

However, they are more probably descendants of Arabs who were forcibly settled in or near Samarqand in the time of Timur (fourteenth century).<sup>89</sup>

The Qizilbash live in the main cities of Afghanistan, mainly in Kabul.<sup>90</sup> They are the descendants of Turkic troops stationed in Kabul in the eighteenth century by the Iranian king Nadir Shah or his successors.<sup>91</sup> Their name ('red heads') refers to the scarlet or crimson headgear with twelve panels (for the twelve imams of Shi'ite Islam), which the Türkmen supporters of the Safawids in the late fifteenth to the early eighteenth centuries used to wear. They have generally held important administrative posts in the country. Their number nowadays is estimated at some 30,000.<sup>92</sup> They speak Persian and are (Imami-) Shi'ites.

89 Adamec 1997:42.

90 Orywal 1986:59-60.

91 J. B. Fraser 1828; Noelle 1997:25-6.

92 Adamec 1997:265.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### Afghanistan in the Twentieth Century: State and Society in Conflict

Abdur Rahman's successors found it difficult to maintain the fearful degree of state supremacy that he had imposed on Afghanistan. Although every Afghan government aspired to achieve the same level of power and centralization attained by the Iron Amir, few succeeded. While twentieth-century technology provided them with better weapons, communications, and transport, none were able to similarly impose their will on the people of Afghanistan. Those Afghan leaders who would best succeed during the next century employed a "Wizard of Oz" strategy. They declared their governments all-powerful, but rarely risked testing that claim by implementing controversial policies. Conversely, the leaders who were most prone to failure and state collapse were those who assumed that they possessed the power to do as they pleased, and then provoked opposition that their regimes proved incapable of suppressing.

The periodic and often-rapid collapses of state power in Afghanistan during the twentieth century had their roots in the persistence of violence at the top of the system. Indeed, changes of power frequently appeared to be a throwback to the old, bloody tanistry system in which the right to rule demanded the elimination of all other rivals. Following Abdur Rahman's peaceful death in 1901, every succeeding Afghan head of state for the next one hundred years would either die violently at home or be driven into exile abroad. One might assume such a sanguinary record would have induced increasingly greater caution in the application of state power by every new ruler, but over time the opposite proved the case. State violence during the last quarter of the twentieth century dwarfed anything experienced during its first third but was no more successful. One reason for this was that after the fall of the monarchy in 1973, each succeeding regime



had a weaker claim to political legitimacy than had its predecessor in the eyes of ordinary Afghans. Such regimes compensated for this defect by increasingly resorting to force to maintain their authority.

After 1980, armed conflicts and social disruptions became the norm. These reached unprecedented heights because each rival faction had an international patron willing to provide it with a seemingly endless supply of weapons and money. Afghanistan became a stage for a series of proxy wars in which Afghan blood would be shed in the name of ideologies that few Afghans shared. The outcome was a level of destruction far beyond what the Afghans could have accomplished themselves, and spawned conflicts that they lacked the capacity to control or resolve on their own. The Afghan people would have the unenviable distinction of experiencing oppression at the hands of both a radical socialist regime and a reactionary Islamist one. Neither had any respect for the wishes of the Afghan people, who would fall victim to their respective ideologies. The worst evil of civil war, Hobbes's cancer of the body politic that could destroy society itself, was let loose. As a consequence, the seemingly all-powerful centralized state that held Afghanistan in its thrall in 1901 would be reduced to a powerless shell by 2001.

#### A SHORT WALK THROUGH THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

##### *The New Elite, New Goals, and Unexpected Outcomes*

Even as its neighbors began to change, Afghanistan entered the twentieth century with its face firmly fixed on the past. Abdur Rahman had taxed the economy more heavily, but the country still remained subsistence based and its people culturally insular. In terms of transport, communications, industry, or education, little distinguished the Afghanistan of 1800 from that of 1900, beyond a few government-run factories in Kabul. Politically, however, Abdur Rahman had radically transformed the country. He centralized power so thoroughly that no city or region outside of Kabul had any significant influence on national policy. He destroyed or subordinated the regional elite in the north, west, and south who had previously challenged the national government's primacy in the nineteenth century to

such an extent that one could be forgiven for thinking that they had been wiped from the map. The tribal structures of the Pashtun areas in the east remained intact, but the amir had so brutally repressed their rebellions that the Pashtuns withdrew from national politics entirely. The Islamic clerics and sufi *pirs* who had played such an independent political role at the end of the Second Anglo-Afghan War were reduced to being either arms of the state or apologists for it. The army was more professional and centralized than ever before, yet the amir never allowed a class of military leaders to develop that might challenge his power or influence his policies.

