

# Afghanistan's political history

## Prospects for peaceful opposition

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### ABSTRACT

#### **What does Afghanistan's political history reveal about possible pathways to a more peaceful future, such as the creation of space for non-violent political opposition?**

The lack of legitimate space for dissent has been a persistent driver of violent resistance in Afghanistan. A predominant political culture has evolved of power concentrated centrally in a single ruler who sets policy and distributes resources leaving no room for non-violent opposition.

Leaders have struggled to exert authority nationwide, however, and in practice have had to accommodate regional rivals through de facto provincial autonomy

to avoid insurrection. Tackling conflict today requires both strengthening existing governance structures and creating a political system that can incorporate insurgents peacefully. Regional devolution of power could alleviate pressure on the centre, but would still leave the core problem of how to introduce effective opposition politics.

An emerging political dynamic with potential to break this enduring deadlock may be found in Afghanistan's growing young population, who increasingly see political participation as a right rather than a privilege and are making demands for more meaningful representation.

Afghanistan's history has produced a deeply entrenched political culture that affects its future development. Its most striking feature is a longstanding court heritage of power focused on a single ruler who sets policy and distributes resources, and whose approval is sought by all those in government. Those outside government are deemed rebels intent not on changing the ruler's mind, but on replacing him with a choice of their own. Max Weber's view of such systems as patrimonial and unstable – liable to palace revolts, coups and rebellions as the only practical means of voicing dissent – accords with the experience of Afghanistan, which since 1747 has seen only two peaceful transfers of power: in 1901 when Amir Habibullah Khan inherited the throne; and in 2014 when Ashraf Ghani succeeded Hamid Karzai.

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Despite a democratic constitution approved in 2004, the idea of a loyal opposition or a division of power within the government has yet to emerge. Titles may change – Shah, Amir, President, Commissar, Commander of the Faithful. But once in power no ruler in Afghanistan has failed to act like an autocrat and since 1919 almost all have been assassinated or driven into exile. This zero-sum political game, however, has often been leavened by de facto autonomy in many of the country's regions. Although rulers might proclaim their absolute authority, in practice they have had to reach compromises with potential opponents to avoid rebellions. The international community, by focusing on the outward structures of government, has failed to resolve this problem because it has privileged process over outcomes. Afghans, by contrast, have generally been more interested in outcomes than what brought them about.

### **Monarchal mindset**

From the foundation of the Durrani Empire in 1747, out of which the modern state of Afghanistan emerged, the rulers of the state were all members of a royal dynastic line. While rival lineages often fought with one another in civil wars over succession, only those whose claims to power were monarchal were considered the legitimate rulers of the state. Even after non-royal insurgent leaders drove the British out of Afghanistan during the two Anglo-Afghan Wars (1838–42 and 1878–80), they ceded power back to the Durrani dynastic line when those wars ended. However, until the late 19th century such rulers in Kabul were

forced to grant considerable autonomy to Afghanistan's regions, which had their own indigenous elites. Nor did any government at that time have direct control over the many subsistence farmers who lived in the mountains or the migratory pastoralists who moved seasonally both across Afghanistan and beyond its borders. While such rural people accepted the suzerainty of a state based in Kabul, they had little interaction with its officials and paid taxes only under duress.

The monarchal form of government reached its high point during the late 19th century under Abdur Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901). In a series of bloody wars, he created a highly centralised national state that did away with local autonomy. Decisions were made exclusively by a small elite centred around the Amir's court. Although Abdur Rahman's successors took his highly centralised government as their model, they proved less successful in maintaining its level of control. In 1929 King Amanullah was overthrown after attempting to collect higher taxes and impose progressive social reforms. He was replaced by a more conservative rival, Nadir Shah, who himself was assassinated in 1933. For the next forty years, Afghanistan was under the rule of his son, Zahir Shah, but for three decades his uncles and cousin Daud Khan held the real levers of power.

