Islam and the Afghan Regime

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In April 1978 the Peoples' Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power in Kabul; less than two years later Soviet troops entered the country in an effort to shore up a regime apparently on the verge of collapse. During the intervening months the PDPA, itself riven by bitter divisions, had proved politically inept in its pursuit of policies which alienated large sections of Afghan society.[1]

Even before the Soviet invasion an armed resistance to the revolutionary government had emerged. Moreover, this was an opposition movement which increasingly spoke in the language of militant Islam. The importance of religion to those Afghans hostile to the PDPA/Soviet regime has been discussed elsewhere,[2] so here we shall concentrate our attention on the position of Islam in the areas under government control.[3]

Demographic patterns in Afghanistan

The idea of an "Afghan people" or "Afghan society" can be used only with extreme caution. In the words of one commentator, Afghanistan is "less a country than a highway along which armies, peoples, religions and cultures have moved back and forth."[4] In the 19th century the country acted as a buffer zone which kept apart the rival British and Russian Empires.

More importantly, the peoples making up the population of Afghanistan are themselves divided along ethnic, tribal, religious and political lines. Of a population of some 15 million at the time of the Soviet invasion some forty per cent belong to the Pushtun tribes which have dominated Afghan political life for so long. These tribes are predominant in the southern regions of the country bordering on Pakistan and their fate has often proved a point of dispute between these two countries. In the north Turkic groups such as the Uzbeks, Turkmen and Kirghiz coexist with the Tadzhiks who, numbering some three million people, make up the second largest group in the country. Many of these came to Afghanistan after the 1916 Central Asian revolt, the Basmachi rebellion

CHINA
USSR
IRAN
PAKISTAN
Peshawar
Kabul
Kunduz
Herat
Kandahar
Tadzhiks
Uzbeks
Turkmen
Hazara
Pushuns

of the early 1920s or the imposition of Stalinist religious and economic policies in Soviet Central Asia from the late 1920s onwards. Finally, we should note the roughly 900,000 Hazaras of the central mountain regions of the country, who form the only ethnic group indigenous to Afghanistan.[5]

The majority of the population are Sunni Muslims but there is also a substantial Shiite minority, notably the Hazara people. Additionally, there are divisions between traditionalists and those who have been influenced by Muslim fundamentalism or Khomeinism. The influence of more radical trends in the wider Islamic world became apparent from the late 1960s onwards when reformist governments and the emergent communism of the PDPA encouraged the rise of an Islamicist movement. This was, as French scholar Olivier Roy has pointed out, not simply that of conservative reactionaries trying vainly to preserve the old ways of life, for it was dominated by young people, who went out into the countryside spreading both religious teaching and some measures of social reform. During the early 1970s, however, this movement became increasingly militant and an abortive attempt to overthrow the government in 1975 led to the imprisonment, execution or exile of its leaders. Many of those who survived were to become leading lights in the political opposition to PDPA rule.[6]

These ethnic, tribal (amongst the Pushtuns) and religious differences have not been without their effect on attempts to unify the peoples of Afghanistan. Nonetheless, when the country has been under external threat it is undoubtedly Islam that has served as a shared reference point for all Afghans seeking to expel the enemy, whether the infidel in question be British or Soviet.

The early policies of the PDPA

The policies pursued by the PDPA following its seizure of power in April 1978 appear at first sight somewhat contradictory. Initially the regime portrayed itself as operating within the traditions of Islamic reformism. In language reminiscent of Mustafa Kemal,* President Nur Mohammed Taraki claimed:

> We respect the principles of Islam . . . . . but religion must not be used by those who want to sabotage progress and to continue exploiting and suppressing the people . . . . . We want to cleanse Islam in Afghanistan of the ballast and dirt of bad traditions, superstition and erroneous belief. Thereafter we will have progressive, modern and pure Islam.[7]

Both Taraki and his chief colleague Hafizullah Amin made an effort to

*Later Kemal Ataturk, President of the Turkish Republic.

be seen participating in Friday prayers and continued to stress that the reforms they were proposing were fully in accord with Islamic teaching.

