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Misunderstanding Ethnicity in the Afghan Conflict

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Afghanistan
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After the conflicts in Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Chechnya, the war in Afghanistan is being explained in terms of the supremacy of ethnicity. The solution, the UN is aspiring, seems plausible: if representatives of all ethnic groups can be brought together into one government, the 23-year war in Afghanistan will end. But such a solution bears the danger that by linking political office and ethnicity the conflict in Afghanistan will be stabilized and even intensified.

Policy-makers and the media tend to narrow the conflict in Afghanistan to the ethnic dimension. They hold that a government in which all ethnic groups are represented would reflect all facets of the Afghan population. They often make the mistake of seeing ethnic groups as uniform bodies acting in accord and equating the ethnic groups with the political movements. What is ignored in the present debate is the fact that, despite the ethnicization of the war, the ethnicization of the Afghan masses failed. Most Afghans hate all the parties to the conflict equally. Nor is the problem of ethnicity of much significance to them. Largely forgotten is that, to the Afghans, it is not the ethnic group, but rather family, clan and village which provide the major hallmarks of action and identity. Even the relevance of ethnicity as a factor of military and political cohesion remained limited in the Afghan war: countless commanders and combat units changed their allegiance several times out of political opportunism and economic incentive – independent of their ethnic affiliation.

What is an ethnic group?

The dilemma with raising ethnicity to the basis of conflict-resolution begins with the question of what constitutes an ethnic group. Despite the widely held view that ethnic groups have existed since time immemorial, most of those in Afghanistan were 'created' in the course of the 20th century. Driven by the scientific endeavour to classify people according to cultural customs, ethnologists invented an entire series of ethnic groups: Nuristani, Pashai, Aimaq, Tajik or Farsiwan. The segments of the populace for whom they were invented are often not even familiar with such labels, much less aware of any common identity. In addition there is a lack of viable criteria to determine who is Uzbek, Hazara or Pashtun. For example, those who maintain that Pashtuns speak Pashtu and are Sunni Muslims err, since there are also Shiite Pashtuns in the Qandahar region and Pashtuns from Kabul often do not speak a word of Pashtu. A good example for the aforementioned is the former king, Zahir Shah. The difficulties with differentiating are being aggravated by the fact that many Afghans – if they mas-

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ter the cultural patterns – in different situations claim to be of different ethnicity. The former Afghan president Babrak Karmal used to emphasize his Pashtun origin, whereas many Afghans considered him to be a Tajik or an immigrated Kashmiri. Ismail Khan, one of the most important commanders of the Northern Alliance, is sometimes considered to be a Tadjik, a Pashtun or a Farsiwan. He himself steadily refuses to be assigned to a certain ethnic group.

Because of differing scientific approaches, it is unclear just how many ethnic groups exist in Afghanistan and how large they actually are. A German survey concludes there are about 50,¹ while a Russian study claims there are 200.² Also it is impossible to say how many Pashtuns or Tajiks are living in Afghanistan. Thus emerges the problem of which ethnic groups are to be taken (and to what extent) into consideration in an 'ethnic solution', as promoted by the UN.

Nation building of Afghanistan

The question of why ethnic groups rose to political relevance in Afghanistan comes to mind. To answer this question one has to look back into history. The Afghan state was created by the rivaling colonial powers, England and Russia, at the end of the 19th century. The ruling family of the Pashtuns, enthroned by England, favoured Pashtun elements in their concept of the nation-state. That is why 'Afghan' is the Persian synonym for Pashtun, Pashtu was always the Afghan national language, and the Afghan history was written from a Pashtun point of view. The politics of the ruling family employed the ethnic patterns that came into existence in order to regulate access to public goods and offices. Pashtuns were privileged in all areas and dominated the military. Tajiks were left with the economic sector and the educational institutions, whereas the Hazara were marginalized. The differential treatment of people went along with the forming of ethnic stereotypes: Pashtuns were considered 'belli-cose', Tajiks were said to be 'thrifty', Uzbeks were known as 'brutal' and the Hazara as 'illiterate' and 'poor'. Despite the politics of the nation-state having created an ethnic hierarchy, there were surprisingly few ethnic con-

flicts. The main reason for this was the enormous contrast between the rural and urban areas. Politics in Kabul was of little interest to the people in rural Afghanistan. Afghans saw the nation-state as a hostile factor and not as a key to accessing resources (such as offices or land rights) which they should take control of. Accordingly they did not articulate a political will to overcome the ethnic hierarchy stipulated by the state.

Ethnicity in the war

Ethnicity became a political-military force to reckon with when the Afghan war broke out in 1979. Even though the war was dominated by the antagonism of communism vs. Islam regarding the paradigms of the Cold War, the belligerent parties increasingly enhanced the ethnic momentum to strengthen their positions. The communist rulers hoped to bring certain ethnic groups closer by raising them to the status of nationalities. Even more important was the creation of militias that relied on ethnic affiliation; well known is the Uzbek militia of Rashid Dostum. Also Pakistan and Iran used the ethnic potential for conflicts. On the grounds of Shiite loyalties, Iran established the Hizb-i wahdat, which was strong among the Shiite Hazara. During the 1980s the Jamiat-i islami, the oldest resistance movement, developed into a representation for the Tajiks. Pakistan supported the Taliban, which followed a radical Islam but was also Pashtun dominated.