In 1964 Zahir Shah attempted break their grip by approving a more democratic constitution that explicitly excluded members of the royal family (except himself) from participating in government. Daud Khan eventually responded by overthrowing the monarchy in 1973 and declaring himself president of a republic. What all these regimes had in common was their continuing dependence on the descendants of the elite created during Abdur Rahman's reign to staff the highest positions. While 20th century rulers periodically sought to widen participation in government, both the 1923 and 1964 constitutions preserved the paramount position of the monarch, and neither ceded real power to those who might challenge them.

Throughout this period, particularly in rural areas, ordinary people treated the absence of popular participation in government as normative. Rulers had subjects and they were them. Rural residents never questioned the legitimacy of the centuries-old monarchy even when they revolted against a particular ruler and might even succeed in ousting him. Someone had to be in charge and a monarchy had filled this structural role for 230 years by the time Daud Khan abolished it.

However, the legitimacy of the monarchy and its competence to lead a modern Afghanistan was challenged by the emergence of a new educated class in Kabul. Growing rapidly during the 1960s, but still only a tiny part



Residents of Kabul amid the destruction caused by Afghanistan's civil war, 2002. © UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

of the total population, this group was highly critical of the country's slow economic and political development. They also chafed at the limited prospects for their own advancement in a system that valued connections over competence. While many younger Afghans who have experienced decades of war now romanticise Zahir Shah's reign as a 'Golden Age', it was not seen as such at the time. After Daud's coup, no royalist demonstrators appeared in the streets of Kabul or Kandahar to demand the return of their king. Indeed, from the perspective of people in the countryside, there was little difference between being ruled by a king or a president since both were members of the same extended family.

Beneath the surface, however, the abolition of the monarchy did have broader repercussions. Observing how easily Daud Khan had disposed of the king, Afghanistan's communists, some of whom had assisted him, plotted their own successful coup in 1978 in which they murdered Daud and declared a socialist republic. Although the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was quite small and internally divided, it announced sweeping plans for radical social and economic reforms throughout the country. Seeing itself as a vanguard socialist movement, the PDPA assumed it could forcibly impose its will and policies on the countryside just as the Soviet Union had done in Central Asia during the 1920s. That threat and the secular government's seeming rejection of Islam induced many communities to take up arms against the regime in Kabul. Unlike previous rebellions that rejected only the authority of particular rulers, this insurgency viewed both the PDPA leadership and its governing ideology as illegitimate.

In less than a year, a relatively disorganised opposition put the PDPA in such peril that the Soviet Union invaded in December 1978 to oust its leaders, roll back its most radical policies, and put its own appointees in charge. This stabilised the government in Kabul but at the cost of Soviet occupation. Its counterinsurgency strategy was grounded in the belief that an ever-higher level of state violence would bring non-state actors to heel. Before the Soviet Union abandoned this policy by withdrawing the last of its troops in 1989, the war would kill a million Afghans and induce four million people to flee as refugees to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan.

### **External dependence: regime and rebellion**

The Soviet invasion was only the latest stark reminder that Afghanistan's stability, or even very existence, depended on the policies of more powerful neighbouring states. In the 19th century the British had invaded Afghanistan twice but withdrew both times, leaving its territory to serve as an autonomous buffer state under the control of a ruler that Britain chose. To secure Afghanistan's borders, the British forced Iran to abandon its claims to Herat in the west and got Russia to accept a border in the north that gave Afghanistan sovereignty over the Turkistan plain and the mountainous region of Badakhshan to its east. The British were less generous south of the Hindu Kush where they imposed the Durand Line in 1893, severing India's north-west frontier territories from Afghanistan, after previously having annexed the Khyber Pass and Peshawar.

Throughout this period the British controlled Afghanistan's foreign relations and supplied its rulers with money and arms. The ability of rulers in Kabul to exert their

government's authority countrywide was made possible by this aid and their authority relied more on coercion than consultation. When King Amanullah declared Afghanistan's full independence in 1919, the British ended their subsidies and proved less cooperative about shipping arms to his government. Lack of these financial resources and weapons destabilised Amanullah's government and helped hasten its collapse when faced with revolts in 1929. In the 1930s Afghanistan's new monarchs restored more cooperative ties with British India and began to reach out to the wider world for aid. After World War II they focused on exploiting the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union to provide the loans and grants needed to finance Afghanistan's development from the early 1950s until 1979.