It was these reforms, however, which were rapidly alienating a largely conservative society from the regime in Kabul. Islamic suspicion of confiscatory land policies reduced peasant willingness to cooperate with land reform programmes. Though urban women were probably freer than their counterparts in most of the Muslim world when the PDPA came to power, attempts immediately to extend women's rights brought conflict in the more traditional rural areas. Moreover the case for reform was not helped by the actions of party militants who spread the Marxist gospel by mocking elders at prayer or tearing the veils of women from their faces.

In dealing with explicitly religious matters the PDPA regime proved especially heavy-handed. Symbolic of this was the October 1978 replacement of the national flag by a red flag lacking any trace of the customary Islamic green. Under Taraki many of the *madrassahs* (theological colleges) were closed down and the Sufi orders forcibly abolished — the latter policy, of course, is not exclusive to Marxist regimes, as is testified by the case of Turkey in the 1920s.

Muslim clerics thought to be hostile to the regime were arrested almost immediately after the 1978 coup. During the summer of that year the newly appointed governor of Nuristan ordered the closure of mosques and forbade the observance of Ramadan in his area, but by September had been forced to leave office by the local population.[8] In January 1979 a more concerted purge was launched against leading religious leaders in Kabul, with over two hundred arrests and the murder of many, including prominent members of the greatly respected Mojaddidi family.[9] Two months later an émigré claimed that thousands of clerics had been arrested since the previous April.[10]

This combination of poorly prepared social reforms and attacks on religion generated further resistance within the country. During March 1979 PDPA officials and some of their Soviet advisers were massacred in the town of Herat, a Shiite stronghold close to the Iranian border.

The next month a Soviet delegation led by General Yepishev (the same officer who had visited Czechoslovakia prior to August 1968) toured Afghanistan. Reporting on the low level of morale amongst Afghan troops, the delegation is said to have blamed this on the "extreme religiousness and downtrodden nature of the mass of soldiers".[11] By the autumn of 1979 it had become apparent to the Soviets that the PDPA government was by no means securely in control of the country. Whilst the military option may initially have been only one of many possibilities, when the Soviets did invade they also revealed some awareness of the need to encourage the Afghan government to lessen its alienation of the people. This inevitably meant some form of compromise with Islam. The

first speech of Babrak Karmal — the President installed by the occupying forces — promised "respect for the sacred principles of Islam".[12] Other official spokesmen contrasted the regime's deep sympathy for Afghanistan's Muslim heritage with the terroristic policies pursued by Amin. At one point Karmal himself went further still when he spoke of the Soviet invasion as the work of Allah.[13]

Almost at once practical steps were taken to soften the anti-Islamic image of the PDPA government. The return of green to the national flag was intended as a sign of the regime's goodwill. Other concessions included an amnesty which extended to many religious activists, the renovation of many mosques at government expense, the reported expenditure of 9.4 million dollars on subsidising pilgrimages to Mecca, the granting of free electricity to mosques, the broadcasting of Koranic readings on state radio, the ending of the formal requirement that religious schools had to accept female students, and the re-opening of many *madrassahs* (though not those of the Shiite Hazaras).[14]

In April 1980 the Revolutionary Council adopted the "Fundamental Principles of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan" which stated:

> Respect and defence of the holy religion of Islam are ensured in the DRA. All Muslims are guaranteed complete freedom in the performance of religious rites.[15]

Over the next few years Muslim representatives were to be included in various experiments designed to reduce the dichotomy between the government and the people. Thus in June 1981 a National Fatherland Front (NFF) was formed which by late 1984 was said to have 700,000 members. Its constituent elements included trades unions, writers' organisations and the Council of Ulema (Theologians).[16]

Babrak Karmal and the Muslim leadership

In June 1980 Karmal addressed a major conference of ulema and mullahs in Kabul. Though attacking those who "sought to use Islam to further their dubious ends," he pledged his government to "the building of a new Muslim society in Afghanistan". At this conference, which was designed to exhibit clerical support for the government, a number of mullahs publicly denounced the Soviet invasion, whilst one who supported it was booed down. Nevertheless in a resolution issued at the close of the gathering the Council of Ulema argued that to fight for Karmal's government was to help "accomplish the will of Allah" and depicted "the subversive activities of imperialist mercenaries" as being "contrary to Islamic faith".[17]

