Transformative politics in 20th century Afghanistan

Lessons for today
Dr Amin Tarzi

Dr Amin Tarzi is the Director of Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia, Adjunct Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern California’s Washington DC Program, and a Senior Fellow, Program on the Middle East, at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He is currently working on a book on Afghanistan’s state formation and borderisation.

ABSTRACT

What lessons for political transition in Afghanistan today can be learned from Mahmud Tarzi’s efforts to reform Afghan politics in the early 20th century – such as on engaging key domestic constituencies to establish an Afghan owned agenda for change?

Mahmud Tarzi looked to introduce progressive ideas drawn from his travels in the Middle East. But progress in realising his ambitions was hampered by a dearth of receptive constituencies in Afghanistan, such as activist civil servants, students or disgruntled military.

Support for Tarzi’s programme was restricted to a few returnee exiles, Kabul-based intelligentsia and dissenting officials, leaving him over-reliant on his proximity to the crown. Tarzi’s modernising vision combined an exclusive, Pashtun-centred nationalism with a multinational state and a progressive approach to science and technology – as well as to Islam, which placed him in direct opposition with the Afghan clergy.

A number of key factors undermined prospects for Tarzi’s agenda: 1) imported reformist ideologies that were alien to most Afghans; 2) failure to engage either influential landed tribal leaders or clergy with authority to legitimate the reform agenda; and 3) Tarzi’s royal patron lacking either the domestic power to impose changes or the foreign diplomacy to secure external support, and further failing to reconcile internal rifts between progressive and conservative camps within his court.

Notwithstanding fundamental differences between Afghanistan today and a century ago, some core blockages to modernisation have persisted – in particular the inability of the government to promote reforms among rural populations combined with the fact that transformational politics are largely seen as an external agenda. Unless these are addressed, modernisation will continue to struggle.
Political transformation in Afghanistan at the start of the 20th century, largely driven by the modernist ambitions of Mahmud Tarzi, is illustrative of opportunities and challenges facing reform initiatives today. The political dynamics of negotiating change within the rise of statism and central decision-making provide important comparisons for the political environment in contemporary Afghanistan and offer insights into prospects for negotiating change looking ahead.

**Beginnings**

The birth of the modern Afghan state under Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901) saw the central government come to exercise a near-monopoly over the use of violence. Territorial boundaries were defined and internationally recognised. The Amir, delegating his foreign policy to British India, freed himself from outside threats while receiving funds and expertise to engage in a hitherto unprecedented programme of centralisation and unification of a state system. He transformed his country through the use of incentives, intimidation, forced mass migrations and multiple internal wars of intense brutality, and his surprisingly loyal military imposed his vision of a state on his subjects.

By 1892, Abdur Rahman had pacified and brought his country under the direct rule of the centralised authority and organised an extensive bureaucracy on an unparalleled scale based on the person of the Amir. Part of his legacy remains the lack of space or structure for political debate and discussion. By design, ultimate authority rested in him and so he felt no need to establish a constitutional basis for his governance. Through conquests and Islamification, Abdur Rahman built Afghanistan as a state in which Pashtuns exercised exclusive authority and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam became the sole law of the land. This did not make for a cohesive state, however. To echo the 19th century Italian statesman Massimo d’Azeglio, while Afghanistan was made as a country, the Afghans were yet to be fashioned as a people.

Abdur Rahman’s policies and programmes did lead to a smooth and pre-planned transfer of power – a rarity in Afghanistan – to his son, Habib Allah (r. 1901–19). The new Amir had been groomed as an heir apparent and organised an extensive bureaucracy on an unparalleled scale based on the person of the Amir. Part of his legacy remains the lack of space or structure for political debate and discussion. By design, ultimate authority rested in him and so he felt no need to establish a constitutional basis for his governance. Through conquests and Islamification, Abdur Rahman built Afghanistan as a state in which Pashtuns exercised exclusive authority and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam became the sole law of the land. This did not make for a cohesive state, however. To echo the 19th century Italian statesman Massimo d’Azeglio, while Afghanistan was made as a country, the Afghans were yet to be fashioned as a people.