Playing off rival international powers for subsidies and military aid has a long tradition in Afghanistan, and this continues into the present. It is fraught with risk because internal political factions can use similar networks to mount coups or insurgencies when regimes exclude them from government. The PDPA knew that if it could seize power then the Soviet Union would have to back it up, despite Moscow's longstanding support for the traditional governments in Kabul that dated back to 1919. Similarly, Islamist groups seeking to overthrow Daud Khan's government turned to Pakistan for support and refuge. Governments in Kabul had been hostile to Pakistan ever since it came into existence in 1947 when the British withdrew from greater India. Pakistan returned the animosity by funding Islamist factions within Afghanistan and giving them sanctuary when their revolts failed.

Still, until 1979, foreign invasions of Afghanistan and its own internal rebellions had been of rather short duration and affected only a few regions in the country. Peace had been restored after periods of turmoil by bringing back the structures of the old monarchical regimes with new leaders at the top. Because such Kabul governments had a monopoly on foreign assistance they could successfully suppress further internal dissent by those who lacked comparable resources. Opponents were forced either to reconcile with the new order or to go into exile because Afghanistan's domestic economy was too weak to finance an insurgency without external patronage. Despite complaints of government abuse and mismanagement, Afghanistan experienced a half-century of domestic stability between 1929 and 1978. This pattern was broken by the Soviet invasion. The consequences of that war are still playing out four decades later.

The Soviets might have been correct in assuming they could wipe out a domestic insurgency in Afghanistan – if, that is, it had remained purely domestic. But given its Cold War rivalry with the US, insurgents fighting the Soviet army

and the PDPA government were eventually able to draw on billions of dollars in aid provided by the US to counter it and establish safe havens in Pakistan. This flow of money and weapons was augmented by Saudi Arabia, which viewed the insurgency as a jihad and was keen to support the most conservative Sunni Islamist factions in the resistance.

Pakistan insisted on controlling the distribution of all funds and arms delivered to the Afghan resistance. It gave the bulk to its own Afghan clients, almost exclusively Islamist and predominately Pashtun parties, at the expense of other factions even when they were doing more of the fighting inside Afghanistan or had a stronger popular base. Fearful that, when the conflict ended, Afghans might prefer a return to the conservative structure of the pre-war monarchies or something similar, Pakistan worked tirelessly to marginalise the influence of Afghan nationalists and royalists. Without much forethought, the US gave Pakistan a free hand and had little direct contact with the Afghan resistance. It only wanted to see the Soviet Union suffer a defeat in Afghanistan and took little interest what might come afterward. Pakistan exploited this indifference to lay the groundwork for its own plan to turn Afghanistan into a client state after the Soviets withdrew in 1989. This proved easier for Pakistan to imagine than achieve.

### **Civil war: regional resurgence and the rise and fall of the Taliban**

As long as the PDPA continued to receive weapons and supplies from the Soviet Union, it was surprisingly resilient. Soviet-backed efforts after 1989 to create a coalition government in which the *mujahidin* factions would have an equal or superior role came to nothing, in large part because of Pakistani opposition and disbelief by the Reagan administration in Washington that such a thing was possible. When the PDPA regime finally disintegrated in April 1992, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union that ended its external support, Afghanistan fell into civil war. In the absence of a negotiated international agreement, the victorious *mujahidin* parties immediately began to fight among themselves for the prize of ruling Kabul.

Each faction attempted to bolster its strength by recruiting allies among country's regional militia commanders, mostly along regional and ethnic lines. These regional commanders were independent agents who traded their support for subsidies and arms – a process begun during the final years of the PDPA. Prone to switch sides for personal advantage, they all sought to preserve the de facto regional governance that had emerged during the Soviet war and then expanded during the civil war. To a degree not seen since their suppression by Abdur Rahman

Khan, Afghanistan's distinct regions and their cities once again became political power centres. Commanders here were not about to cede influence to a central government in Kabul that lacked its own national army and had no international patron to finance it.

