Based almost exclusively in Kabul, this counter-elite had few ties to rural Afghanistan, even though many had provincial origins. They certainly had no political base there. Rather, they saw themselves as a socialist vanguard party that would use the state to reorganize the economy and Afghan society from the top down. Although more radical, they shared with the Muhammadzais a dependency on state institutions and state power to implement such changes. After taking control of the state structure in 1978, they assumed that they could use its power to impose their policies on the rest of the country at a rapid pace. Never was an assumption more unwarranted. The realities on the ground in Afghanistan would prove much more challenging and difficult, as this and all future governments would come to learn through hard experience. It would also raise questions long buried: What made a government legitimate, and who had the right to rule?

Three Different Afghan Eras

The history of twentieth century in Afghanistan in which these events played themselves out may seem unduly complex on first encounter, but it can be broken down into three main periods: 1901–29, 1929–78, and 1978–2001.

Amanullah's failed attempts to modernize Afghanistan after the conservative reign of his father, Amir Habibullah, frame the first period from 1901 to 1929. This era ended in a brief civil war, which drove Amanullah from power after a Tajik bandit named himself amir in Kabul and ruled for nine months, before being killed himself.

Under the rule of the Musahiban brothers and their sons, the second period from 1929 to 1978 gave Afghanistan its longest interval of peace and internal stability. This period began with the declaration of Nadir Khan as king in late 1929 by a national jirga composed primarily of Pashtun tribes that had opposed Amanullah. Although Nadir was assassinated in 1933, for the next fifty-five years his extended family would maintain an exclusive grip on power. During this time Afghanistan was politically stable, avoiding both international conflicts and any significant internal rebellion.

Under Nadir's brothers, who ruled in the name of his young son, King Zahir Shah, the Afghan state introduced few changes—and then only at a glacial pace. The tempo of reforms quickened with the arrival of a new generation, particularly under Daud Khan (Zahir Shah's cousin), who became prime minister in 1953 and ruled for the next ten years. Zahir Shah finally emerged in his own right after he dismissed Daud in 1963 and began to rule directly, thirty years after he first ascended the throne. He instituted a new constitution, which created a limited democratic government. During the 1960s, the economic and social development of Afghanistan accelerated at the fastest pace that the country had ever known as it opened itself more to the outside world, ending the severe isolation first imposed by Abdur Rahman. Both the monarchy and its experiment in democracy came to an abrupt end in 1973, when Daud ousted Zahir Shah in a coup. Since Daud was a member of the royal family, however, the Musahiban grip on power remained unchanged even though he declared himself president of a new Afghan republic.

Today, the period of Musahiban stability and peace has been showered with praise as a golden age. Like most such golden ages, it looks much better in hindsight than it did to the people of the time. In particular, a new generation of Afghans who had taken advantage of educational opportunities found themselves without much in the way of economic opportunity and excluded from political power. The bulk of these were modernists, for whom Amanullah was a model. But there was a minority of Islamists, also opposed to the government, who equally sought its downfall. Given the dynamics of Afghan history, it is not surprising that when Daud seized power in 1973, he devoted most of his attention to suppressing the Islamists. This proved a fatal error: a coup by his formerly socialist allies in 1978 resulted in his death and the end of Durrani (Sadozai and Barakzai) rule after 230 years. The Communists who replaced him were Ghilzai Pashtuns—sweet revenge perhaps for the many times that they had previously been excluded from power.

War and anarchy characterized the third and most complex period, from 1978 to 2001. In retrospect, Afghanistan's troubles over these twenty-three years can be divided into three unholy parts. The first phase began in 1978 with a bloody coup by members of the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), who murdered Daud and declared a social-

ist regime. After only twenty months, internal dissent within the regime's own ranks and a growing insurrection against its radical policies brought the government to near collapse. In an attempt to stabilize the situation the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. This initiated a ten-year occupation that pitted the Soviets and the PDPA against the Islamist-led mujahideen (holy warrior) factions that waged war against them. The mujahideen party leaders based themselves in Pakistan, but were funded by the United States and Saudi Arabia. The Soviet war would leave a million Afghans dead and create three million refugees before the Russians withdrew their troops in 1989. Against the odds, the PDPA regime under Najibullah (r. 1986–92) maintained its power in Kabul after the Russians left. Najibullah's stability, however, was fatally undermined when the Soviet Union collapsed. The PDPA dissolved itself in April 1992, and its internal factions joined with competing mujahideen parties, mostly on the basis of ethnicity or regional affiliation.