Abdur Rahman’s policies and programmes did lead to a smooth and pre-planned transfer of power – a rarity in Afghanistan – to his son, Habib Allah (r. 1901–19). The new Amir had been groomed as an heir apparent and had a relatively good level of education. From the beginning of his rule, Habib Allah sought to heal some of the wounds left by his father. He allowed and encouraged the return of some exiled members of his own Muhammadzai clan, including Mahmud Tarzi who had lived in Ottoman Damascus. Tarzi brought with him progressive political ideas and was able to persuade the Amir to consider certain changes, spearheading guarded and gradual policies of transformative nation-building. In 1904 the Amir set up the first public college in Afghanistan, Habibyah, employing local as well as Indian Muslim and Ottoman teachers. It was at this school that the ideas of political transformation and constitutionalism came about and were propagated.

However, the first movement to transform Afghanistan into a more representative and inclusive political system was crushed before it became operational. Either the Amir had informants within the group or there were opportunists who told the Amir that the first constitutional movement’s ultimate aims would lead to his own removal from power. Habib Allah ordered the execution of many of the constitutionalists and imprisoned others. A few, including Tarzi’s nephew, were released. Later, learning from the failures of this movement, Tarzi began his programme of transformation by forming a group known as the Young Afghans, which disseminated its ideas of independence, nationalism, progress and women’s rights through its newspaper, *Siraj al-akhbar*, published fortnightly under Tarzi’s editorship from 1911–18. However, he refrained from direct criticism of the monarchy.

While the ideology for Tarzi’s quest to reform Afghanistan was drawn from 19th century European experience, his blueprint was initially based on the Young Turks era of 1908–18. However, unlike the Ottoman situation, Afghanistan lacked viable constituencies to take his ideas forward, such as a significant core of activist civil servants and students or any type of a coalition of disenchanted military officers. Indeed, Afghanistan had no formal schools and the military was largely apolitical. The prime movers behind Tarzi’s reform movement were the returnee exiles and a very small Kabul-based group of intellectuals as well as disenchanted and ambitious senior officials and members of the Amir’s household. A key for Tarzi’s successful programmatic debut was his access to the Amir, which was solidified through the marriage of two his daughters to Habib Allah’s eldest and third sons. These sons convinced their father that the reforms were a safeguard rather than a threat to the monarchy.

Tarzi and his associates wanted to create an exclusive nationalism in Afghanistan with the Pashtuns at the centre, Pashtu as the national language and Persian (later Dari) as the official language – in order to allow access to a broader set of scientific and historical literature with cogency beyond the borders of the country. This also afforded validity to Tarzi himself who, while being a Pashtun from Kandahar, spoke primarily in Persian. In fact, the majority of the Afghan political elite going back to the foundational periods of the country in the mid-18th century used Persian as their main language and had designated it as their country’s lingua franca. By selecting Persian as Afghanistan’s official
language, Tarzi intended to allay non-Pashtuns’ fears that they would become second-class citizens.

The Afghanistan envisaged by Tarzi and his associates, while Pashtun in nature and thus separate and exclusive from Iran, was to be a multinational state with a progressive outlook on science and technology. This placed Tarzi in direct opposition with the Afghan clergy. Regarding Islam as a religion that supports human progress, Tarzi viewed his country’s religious elite with extreme suspicion and as a major impediment to the country’s progress and the emancipation of the masses from ignorance and misogyny. His policies promoted Islamic revivalism, echoing his mentor Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897). Tarzi’s lifelong quest was to modernise Afghanistan within the context of progressive and inclusive Islam – a goal which he and his associates never achieved and one that still is at the heart of the current fight for the country’s future.

**Blockages**

King Amanullah (r.1919–29) is widely known as Afghanistan’s reformist monarch. As a boy, he was Tarzi’s protégé and would in 1913 marry Tarzi’s daughter Soraya, before becoming king in 1919 after the assassination of his father. Amanullah’s transformational initiatives ultimately failed, however, and, in retrospect, there were six main reasons for this.

First, the ideologies espoused by the reformists, a number whom had returned from exile or were foreigners, represented a thought process alien to most Afghan citizens. Afghanistan entered the 20th century with no secular schools, a very small group of intellectuals centred mainly in the capital, and no newspapers. It had very limited contact with the outside world and lacked internal communication routes to connect the various parts of the country resulting in extreme xenophobia. This disconnect was never rectified despite Amanullah changing his proposed constitution – the reform process’s centerpiece of inclusivity and progressivism – twice before it was promulgated.