The lack of big power interest in Afghanistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union opened the door to neighbouring actors seeking to achieve their own political ends. Pakistan supported its mostly Pashtun Islamist clients. Their mostly non-Pashtun opponents turned to Iran, India and even Russia for support. None of these had the resources or will to finance a whole country but they could pay enough to keep their opposing factions in the fight. Cities such as Herat in the west and Mazar-i Sharif in the north maintained relatively stable governments, while others such as Kandahar in the south fell victim to *mujahidin* factions that committed abuses that local officials were powerless to curb. Kabul, which was unscarred when the PDPA fell, soon suffered so much shelling and factional fighting within the city that the capital was left a shell of its former self.

Beginning in 1994, the clerically led Taliban movement took advantage of anarchy in the south to establish itself and, backed by Pakistan, expand into other parts of the country. In September 1996, the Taliban swept into Kabul and over the next five years came to rule over most of Afghanistan. However, the legitimacy of the Taliban government was never accepted internationally and its policies were particularly unpopular in Afghanistan's cities. The Taliban might have been capable of bringing a draconian order to the territories they occupied but proved incapable of much governance beyond that. The outside world largely ignored what happened in Afghanistan during this period, assuming that events there had no wider significance. This attitude changed dramatically in September 2001 when the Taliban's Arab Islamist allies, al-Qaeda, based in Afghanistan and led by Osama bin Laden, masterminded terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. International attention returned to Afghanistan with a vengeance. In alliance with anti-Taliban factions inside the country, the US routed the Taliban in less than ten weeks. A new chapter had opened in Afghanistan's political history.

Following the collapse of the Taliban in 2001, the international community sought to restore order to Afghanistan by rebuilding its central state structure. In one sense, they followed an old pattern: international actors anointed the new Afghan leader and financed his government. Keen not to be seen as colonial overlords, however, they sought to ratify the choice of Hamid Karzai as leader by assembling a *Loya Jirga* (a national assembly

of selected notables) to give its consent. While touted as a 'traditional' means to choose Afghan leaders, its use in this way had little precedence except for it being asked to approve the choice of Karzai unanimously without being offered any alternatives. It was also a consultation of the victors that excluded the defeated Taliban. Many of the Taliban's former leaders were keen to participate in the new government in 2002 but were left out of the process, laying the groundwork for a reborn Taliban insurgency that would grow in strength over the following years.

In 2004 a new constitution was adopted that created a parliament and, for the first time in Afghan history, made the top position of president subject to election. But rather than design a structure of government to meet Afghanistan's 21st century needs, the drafters of the 2004 constitution chose to copy almost all the elements of Zahir Shah's 1964 constitution, establishing a highly centralised administration in which the president held almost unlimited executive power. In addition, while Afghans might now elect the president, members of parliament and provincial councils, the governors and sub-provincial administrators with the greatest impact on people's daily lives all remained presidential appointees who owed no accountability to the people they governed. Given the almost kingly powers wielded by the Afghan presidency, the ever-higher levels of fraud that accompanied each succeeding election to that office has endangered its legitimacy. While the current president, Ashraf Ghani, believes that such a centralised system as Afghanistan's only path to stability, others see it as the government's greatest vulnerability.

## Conclusions

Afghanistan now sits at a critical juncture. It needs to strengthen its existing government while creating a political structure that could accommodate the peaceful participation of those who have taken up arms against it. Both could be better accomplished by devolving power regionally so that control of the national government becomes less of a zero-sum game.

However, the larger structural problem would remain of how to introduce effective opposition politics as a counterweight to the historically authoritarian instincts of whoever is the head of the Afghan government. This system has deep roots and has developed in the context where only a small elite has had exclusive control over government institutions. But political culture is not static and Afghanistan now has a young population who see participation in government as a right and not as a privilege that can be revoked at will. The past may explain how Afghanistan got to where it is now, but does not determine what it will become in the future.