Since opposition to the PDPA was the only glue that bound rival mujahideen leaders together, the fall of the regime sparked an intense power struggle. This new phase was characterized by a bewildering and constantly shifting set of alliances and betrayals that produced a civil war no faction could win. While each faction dominated at least one region of the country, none was powerful enough to eliminate the others. Many parts of Kabul, which had remained undamaged during PDPA times, were destroyed in this fighting. Many Pashtun areas in the east and south fell into disorder. Chaos in the south led to the rise of the Taliban in 1994, a religious movement led by clerics from Qandahar that pledged to restore order in the name of Islam. Under the leadership of Mullah Omar the Taliban pursued policies every bit as radical as the PDPA, but in the opposite direction. With the support of Pakistan the Taliban expanded rapidly, opening the third and final third phase of this civil war. They seized Kabul in 1996 and by 1999 controlled all of Afghanistan, except the northeast. Despite their internal victories, the Taliban received little international recognition and took their friends where they could find them. They granted training bases to various international jihadists groups with whom they shared common values, such as Osama bin Ladin's al Qaeda. The cost of this cooperation proved fatal when al Qaeda operatives attacked New York and Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001. Before

the year was out, the United States and its coalition allies expelled the Taliban from Afghanistan, and helped establish a new government in Kabul.

Issues That Never Died

Although these periods may appear quite different, the underlying problems that divided Afghanistan in the twentieth century remained the same throughout. The most volatile was the issue of social change and its direction. Neither those who sought to transform Afghanistan nor those who resisted change were ever able to displace their opponents permanently. Thus, whether the regime was conservative or reformist, radical or reactionary, each would be brought down by the defects of its own policies. Over the course of the twentieth century, regimes with opposed ideologies replaced one another in an ever more violent manner. Each began with the confident illusion that its new policies or crafty political compromises would break the old cycle for good, only to have its world collapse when it fatally underestimated the strength of the opposition. While activist regimes tended to fall apart more quickly than traditionalist ones, neither escaped this fate. Conservatives or reactionaries might temporarily suppress the unmet demands for faster, more profound changes and a better standard of living emanating out of Kabul, but not in the long run. Yet radicals or reformists making up for lost time by quickly imposing such changes countrywide never survived the wholesale rejection of their policies by a rural Afghan majority that still organized itself along qawm lines within a subsistence-based economy.

A dictum by Karl Marx was ignored by those seeking instant change, particularly Afghanistan's radical Marxists: a society is a product of its economic base. Reformers or revolutionaries could never hope to change Afghan society without first changing its economy—a daunting and unglamorous task, which would take generations and require its stronger integration into the wider world. But conservatives seeking to freeze Afghan society in place or return it to an idealized past could take little comfort in this fact. Centuries before Marx, and in a world where Islamic and tribal values remained unchallenged, ibn Khaldun had observed that the cash economy of the city undermined group solidarity and kinship ties by em-

powering the individual. Isolated as Afghanistan seemed, even the rural countryside could not escape the penetration of a growing money economy that brought ever more city values into the villages with each passing generation and every new road or school. The new economy gave people new ideas and new wants. Conservatives, let alone reactionaries, could never permanently maintain what they saw as traditional tribal or Islamic values in a world where economic opportunity and social mobility increasingly unhinged old status hierarchies. Going to war to defend such values only increased the rapidity of social change within the communities that fought them. Still, oblivious to these realities and regardless of its ideology, each regime that took power in Kabul and lasted long enough to hold a military parade assumed it was the natural master of the country and its inhabitants, and could dictate Afghanistan's future. Of course, beyond the edge of town where government influence historically ebbed and then vanished completely in villages where donkeys were more common than cars, these trumpets of state supremacy sounded faintly, if at all.

Abdur Rahman might have been the first to diagnose the continuing problem that led to his successors' demise—Amanullah in 1929, Daud in 1978, the Communists in 1992, and the Taliban in 2001. All had come to grief after employing state power to change Afghan society without the cooperation of its people. Abdur Rahman (and earlier Afghan amirs) was oppressive when it served his interests, but never conceived of the state as an instrument of social and economic change (or indeed of using it to provide any public services). Instead, he focused on gaining and maintaining political power. The unspoken quid pro quo in this arrangement was that government would not interfere in the lives of ordinary Afghans, except in the traditional areas of taxation and security. This was the policy followed by Abdur Rahman's son Habibullah in the first decade of the twentieth century and by the Musahiban monarchs (Nadir Shah and Zahir Shah) from 1929 to 1973. The irascible amir might also have observed that attaining his own limited goals had been difficult and bloody enough; transforming Afghanistan's economy, values, and attitudes was a task better left to God. Taking on this task in God's absence were a series of ever more radical Afghan governments that approached transforming their country with unbounded expectations and a missionary zeal that rejected compromise.