The final version of the constitution, which entered into force in 1925, was much more restrictive than the first draft in 1921, especially in matters dealing with the role of religion in society. This initial draft can be regarded as the most progressive non-communist fundamental law ever envisioned for the country. Attempts to implement the 1925 constitution and other regulatory proclamations without addressing these disconnects fuelled the rebellions that resulted in the ousting of Amanullah in 1929. The hesitation of successive Afghan leaders to introduce political reforms that deal with religious and social issues has been in a large measure due to the disastrous end to Amanullah’s reign. Looking at Afghanistan’s last attempt to write a constitution after the collapse of the Taliban, the expediency of having a strong presidency and disallowing any possibility of reviving the monarchy led to a constitution that was developed with little participation by the Afghan people. Article 3 of the 2004 constitution further means that the majority of freedoms enshrined in the document can be voided technically – as many have been in practice.

Second, the reformists failed to include landed tribal leaders among their ranks. These men could have persuaded their peers to accept the voluntary yielding of some of their immediate privileges to the state for the collective betterment of society and their own long-term prosperity. The absence of the tribal leadership also meant there was no voice for the concerns of that group, a group that had immense influence on public opinion throughout the country – including, critically, in rural Afghanistan – and strong connections to the clergy. In his last work, written during his second exile (1929–33), Tarzi identified the landed tribal elite as one of three reasons for the failure of his experiment.

Third, efforts at reform could not reconcile resistance from the clergy, which in Afghanistan has traditionally been used to legitimise power, be it governmental or within tribal systems. The only time that the clergy saw an active challenge to this status quo was during Abdur Rahman’s reign when the Amir tried to regulate their profession, forcing them to become state functionaries. Nevertheless, as part of his statist policies, the Amir used the clergy to further reinforce the notion that Afghanistan was the domain of Pashtuns and that the Sunni Hanafi rite was the only legitimate form of state religion. Habib Allah relaxed his father’s restrictions on the clergy’s position, leading to the strengthening of their political role in defining the nature of the Afghan state as conservative and Sunni, and with Pashtun primacy.

With Amanullah’s attempts to introduce reforms, the clergy, sensing a diminishing of their own privileges and those of their allies within the tribal leadership, became the most vehement voice against both the reforms and reformers, including the king and his father-in-law. In fact, during the uprising in eastern Afghanistan, one of the rebel demands to end their rebellion was the ousting of Mahmud Tarzi and his family from Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly, Tarzi blamed the ignorance and regressiveness of the clergy as another reason for the failure of his reforms. More recently, since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the ensuing wars, the clergy has re-emerged as a political force, with the main armed opponents of the current Afghan political arrangement identifying as students of religious seminaries.
Fourth, unlike Tarzi’s hero Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, who founded Turkey’s republic, the Afghan king had lost a monopoly over the use of violent force previously held by Abdur Rahman – and with it the ability and legitimacy needed to enforce his rules. So when he tried to introduce reforms that directly challenged privileges and prerogatives of the tribal chiefs and the clergy, he failed. Looking back, Amanullah had a relatively cohesive plan of action; he just lacked the enforcing mechanisms to safeguard his reforms from the backlash they met. Today, the military is arguably much stronger and more nationally representative than at any other time in Afghan history. The National Defence and Security Forces are fighting internal enemies whose stated goals include the reversal of social and institutional progress made since 2001. The military is not the vehicle to transform Afghanistan’s politics, however. The problem lies within the executive authority, which is divided and weak.

The main challenge for Mahmud Tarzi and his associates stemmed from the Afghan socio-economic system’s inability to absorb the reforms and the government’s inability to enforce them or withstand the backlash they caused."

Fifth, Amanullah lacked the diplomatic nuance to appreciate the geopolitical situation of his country – in particular the continuing presence of the British in India. This author’s grandfather served as Amanullah’s personal secretary during the 1927–28 voyage that took the monarch to a dozen Asian and European countries. He recounted how dismissive the king was towards any suggestions from Britain. For example, in response to a British request to relax his country’s entente with the Soviet Union, the infuriated king went out of his way to antagonise the British further.

