Central Asia
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The Taliban Enigma
Person-Centred Politics & Extremism in Afghanistan

If the process by which we arrive at today's institutions is relevant and constrains future choices, then not only does history matter but persistent poor performance and long-run divergent patterns of (socio-political and economic) development stem from a common source.[1] The meteoric rise of the Taliban (1994-1995) as an extremist Muslim militia movement in post-Soviet Afghanistan remains an enigma to the Afghans as well as to outside observers. What is enigmatic is not so much where they come from, or what internal and external forces might be propping them up, or even the brand of Islam they are brandishing. Rather what remain puzzling are questions such as: What in the Afghan history and political culture provides space and a place for the rise of such an extremely harsh and violent militant movement at the dawn of the 21st century in this beleaguered nation? Is this an expected manifestation of recognizable historical patterns in the country? Or is it an aberration and a product of novel circumstances of post-jihad Afghanistan? If it is not a novelty, as will be argued here, then how can it be explained within the parameters of Afghanistan's social history and political culture?

Afghan Taliban soldiers pose in Kabul on their way to the frontlines north of the capital.

PHOTO: ANP, MOHAMMAD BASHIR, 28 JULY 2000

Manifestations of 'extremism' or 'radicalism', whether ideological or behavioural are by definition political and, as such, *relational*, relative, contested and highly contextual phenomena. The most common context giving rise to extremism (religious or otherwise), both historically as well as in the present time, has been the struggle for control of the powers of the institution of state (both traditional and modern). The principal objective of these often violent struggles has been over the rights to control, to re-define, and even to determine not only the basis for political legitimacy and exercise of authority, but also to proclaim what ought to constitute Muslim religious orthodoxy/orthopraxy. That is, their goal is to articulate the nature of the relationship between state and society, to define the limits of the subjects'/citizens' rights against the need to ensure security and sanctity of the state, and to justify it by the particular reading of what is held to be 'the *only* true and authentic' practice of Islam. Therefore, the rise of any form of extremism within a political community must be considered as a calculated response – a very risky response indeed – to either perceived or actual extremist policies and practices of the contestants including the state, within the larger political ecological and socio-economic realities shaping the contest.

Person-centred politics in Afghanistan

Assuming that history and cultural context profoundly condition the trajectories of future possibilities, the following aims to explore, however briefly, the implications of one crucial characteristic of Afghan political culture. This characteristic is person-centred politics within the changing contexts of state-society relations during the anti-Communist jihad as well as the post-jihad political-ecological and political-economic environment that has given rise to the Taliban movement and their particularistic form of Islamic extremism or Talibanism, in Afghanistan today. Person-centred politics, the cornerstone of kin-based mode of Pushtun tribal social and political organization, has been the defining attribute of Afghan politics since the creation of Pushtun-dominated centralized polity in the mid-18th century by a charismatic and able Abdali Pushtun chief, Ahmad Shah Durrani (r. 1747-1773). According to Eric Wolf,[2] the 'Achilles' heels' and 'the diagnostic points of stress' of kin-based politics is that a chief or leader 'draws following through judicious management of alliances and redistributive action, [but] he reaches a limit that can only be sur-

passed by breaking through the limitations of the kinship order [itself]'. To overcome the limitations of this person-centred kin-based politics, Wolf suggests that the leader 'must gain independent access to reliable and renewable resources [material, monetary, and ideological] of his own.'

Addressing this serious limitation of person-centred, kin-based political economy in Afghanistan has been possible, however brief, by two major means. During the 18th and 19th centuries, it was through the fruits of waging jihad, initially against non-Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, and then internally against the non-Pushtun communities to impose a form of internal colonialism. And during the latter parts of 19th and the 20th centuries it was through solicitation/offer of foreign subsidies, mostly from real and/or potential enemies of the nation. The effectiveness of these strategies, however, has proved to be episodic and transient.

The costs of the failure to resolve this serious problem of political economy of the state for Afghanistan have been very heavy. The primary reason for the failure has been the unwillingness or inability of the leadership to shift from a tribal political culture anchored in person-centred politics to a broader, more inclusive, participatory national politics based on the development of modern national institutions and ideologies. As a result, during its 250-year history of statehood, Afghanistan has suffered through at least 100 years of fratricidal wars of succession and/or pacification (often called jihad by the contestants) with devastating consequences and painful legacies. These bloody internal conflicts, which have facilitated (invited) foreign aggressive interventions (British, Russian and now Pakistani, Iranian and others), even when dressed with ideological justifications (Islamic or otherwise), were fought not for or against any ideological or institutional cause or causes. Instead, they were fought for or against specific individuals, families or clans out of personal, but often rapidly shifting, commoditicized loyalties (primordial and/or acquired/purchased).

