

## Country Study 1:

# Afghanistan – A state in upheaval

Photo: Glatzer



*Until 1978, the Afghan state was weak but stable. In contrast, rural regulatory structures that complemented the state have always been strong. It was only the attempt to establish a strong state on the basis of foreign ideologies and military over the heads of the rural population that ultimately led to chaos and collapse. Whereas the central state sometimes broke down, many state institutions in the provinces demonstrated remarkable resilience, leading to a definite nation-state consciousness throughout large sections of the population.*

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In Afghanistan, there was always a very sharp contrast between the capital and the hinterland – as well as mutual disinterest and distrust. Nonetheless, this hinterland should not be viewed as a subordinate element of the dominant central state, for here is where it was determined who could govern successfully in Kabul and who was bound to fail.

### Attitudes towards the state before 1978

Until the events of 1978, most Afghans accepted the state's existence as a given (see also box, page 34). The rural communities were often indifferent to how political decisions were arrived at in the capital, or how rulers and office-holders were recruited or controlled. When the king was ousted in 1973 and a republic proclaimed, the response was laconic: «We have a new king: King Republic». The hinterland maintained a pragmatic distance to the state, which was regarded as a remote agency which could occasionally be useful – for example, by maintaining peace throughout the country, or affording some measure of protection from encroachments by more powerful neighbours. However, when it came to matters which they could regulate themselves, people preferred to keep the state at arm's length. For example, district officials might be called in to mediate in a local dispute only when it appeared to be slipping out of the control of the village or clan elders.

Prior to 1978, the state was able to perform its security functions very efficiently through a system based on coercion combined with symbolically effective, intermittent, low-cost military operations. The state's major failure occurred during the famine and drought of 1971/1972, when a very harsh winter followed two poor harvests, with the result that tens of thousands of people starved to death in northern and central Afghanistan. Although enough aid was available in both Kabul and Pakistan, the army proved incapable of transporting food to the famine areas. Much of the blame was laid on the inac-

tion of King Zahir Shah, and this disaster is widely regarded as the reason for the demise of the Afghan monarchy. However, within a few years of the republic being proclaimed, the hopes vested in the new republic had given way to the sober recognition that the rural communities' living conditions were not improving. Very few Afghans regretted the passing of «King Republic» in 1978.

### The revolution and the relationship to the state during the war

In spring 1978, the Marxist man of letters, Nur Mohammad Taraki, and his communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) were propelled into power following a leftist coup, and the unwritten social contract between the people and the state collapsed. Taraki was born in a nomad's tent in remote Afghanistan in 1917, but had grown up in Kandahar and tended to move mainly in left-wing intellectual circles, both in Afghanistan and abroad. He was far more at home in these surroundings than in his own rural community, and gave far more credence to Karl Marx's incidental comments about Afghanistan than anything he could have seen for himself in Afghan villages and, indeed, in his own family.

As a result, after the coup, numerous well-meaning but unrealistic revolutionary ordinances were swiftly adopted – for example, on land reform and adult literacy – which caused bewilderment and outrage among rural communities. In 1978, PDPA cadres from Kabul flocked into the villages in south-east Afghanistan, where they sought to ferry women away to attend literacy classes, whereupon a number of these eager young men were killed on the spot by the women's enraged husbands and fathers. The military was then dispatched to take punitive measures against the recalcitrant villagers, prompting some to flee to Pakistan, while others took up arms against the new rulers in Kabul.

In most other provinces, too, Kabul's regime was soon embroiled in open and

bloody warfare against its own population. It resorted to massacres and other atrocities which crucially shaped the rural population's view of the new government in Kabul. By the time foreign troops invaded Afghanistan in late 1979 in a bid to support the tottering regime against its own people, the government had lost the final vestiges of popular support.

The Afghan communists had made a basic mistake: they had sought to disrupt the political balance between the well-established rural regulatory structures and their associated norms and values, on the one hand, and the central state's claims to

power, on the other. They thus severed the age-old contract between the rural communities and the capital, thereby sealing the fate of their own regime.

The communists seemed to have assumed that there was no need to secure the public's good will, believing that they could safeguard their position through violence and foreign backing instead. As a result, the Kabul state lost all its support in the hinterland during the 1980s and, despite the high body-count which resulted from the deployment of Soviet troops, was only able to assert its position in the major cities.