At the end of this conference delegates elected a new Council of Ulema and accepted a government proposal to form a Directorate of Islamic

Affairs.[18] Both of these appear to be firmly under the control of KhAD-66, a special committee responsible for religious affairs within the Afghan secret police, KhAD (Khidamate Alta't Dauliti). This body vets all clerical appointments, censors religious publications and places informers in all the mosques in areas under government control.[19]

Other institutions such as Islamic courts have been retained by the Karmal regime, though greatly reduced in number and with their jurisdiction limited to civil matters concerning personal status. Similarly some local *madrassahs* and the Kabul Faculty of Theology have remained open, though the number of students at the latter has fallen dramatically and its courses have undergone considerable politicisation.[20]

The PDPA government has followed Soviet practice in its attempts to use Muslim clerics in defence of regime policies. Following the Soviet invasion both the USSR and the PDPA government came under strong criticism from within the Islamic world. This was particularly apparent in September 1980 when all the major Muslim states boycotted a conference in Tashkent organised by Soviet Muslims.[21] Though the volume of international criticism of the Soviet invasion has subsided in recent years, as late as November 1985 a UN resolution calling for troop withdrawal and a political solution to the Afghan problem was supported by 122 votes to 19, with only 12 abstentions.[22]

To meet this criticism leading pro-regime clerics have made numerous visits abroad. Prominent in such activity was Abdul Aziz Sadeq, chairman of the Council of Ulema, who constantly reiterated the freedom of belief enjoyed by Afghan Muslims and rejected the view that the resistance was in any sense Islamic. Though admitting that mullahs had been arrested in the past, he said that these were mistakes that had generally been rectified after his Council had appealed to the government.[23]

The position of pro-regime clerics was far from secure and they frequently became targets for the resistance. On a visit to Moscow Sayeed Afghani (d. 1985) of the Directorate of Islamic Affairs noted:

> One single mullah in Afghanistan can do what the whole of an armed force could not succeed in doing and, as a result, the hostile forces of propaganda are directed against the advanced sector of the clergy and ministers of religion are murdered, blackmailed and threatened.[24]

Concrete evidence of this was provided by the murder, in March 1981, of Muhammed Amin Sadr, personal mullah to Babrak Karmal.[25]

For those clerics who continued to oppose the regime the penalties could be severe. A Kabul mullah who used Friday prayers to denounce the Soviet invasion and call for a *jihad* (holy war against the infidels) promptly disappeared and there were persistent rumours that many

Afghan prisoners, including mullahs, were being held in the Soviet town of Tula until such time as they gave public expression of support for Karmal.[27]

Repression was both a cause of and a response to resistance activities. By 1980 a variety of parties all claiming allegiance to Islam were emerging amongst Afghan refugees in the Pakistani town of Peshawar. Amongst these were to be found Sunni and Shiite Muslims, traditionalists and fundamentalists supported by Muslim states such as conservative Saudi Arabia and revolutionary Iran. The links between parties and resistance fighters were often tenuous. Indeed commanders such as Herat's Ismail Khan, or the near legendary Ahmad Shah Massoud of the Panjshir Valley, who had proved their worth on the battlefields of Afghanistan, seemed likely to supersede more traditional leaders. Yet all were united by the general belief that this struggle was a *jihad.*

The regime's current attitude towards Islam

Despite its efforts to play down the religious significance of the resistance movement and to bring Islam within government-controlled areas under state control, the PDPA regime has continued its attempts to co-opt religious institutions and leaders into the governing structure. Thus a traditional *Loya Jirgah* (national assembly) called in April 1985 included many clerics and in its public pronouncements stressed the government's respect for the Islamic religion.[28]

In the same month a further conciliatory gesture was made when the Directorate of Islamic Affairs was given full ministerial status. At its head was Abdul Wali Hujjat, a Tadzhik who according to guerilla sources had a somewhat chequered past. Trained as a mullah, he had been briefly imprisoned for corruption during the late 1940s. More recently he had served within the Ministry of Justice and on the post-1978 revolutionary tribunals. Bearing in mind also his reported anti-Pushtun tendencies, it is difficult to believe that the PDPA really felt this might be the man to inspire confidence in those believers wavering between resistance and acquiescence to the Kabul regime.[29]