But the ethnicization of the conflict was restricted with regard to one important aspect: the ethnic card was never played openly, but remained covert. Thus one can find very little proof of ethnocentrism among any of the political movements involved. The published speeches of leaders such as Ahmad Shah Massud, Burhanuddin Rabbani or Mullah Omar, are imbued with Islamic rhetoric, but all of them vehemently denied any ethnic dimension of the war. Politicians never tire of declaring their respective parties as being multi-ethnic. The underlying reason is that Afghans refrain from picking ethnicity out as a central theme. There is a wide-ranging consensus among Afghans that to bring forward arguments along ethnic lines will threaten the continued existence of the Afghan nation-state. Whoever claims rights in the name of an ethnic group is quickly considered a traitor. In addition to this, many Afghans consider the accentuation of ethnicity as un-Islamic, as it questions the *umma*, the all-inclusive Islamic community.

Prospects for the future

If an attempt is being made to implement the UN-sponsored 'ethnic solution', the explosiveness of this proposal will become evident, for it can only be achieved through a quota approach. Recently, Pakistani President Musharraf called for the Pashtuns to hold 60% of the offices in a future Afghan government. But setting quotas for government posts harbours the danger of permanently fixing the importance of ethnicity, thus setting the stage for a juggling of numbers at the filling of every official position. The lessons from Sri Lanka and Malaysia should have taught that setting ethnic quo-

tas is not a suitable formula for settling an 'ethnic' conflict, partly because it prepares the ground for the kind of patronage that is diametrically opposed to the concepts of a civil society propagated by the West.

There has been much discussion of establishing an ethnic federalism as a way of doing justice to ethnic demands. But that approach, too, would prove counterproductive, since Afghanistan is not ethnically homogeneous and the various population groups are very difficult to delineate geographically. Often enough there are villages in which a whole range of ethnic groups reside. The implementation of federalism would also harbour the danger of 'ethnic cleansing', since ideas of homogenization could easily be projected onto the territory as highlighted by the example of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Against this background the suggestion to separate Afghanistan into a northern Tajik zone and a southern Pashtun one, does not only seem naïve but highly dangerous.³

Also the raising of ethnic representation will have dire consequences. In that case ethnicity could not be neglected in the political context and would turn into the bedrock of all political action. The still minor importance that ethnicity has among the Afghan populace should be harnessed for political reconstruction, rather than being enforced by an 'ethnic solution'. Any new regime must underline that government appointments and political decisions will be guided by professional competence and not by ethnic considerations. A new Afghan constitution should likewise keep clear of ethnic factors as much as possible. It would be devastating to establish Sunni Islam as the state religion, for that would shut the Shiites out. As to language policy, Farsi – Afghanistan's lingua franca – and Pashtu should be given coequal status, while such languages as Uzbeki, Turkmeni or Baluchi could be granted the status of province languages.

In Afghanistan, the international community is once again faced with the challenge of dealing with a conflict that is interpreted as an ethnic one. The architects of a future Afghanistan would be well advised to work against the ethnic polarization of the country. Ethnicity is not the cause of the conflict, but the consequence of political and military mobilization. Hence acceding to ethnic demands will not contribute toward the resolution of conflict, but will only strengthen those who – as has happened before in the Balkans – use ethnicity as an instrument for promoting their own interests.

Notes

1. Erwin Orywal, *Die ethnischen Gruppen Afghanistans*. Wiesbaden (Beiheft zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients (TAVO) Reihe B70, 1986).
2. V. M. Masson and V. A. Romodin, *Istoriya Afganistana* 2 Bde (Moskau, 1964/65).
3. Peter Schweizer, 'Afghanistan's Partition', *USAToday*, 29 October 2001, 15(A).

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Haji Zadeer (right), newly elected governor of the Nangarhar province, with Hadi Shinvary, religious leader, at a council of elders, Jalalabad, 17 November 2001.

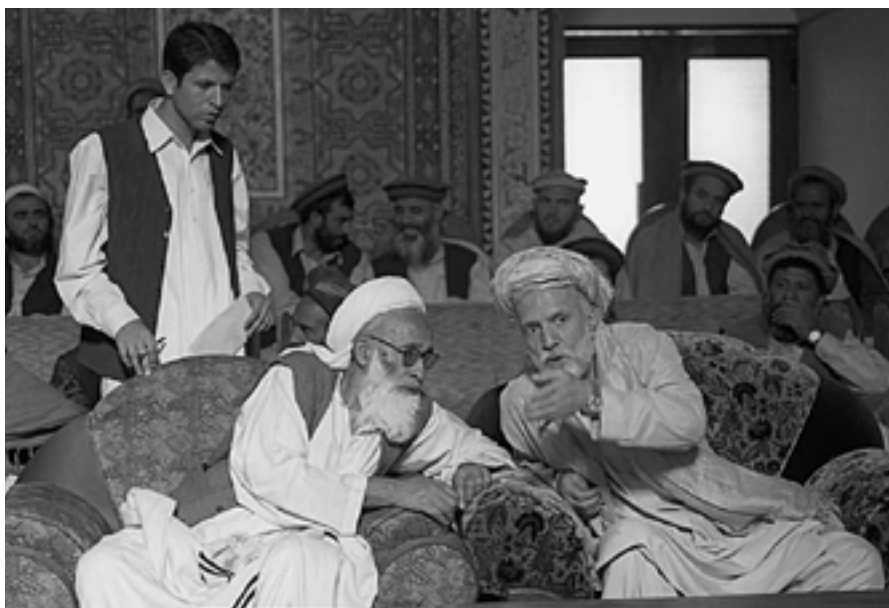


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