Modern Afghan historiography generally tends to place the main blame for the failure of Afghanistan’s reforms and political transformation squarely on British polices. However, Amanullah would have given his plans a much better chance of success had he not opposed the British so vehemently. In retrospect, his military could also have benefited from British support. Mahmud Tarzi, who was not a supporter of Amanullah’s trip, did, however, share his father-in-law’s distaste of the British. For Tarzi, the combination of conservative tribal elite in a symbiotic relationship with a regressive clergy backed by British anti-Amanullah polices were the principal reasons for the failure of the transformational reforms that he and his associates had envisaged at the beginning of the 20th century.

The sixth element contributing to the failure was the interfamilial and interpersonal rivalries within his government. As king, Amanullah was unable or unwilling to put a stop to the internal rifts among his closest advisors. There were two camps. The pro-reform camp led by Tarzi looked to the nascent Turkish Republic for inspiration and support. Unfortunately for them, Turkey had very little tangible assistance to offer. The more conservative camp, led by Muhammad Nadir (later Nadir Shah) found support among the tribal leaders, the clergy and the British – Tarzi’s three prime culprits in the failure of his plans. The Nadir camp found more fertile ground on which to promote its platform and was able to squash the reform effort. In the end it was able to insert itself into power to perpetuate its conservative agenda and undermine further attempts at reform until the mid-1960s. In contemporary Afghanistan, the current elite camps, while not having direct familial relations, have links to various mujahidin groups, former communist cadres or ethnic groupings. If these are not harnessed and directed towards a common cause, they can become a major source of national discord and a magnet for foreign influencers to further their interests in Afghanistan or to use Afghanistan as a proxy battlefield.

Lessons for today
There is exactly a century between the start of the two transformational periods in Afghanistan’s modern history – Habib Allah’s ascension to amirship in 1901 and the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Both transformational periods began after the country had experienced draconian and divisive political climates. There is a clear limit to comparison between the two eras. In 1901, the country had been pacified by the central government, the transition of power was orderly and there was no direct foreign meddling. In 2001, the country was in the midst of a civil war and its transition came about by force, executed through direct and full foreign involvement. Despite temporal and circumstantial differences, however, the transformational period in early 20th century can provide valuable lessons for the current one.

The early 20th century reformers in Afghanistan achieved a number of their goals and failed in others. But in retrospect, they managed to set up the rudimentary elements of transformative politics for future generations. They succeeded in achieving Afghanistan’s full independence in 1919. They were able to introduce a national historical narrative – albeit not fully inclusive of all
segments of the country’s population. They began debating issues dealing with ethnic, religious and linguistic identities of their country’s diverse population. They helped introduce basic semi-secular education and tried to introduce rudimentary rights for women and religious minorities under the law. The list of specific transformative reforms was long and ranged from defining who was an Afghan citizen to regulating marriage age.

The main challenge for Mahmud Tarzi and his associates stemmed from the Afghan socio-economic system’s inability to absorb the reforms and the government’s inability to enforce them or withstand the backlash they caused. Unlike its neighbours, India and Iran, Afghanistan did not have a civil society or intellectual base beyond the small elite mainly centred in Kabul. For the majority of the masses who were either illiterate or semi-literate, the transformative message was either absent or incomprehensible, or was delivered via the two classes that stood to lose most from it — the tribal leaders and the clergy.

The post-2001 experience has revived some of the same social fissures that haunted the country a century ago. Despite improvements in literacy and means of information dissemination, the capacity of the rural population to absorb the transformational goals remains limited. This challenge is compounded by an array of factors that did not exist a century ago — foremost among them the notion that foreigners are the drivers of transformational politics. The early reformers were creating Afghanistan’s historical narrative. Today, there are several disconnected trends to deconstruct the very concept of the country. The fact that these trends, ranging from the status of Pashtuns in Pakistan to the universality of the label ‘Afghan’, are debated within a political climate conditioned by an ethnically based governance structure imposed by foreigners only exacerbates the situation. Deconstruction is needed but incorporating the lessons from past experiences.

Before attempts are made to take down the existing narratives, brave undertakings should be made to chart a vision for Afghanistan’s future without discarding the realities of the past or those of today, as uncomfortable as they may be. Mahmud Tarzi’s dream was to help build an independent, progressive and self-reliant Afghanistan that could be an engine in moving the Islamic world forward into the 20th century. The Afghanistan of 21st century, while endowed with selfless defenders and dynamic youth, is sadly nowhere close to the dream of its son, who now is resting on a hill in Istanbul yearning for the winds of change to come from his homeland.