Paradoxically Abdur Rahman's high degree of centralization, imposed at a high cost, would prove detrimental to the stability of later Afghan governments. The amir had suppressed the dynastic rivalries, religious movements, and regional rebellions that plagued nineteenth-century rulers, but he left the Afghan state ill equipped to cope with the new social and economic challenges that would characterize the twentieth century. Afghan governments remained reactive rather than proactive, responding to problems when they became crises rather than averting them. This structural difficulty was compounded by an ever-widening cultural split between a rising elite in Kabul (a product of Abdur Rahman's state building) and the inhabitants of the countryside and provincial cities. The former increasingly espoused the cause of reform while the latter viewed change with suspicion. Although the urban elite were few in number, their influence was huge because they dominated government institutions. To them it seemed only natural that in the wake of Abdur Rahman's successful state building, the next goal should be Afghanistan's modernization. Compromise with opponents on this issue (except on a temporary basis) would be unnecessary since they could always be put down by the force of modern arms.

The new national political elite had a much narrower social, political, and regional base than those of nineteenth-century Afghanistan. Leaders then were politically autonomous and served as intermediaries in their people's dealings with the central government in Kabul. Such loyalties might be based on tribal ties, regional affiliations, religious networks, or descent from rival dynastic lines. Their followers were loyal to them first and Kabul second (if at all). Abdur Rahman's elite, by contrast, was created to serve him and his state, from which they derived their influence. They

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were drawn primarily from the ranks of tame Muhammadzai sardars, the descendants of Payinda Khan (the Muhammadzai founding ancestor), whose influence as a group had been declining for generations. But after the amir made them "partners of the state" (*sharik-i-dawlat*), which entitled them to receive regular government stipends and land on easy terms, they became the dominant class in Afghanistan. Not all Muhammadzais immediately qualified for this honor: the amir banished from the country all those whom he deemed too ambitious or influential, although they too returned after his death. Abdur Rahman's ruling class also included members of other groups that served the state, including urbanized Tajiks and ethnic minorities or provincials based in Kabul, many of whom began their ascent to power as lowly servants to the palace (*ghulambacha*). Unlike tribal Pashtuns, who were famously endogamous, the Muhammadzai elite periodically married their women to influential men outside their lineage, opening the way to social advancement and co-opting those who might have otherwise opposed the status quo in the absence of such ties.

Abdur Rahman's imprint would remain surprisingly strong over time, as Barnett Rubin discovered through a statistical analysis of who held prominent government positions eighty years later.

The ethnic composition of the old regime [of the 1970s] was remarkably similar to that of the court circles originally recruited by Amir Abdur Rahman. The most salient characteristic of that elite was that it included more than ten times the concentration of Muhammadzais and Kabulis than the population as a whole. Other Pashtuns were also over-represented, and the overrepresentation of Pashtuns and Muhammadzais was greater among the core power holders than it was in the elite as a whole. Tajiks (mostly Kabulis) were also quite predominant, but mainly in the legal, financial, and social ministries; Pashtuns held the core of power.<sup>1</sup>

The power base of this new elite stood in sharp contrast to the old feudal aristocracy, although it remained largely Pashtun in origin. The feudal aristocracy's economic power had rested on its landed estates in the provinces, and its political power was derived either from the troops that it could muster or its ability to mobilize its own people in support of (or opposition to) the national government. Abdur Rahman's elite drew its wealth

and political influence either from state patronage that could be withdrawn at any time or their ability to influence state policy. Unlike previous Afghan elites, these people were not masters of a national government but rather its servants. It was a rentier aristocracy that would live in a hothouse world in which everyone knew everyone else (and where everyone not related by birth appeared to be connected by marriage). Members of the Muhammadzai clan in particular would come to display a paradoxical air of aristocratic hauteur undercut by a political servility that ill befitted either Afghanistan's egalitarian ethos or its tribal emphasis on preserving personal autonomy.\* More significantly for Afghanistan's future, they were city people in a land where the vast majority of the population still lived in rural villages. Their ties to, and understanding of, this "other Afghanistan" were weak. For the next eighty years, national politics would be restricted to the city of Kabul and the state-dependent elite that held the reins of power there.

Like a similar prerevolutionary aristocracy in France, a small but influential minority of their members were supporters of radical social and political change. They assumed that they would be the leaders of any progressive movement because they were the only educated people in the country. Yet the expansion of the government and economy in the 1960s began to produce a larger class of educated people, who lacked the same access to power and wealth, and the respect for the existing structures of power. Previously, the number of such people was so small that they could be incorporated into the older aristocracy directly or at least co-opted into its patronage network with government jobs. But by the 1970s, their numbers had become too large and their social origins too diverse for this tactic to be effective. The dominating role of Kabul in Afghan political life instead had the perverse effect of creating a mirror counter-elite that Rubin labeled "rentier revolutionaries."<sup>2</sup> While these groups spoke of radical socialist change that would transform Afghanistan, their means of achieving this goal were the same as their royal predecessors': to control the state's assets and use its power themselves.

\* A non-Muhammadzai Pashtun explained this perceived alternation by quoting an old Afghan saying: "One man's master is another man's dog!"