Nonetheless, key segments of its institutional architecture continued to function, not only in Kabul but also in the «liberated» regions held by the mujaheddin. For example, while the city of Herat was still under the control of the Kabul communists, the rebel leader Ismael Khan established a functioning judiciary, education and health sector in the region. Around the same time, in Kunar province in the east of Afghanistan, a small state was established and party-based elections were actually held here in 1990. Even in remote regions such as eastern Nuristan and in central Afghanistan, functioning state structures developed.

In Peshawar (Pakistan), an Afghan government-in-exile was established, based on the mujaheddin parties (tanzim). These parties organized supplies for the rebels and oversaw life in the refugee camps. Pakistan and the mujaheddin's Western backers were convinced that without these parties, it would be impossible to organize the campaign against Kabul, but the tanzim nonetheless remained unpopular.

The bankruptcy of the mujaheddin parties became all too apparent in 1992 after the ousting of Najibullah, the last president of Afghanistan during the period of communist rule, when the mujaheddin in Kabul launched an all-out assault on each other instead of rebuilding the state. In the factional fighting, around 50 percent of the capital Kabul was reduced to rubble. In the provinces, however, the state was being reconstructed, albeit in an uncoordinated fashion and with mixed success. The rapid reconstruction taking place in some provinces, notably Herat, Khost, Nangarhar and Bamyan, would have been impossible if the state's institutions had not remained embedded in the public consciousness.

But despite the success of some regional rulers within their sphere of influence, they proved incapable of reconstructing the central state. And although substantial assistance was provided by the international community in order to reconstruct the country's infrastructure, this foreign intervention also proved unhelpful in terms of restoring a unified state. Indeed, the opposite was true: motivated by their own vested interests, Afghanistan's neighbours and other countries further afield continued to support their own particular favourites, both individuals and parties, at the expense of the country's unity.

Despite the prosperity in some individual provinces of Afghanistan, the country descended into political chaos, and, in terms of their flagrant contempt for human rights, the actions of some mujaheddin commanders and parties were largely indistinguishable from outright

## A sense of nation and ethnicity

In early 1970, the author fell into conversation with local people on the outskirts of a Hazara village in central Afghanistan and happened to point a nomads' camp nearby. The following dialogue ensued:

«What kind of people are they, over there?»

«**Kuchi.**» (Nomads)

«What ethnic group (Qawm) do they belong to?»

«**Afghan.**»

«But aren't you Afghans yourselves?»

«**No, we are Sayyid.**» (Descendants of the Prophet; a great many Hazara of central Afghanistan regard themselves as Sayyid.)

«But don't you belong to Afghanistan as well?»

«**Hm ...**»

«So what country do you belong to?»

«**Bamyan.**»

«Not Afghanistan?»

«**Hm ... yes, as well.**»

«And to which state (Dawlat)?»

«**Kabul.**»

«And what is Afghanistan?»

«**The Afghan's country.**» (Points to the nomads' camp)

The ensuing discussion revealed that there was considerable awareness of the state, primarily in relation to its officials, the military and the capital, but knowledge of the country of Afghanistan, its borders and its constituent demographic groups remained hazy. At this point in time, a sense of Afghan national identity had not yet emerged, at least not in the hinterland; instead, people identified themselves in terms of their descent (Sayyid), religious denomination (Shia) and region (Bamyan). Ethnicity merely played a role in distinguishing one group from another, in this instance from the Pashtun nomads. Among the Taymani in west central Afghanistan, the author observed that ethnic self-classification varied depending on the interlocutor. When speaking to government officials and itinerant ethnologists, the local people described themselves as Pashtun («Afghan») from the Kakar tribe, but when Pashtun nomads claimed grazing rights from the Taymani, the locals described themselves as Taymani or Aymaq. Even when friendly and economically symbiotic relationships had developed between the Pashtun nomads and the Taymani, ethnic distinction was considered important.

Despite frequent conflicts flaring up between the Pashtuns and the Hazara since the 19th century, Afghanistan's interethnic relations were generally marked by peaceful coexistence and pride in one's own cultural specificities, in line with verse XLIX, 14 of the Qur'an: «O mankind! Lo! We have ... made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another» (Pickthall translation).

Only during the civil war in the 1980s and 1990s, which began in the «liberated territories» even before the withdrawal of the Soviet Army (1989), did ethnicity become a weapon in the bloody power struggle waged by political actors. The abuse of ethnic identity was too transparent for large sections of the population not to notice it. It is no coincidence that a strong Afghan sense of national identity evolved during this particular period, transcending ethnic borders.