The legacies of person-centred politics in Afghanistan

Modern state building efforts in Afghanistan began (in 1880) with unprecedented brutality against large segments of society, especially by violence directed against non-Durrani Pushtun and certain non-Pushtun groups. The rulers utilized the discourses of Islam, tribe/kinship and Durrani kingship to hold together a myriad of linguistic, sectarian and tribal groups in virtual subjugation within a buffer state. Resistance and popular revolts against the state were repeatedly crushed with weapons and money provided to the governments by outside colonial powers, initially Great Britain and later the former Soviet Union. These efforts, however, did not disrupt the kin-based personalized politics of what Edward Banfield termed 'amoral familism'[3] – a tendency to 'maximize material, short-run advantage of the … family [and kin], assuming that all others will do like-wise' – but strengthened them. Indeed, it can be argued that the contradictory policies and practices of state building in Afghanistan have promoted a political culture of person-centred politics to the virtual exclusion of nurturing broader and more inclusive national ideologies, institutions and moral principles. Therefore, it is contended that the rise of Taliban movement during the post-jihad crises of succession, with their form of Islamic extremism or Talibanism, is the inevitable culmination of the historical legacies of the person-centred, Pashtun-dominated, Afghan political culture. The most significant of these legacies, although by no means exhaustive of all the possibilities, include:

Firstly, consistent policies and practices of political mistrust directed against the great majority of Afghan subjects/citizens by state authorities have promoted an attitude of distrust of politics and politicians by the citizens. Such prolonged experiences, in turn have seriously weakened traditional communities of trust (*jamaᶜat*), i.e., civil society. And it has caused the general erosion of trust as a 'social capital' in Afghan society beyond the circles of family and close kinsmen or at most one's own ethnolinguistic group.

Secondly, person-centred, paternalistic politics encouraged commoditization of loyalties, the creation of a political economy of dependency and patron-client relationships at all levels of Afghan society, including the increasing dependence of governments on foreign aid. This situation has been further exacerbated because of the collapse of the state and the rise of multiple centres of power, all of them receiving assistance (economic and military) from numerous governmental and non-governmental international agencies during the more than two decades of a devastating war. This new political ecological condition of continuous warfare has also introduced a new weapon in the arsenals of person-centred political combatants. It is access to a thriving print and electronic media – inside Afghanistan, in Afghan refugee communities around the world as well as the BBC and VOA radio services in Dari and Pashto languages – utilized for a more effective vilification and demonization of the opponent's character. These pervasive attempts at mutual character assassinations have left no room for the possibility of constructive dialogue and discussion about national goals, ideas or strategies, and have led to the inevitable escalation of political contests into violent military conflicts, justified increasingly by adherence to religious extremism and Talibanism.

Thirdly, person-centred politics has placed all ideologies (Islamic and otherwise) and moral principles at the service of preserving self-interest and protection of personal, familial, tribal or ethnic group honour. This has resulted in serious discrepancies between public policy pronouncements of the contending groups and their actual practices. The Taliban claims of being inclusive of all ethnic groups and of bringing peace and security to territories under their control while committing some of the worst ethnic cleansing violence against non-Pushtuns in their conquered regions; and contrary to explicit Islamic principles, the rising production of opium poppies, and the manufacture, sales and trafficking of elicit drugs in the areas under the Taliban control may be a case in point.

Fourthly, the treatment of non-Pushtun citizens of Afghanistan as mere internal 'colonial' subjects (not citizens, at least not 'real Afghans') has produced a deep sense of alienation, resentment, and distrust. Their role in national history was depicted as marginal and their participation in national politics was purposefully undermined. That is, through a well-established policy of demographic aggression, ranging from resettlement of Pushtun in non-Pushtun territories to underestimating the actual numbers by administrative means,[7] their political representation in national assemblies were severely curtailed. At the same time, non-Pushtun groups were subjected to excessive conscription (for military service and corvée labour) extraction by taxation, appropriation, looting and other extra judicial exactions. It is because of these painful historical memories of oppression and injustice that non-Pushtun minorities in ▶