Whatever the outcome of the armed struggle in Afghanistan[30] it is clear that Islam will remain a major social force with which any government will have to contend. This has, at least formally, been recognised by Karmal and his Soviet backers. The regime has therefore not initiated mass atheist propaganda efforts, and it has repeatedly stressed its respect for Islam. Yet simultaneously it has warned that "the utilisation of Islam for hostile acts . . . . . in the service of imperialists, colonialists and their hirelings" will not be tolerated.[31]

In practical terms the PDPA regime appears to be following Soviet policy in Central Asia during the mid-1920s, that is avoiding a full frontal

assault on religious belief but seeking to undermine its hold and to bring religious institutions under tight state control. The difference is that in the 1980s the Soviet-backed government faces a more anarchic and more uniformly hostile population and one which is not unaware of the eventual fate of Soviet Islam. Although it is difficult to see how Afghanistan can be governed without reference to Islam, the evidence of history is hardly likely to inspire confidence in the benevolent intentions of Soviet-type regimes with regard to religion.

Note. It should be emphasised that this article is based primarily on secondary sources rather than original research. My thanks go to Shirin Akiner for her comments on the first rough draft and to S. Enders Wimbush for letting me see an advance copy of the cited article by Lobato.

[1]For accounts of developments in Afghanistan see N. and R. Newell: *The Struggle of Afghanistan* (London, 1981); H. S. Bradsher: *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Durham, USA, 1985); B. S. Gupta: *Afghanistan — Politics, Economics and Society* (London, 1986).

[2]For example O. Roy, "Islam in the Afghan Resistance", in *RCL* Vol. 12 No. 1, 1984, pp. 55-68.

[3]The only other work I know of is Chantal Lobato, "Islam in Kabul. The Religious Politics of Babrak Karmal", in *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 4 No. 4, 1985.

[4]J. Fullerton: *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (London, 1984), p. 25.

[5]For more detail on ethnic composition see Bradsher, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

[6]Cf. O. Roy, "The Origins of the Islamicist Movement in Afghanistan", in *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 3 No. 2, 1984, pp. 117-27.

[7]Quoted in Bradsher, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

[8]E. Girardet: *Afghanistan — The Soviet War* (London, 1985), pp. 113-14.

[9]Newell and Newell, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-5.

[10]*Guardian*, 5 March 1979.

[11]Bradsher, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

[12]Newell and Newell, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

[13]Bradsher, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

[14]Cf. Bradsher, *op. cit.*, p. 291; *Kommunist Tadzhikstana* 21 October 1980; Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO): *Background Brief* 1981/1; *Guardian*, 23 December 1981; Girardet (1985), *op. cit.*, p. 149.

[15]Quoted in Gupta, p. 115.

[16]Bradsher, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

[17]*Loc. cit.*, p. 233.

[18]*Turkmenskaya iskra* 2 July 1980.

[19]On KhAD see Fullerton, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-30.

[20]Lobato, *op. cit.*

[21]On the Tashkent conference see *Pravda vostoka*, 3 October 1980; *International Herald Tribune*, 13-14 September 1980.

[22]FCO: *Background Brief* 1985/12 — the only "Muslim" states to support the Soviet Union were South Yemen, Libya and Syria, whilst Iraq abstained.

[23]*Literaturnaya gazeta*, 20 February 1980; *Izvestiya*, 10 January 1980.

[24]*Muslims of the Soviet East* 1982/1, pp. 15-18.

[25]FCO: *Background Brief* 1981/5.

[26]*RCL* Vol. 8 No. 4, 1980, pp. 320-21.

[27]*The Times*, 30 January 1980.

[28]FCO: Background Brief 1985/5.

[29]*Central Asian Newsletter*, October 1985, pp. 3-5.

[30]Mr Gorbachov, when addressing the 27th CPSU Congress in February 1986, made it quite clear that Soviet troops were unlikely to be withdrawn until the threat to Afghanistan's sovereignty posed by imperialist-backed counter-revolution had been rebuffed *(Pravda, 26* February 1986).

[31]Cf. *Pravda*, 11 and 15 November 1985.