The prospects of peaceful reconstruction are good. The economy is growing, as is agricultural production.

Photo: Glantz

gang warfare. In 1994, a small group of theology students (Taliban) looted a weapons store and went on to liberate the southern city of Kandahar and the surrounding area from the plague of these perverted «holy warriors». They were welcomed with open arms by the Afghans, with thousands of militia members who had been serving in the armies of various warlords defecting with great enthusiasm to the Taliban. No one appeared to be too concerned at this point about the ideology of the Taliban and their Pakistani masters. The Taliban – who had actually only set out to liberate Kandahar – were borne along on a wave of enthusiasm which enabled them to storm into Kabul, quelling all resistance from the mujaheddin on the way. Within a year, Kabul and 95 percent of the country were in the hands of the Taliban. During the first year of the Taliban regime, almost the entire population – from small farmers to the Kabul intellectuals – were «pro-Taliban». The terrors of the civil war were so fresh in people's minds that the radical ideology upheld by these «student soldiers» was hardly a matter of concern.

But within just a few years of Taliban rule, sober reality set in for much of the population, even among the Pashto, from which the core of the Taliban movement had been recruited. It was apparent that neither the theology students themselves, nor their commanders and militias, were capable of wielding state power effectively. Soon, most of the population – even in remote regions – became mistrustful of the Taliban's almost hysterical assault on Afghan cultural traditions, and their all-pervasive encroachments into the private sphere and normal life.

The Taliban repeated the error made by the communists: they failed to restore the political and administrative balance between the capital and the villages. However, it also became increasingly

apparent to the urban and rural populations alike that considerable influence was being exerted on the Taliban by Pakistani, Arab, and – at least initially – US advisers, and that they had become alienated from their own people as a result.

### The people and the state in the post-war period: New opportunities

From surveys conducted by the author between 1995 and 2000, it is apparent that a nation-state consciousness was already well-developed among illiterate farmers, artisans, casual labourers and small traders. Although there was admiration for successful regional rulers such as Ismael Khan in Herat and Hajji Qadir in Jalalabad, respondents voiced concern about the country's unity, and criticized the warlords for being egocentric and obstructing the formation of a central government. Even the opposition's famous strategist Ahmed Shah Massoud now only enjoyed support within his home region and, outside this region, among foreigners. Many Afghans blamed him for the chaos that had prevailed in Kabul before the Taliban took control; they also claimed that he had played the ethnic card and wanted to establish a Tajik state. Most Afghans could only envisage Afghanistan's future as a nation-state with a strong administrative centre in Kabul, weak provinces, and large-scale autonomy in local affairs at village and district level.

This reinforced nation-state and status consciousness among the Afghan people appears to have evolved primarily in exile abroad. More than half the Afghan population – even people from very remote areas of the country – spent at least some of the war and the Taliban years abroad. It was here that they developed a growing

awareness of their identity as Afghans, with tribal allegiance or ethnicity being irrelevant. Exile offered these Afghans a number of positive experiences; above all, they saw for themselves how a functioning state works in practice – Pakistan, Iran or a Western democracy. These experiences and insights may have been fragmentary, but today, everyone in Afghanistan knows which basic services must be delivered by a properly functioning state, and realizes that the corruption, arbitrary rule, brutality and even inertia of previous regimes are not a matter of course, that there are alternatives, and that the public can also make demands of the state.

Among Afghans today, the nostalgic yearning for the peace and security of the pre-1978 period cannot be ignored, but everyone knows that it is no longer possible to revert to the good old days using the same methods deployed at that time – namely a minimum of state and a maximum of autonomy for rural institutions. The iniquities of the warlords, the drug-based economy, foreign interventions and the lack of checks and balances on the activities of many international aid organizations have prompted increasingly vociferous calls, even in the villages, for the central state to take a stronger role. Provided that this stronger role is based on transparency and a consensus with the representatives of the villages and valleys, the cooperation with the communities will be secure and the balance between the village and the state will be restored. Today, the reconstruction of the Afghan state has realistic prospects of success if it builds on the well-established and politically egalitarian structures in rural regions, the Afghan people's heightened understanding of the role of the state, and their yearning for peace and security in a unified state in which efficiency and justice are perceived to prevail.