted brother against brother and father against son.

As part of this process, the Mujahidin systematically removed women from education, the labor force, and all social functions. They went even beyond that and entered private homes raping young women and looting property. Needless to say that the harsh treatment doled out by the Mujahidin forced more and more Afghans into Pakistan and more children into Pakistani refugee camps where, increasingly, the Wahhabi thought was becoming the dominant philosophy.

Under the Mujahidin Kabul became a virtual ghost town. People did not know where to turn. Neither were the other towns of the country faring any better. Herat, Mazar-i Sharif, and Qandahar were in the hands of regional warlords, some God-fearing and moderate, others cruel and violent. All were seeking prestige, wealth, and satisfaction for themselves and their immediate families.

By 1994, the United States, no longer worried about a resurgence of Communism in Afghanistan, gradually left the scene. Saudi Arabia, however, having created the niche it needed for the expansion of Wahhabi thought in the region, continued to funnel funds in, delivered by young Saudis like Osama bin Laden and general camp instructors. Left alone, Pakistan became worried. What could happen to Pakistan's stability, Pakistani authorities wondered, if Afghan Mujahidin decided to expand their brand of Islamic fanaticism into their domain? The situation had the potential of destabilizing not only Pakistan, but also the already shaky republics of Central Asia. Something needed to be done to curb the power of the Mujahidin.

Islamabad gave the Afghan question due thought. It was decided to send in the Taliban to displace the Mujahidin and to establish a moderate Islamic rulership in Afghanistan. The blue print for the future Afghan government had supposedly been taught in the refugee camps. At the time, the Taliban seemed to be among the best students of theology that the camps could offer. They were supposed to win the situation for both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the two main nations that supported them until shortly after September 11, 2001.

### **The Rise and Fall of the Taliban**

The Taliban, a rag-tag band from the Pushtun stronghold of Qandahar rose against the Mujahidin and, in 1994, captured the strategic city of Herat. For the next two years the Mujahidin and the Taliban fought each other for the control of the rest of Afghanistan, devastating the infrastructure of the country as well.

Eventually, in September 1996, the Taliban won the battle against the Mujahidin, entered Kabul and, as the first order of business, hanged both Najibullah and his brother in the Kabul public square. The defeated Mujahidin, led by Commander Ahmad Shah Mas'ud, moved to the Panjshir Valley in the Tajik-speaking northeast. Over time, the northern warlords formed an alliance against the predominantly Pushtun south. The coalition thus formed came to be known as the United Front or the Northern Alliance.

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See also:

[Central Asia: An Overview](#)

[Azerbaijan: An Overview](#)

[Iran: A Concise Overview](#)

[Kazakhstan: An Overview](#)

[Kyrgyzstan: An Overview](#)

[Tajikistan: An Overview](#)

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