

# Centralization/Decentralization in the Dynamics of Afghan History

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## Afghan misperceptions

Afghanistan has been the subject of at least three myths that have been accepted as truth and distorted the interpretation of events there.

1. Afghanistan has never been conquered even by the most powerful of empires.

In reality the territory of today's Afghanistan was conquered and successfully ruled by practically every imperial power in the region before the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a less than complete summary below indicates:

- The Persian Empire (6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BC)
- Alexander the Great and Greco-Bactrian kingdoms (4<sup>th</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BC)
- Kushans (1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries)
- Persian Sassanid Empire (3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries)
- Muslim caliphate (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries)
- Mahmud of Ghazni (10<sup>th</sup> century)
- Chinggis Khan and the Mongols (13<sup>th</sup> century)
- Tamerlane (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century)
- Mughal India & Safavid Iran (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries)

It is true that the pre-modern empires that controlled Afghanistan regularly failed to incorporate its marginal mountainous and desert areas under their direct rule. Thus the Pashtun and Nuristani inhabitants of today's mountainous border region with Pakistan, the Hazaras of in the high mountain massif of central Afghanistan, or the Tajik and Pamiri peoples of northeastern Badakhshan province could rightfully claim to have successfully resisted central governments and avoided conquest. But since such people and their economically marginal territories rarely repaid the cost of administration, premodern empires ignored them or used policies of indirect rule such as access to trade, rule through local proxy leaders, or the occasional punitive campaign to project power. The parts of Afghanistan that were conquered and successfully ruled included its cities, irrigated plains and strategic trade routes that constituted the vast bulk of the regions wealth and its only densely populated territories. It was a Swiss cheese model of governance in which the state ruled the cheese and ignored the naturally occurring holes

## 2. Afghanistan is a graveyard of empires.

No Afghanistan generalization is more popular among journalists than the “graveyard of empires” trope. It highlights the destruction of the British Expeditionary Force in the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42), the massacre of the British diplomatic staff in Kabul and the Afghan victory at the Battle of Maiwand during the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80), and the frustration of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89). Yet while each of these invasions ended in withdrawal of foreign forces, none ever proved fatal to the imperial power involved. (Even the catastrophic British defeat in Kabul in 1841 failed to inspire other Afghan cities, nor did it stop the British from returning to burn Kabul down in revenge in 1842.) In fact, in the aftermath of the First Anglo-Afghan War, Victorian Britain reached the apogee its imperial power over the whole Indian subcontinent, a rule that would last until 1947. Similarly, while the Soviet experience in Afghanistan ended in failure, its financial costs, political consequences and level of casualties were far too minor to have caused the collapse of a superpower. The demise of the Soviet system had roots that its Afghan misadventure may have revealed more clearly but did not cause.

## 3. Afghanistan is ungovernable.

Failures to stabilize Afghanistan by invading foreign armies have often been explained away by asserting that the Afghans are an ungovernable people who revel in war and anarchy. A recent example was a 2009 comment by the Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, that “We are not going to ever defeat the insurgency. Afghanistan has probably had—my reading of Afghanistan history—it’s probably had an insurgency forever, of some kind.” In fact Afghanistan experienced fifty years of peace from 1929 to 1978, and had no insurgencies before 1841. Portraying Afghanistan and the Afghans as unruly, however, has also been employed by Afghanistan’s rulers to deter foreigners contemplating invasions and as a tactic to get outside aid by promising to keep them from causing trouble. Failures of government (the continuous exercise of state authority over the population it governs) have been wrongly conflated with failures of governance (the manner in which communities regulate themselves to preserve social order and maintain their security). Where the majority of the population resides in rural Afghanistan, local communities regularly maintain adequate local governance in the absence of formal government institutions. But communities that regularly resisted state intrusion nevertheless recognized the sovereignty of the Afghan national state and only challenged its legitimacy when provoked by the imposition of too much state authority.

## **Decentralization as a tool of state governance**

The Afghan state's physical control of a specific territory has never been a valid reference point in assessing its ability to govern. Instead, the stability of the government was judged by the

ability of its leaders to balance their interests against local needs and priorities. Effective leaders leveraged their power by devolving authority to non-state mediators to resolve many diverse local and regional grievances on the government's behalf in the most remote parts of the country. This allowed Kabul to preserve order and enhance its authority even in the absence of state institutions. It was a results oriented system in which formal government institutions played a decreasingly smaller role the farther one was from the centers of state authority. Only when disputes that threatened the peace grew larger than local communities could handle, or threatened core state interests, did district or provincial government authorities see the need to intervene with state power.

This minimalist approach to government suited both Afghanistan's rural residents and Kabul appointed officials, who historically devoted themselves only to collecting taxes, conscripting soldiers and preventing banditry. Those regimes that insisted on imposing greater state authority generated rebellions in opposition to them. In one case, that of Amir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901), the national state eventually prevailed and crushed its rivals. But more recent instances of state expansion under King Amanullah (1919-29) and the PDPA (1978-92) failed and the national government collapsed. It was no accident that the "do-little" Musahiban dynasty, which fell between these two radical reforming eras, deliberately chose minimalism as its guiding policy. Despite its many weaknesses, this dynasty gave Afghanistan a half-century of peace—the longest in the country's history—and maintained a functioning state structure throughout its existence.

The conclusion that may be drawn from Afghan history is that communities in rural areas that resisted the Afghan government's attempts to interfere in their affairs never rejected the need for governance. They just believed that their own informal institutions better maintained long-term local order than any distant government could. As significantly, all communities in Afghanistan (even those most insistent on preserving their own autonomy) accepted the need for an Afghan government in Kabul that could take on higher-level responsibilities that require a state structure. These include government's role in preserving internal security, protecting the country from hostile neighbors and negotiating on the nation's behalf for benefits from the larger international community. The narrowly constructed Afghan Constitution of 2004 that vests all administrative authority in the Kabul government failed to appreciate this lesson. Its "one size fits all" approach was a recipe for failure precisely because it did not accommodate the country's historic diversity, a critical variable for any plan to implement models of governance there. Provinces and districts might look the same on a map, but some had much more significance than others. The administrative structure of the government therefore lacked the flexible tools of governance necessary to succeed in areas of low population density with subsistence economies.

## Cultural aspects of political authority

Debates about Afghan tribes and ethnic groups and tribes are numerous and contradictory. Some assert that such units are fictions that lead to wrongheaded and misleading analyses while others contend that they are the fixed bedrock units of social organization vital to understanding politics there. One problem in this debate is that the unit of analysis for tribe or ethnic group in Afghanistan, glossed as *qawm*, is context specific. *Qawm* affiliations may refer just to a person's immediate kin or home village (hundreds of people), regionally based affinity groups (thousands or tens of thousands of people), or nationally recognized tribes and ethnic groups (hundreds of thousands or millions of people). Another problem is that as the level of generalization expands the more checkered with exceptions it becomes. Smaller units that display a great deal of uniformity, solidarity and accepted self-identification, dissolve at the higher level. Groups identified simply as Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek or Hazara fall into Benedict Anderson's slot of imagined communities that take on salience only in opposition to (or cooperation with) similar such units.

If this is the case, is there any reason to do any analysis or comparison at the large group level at various times in history? One area in which it may well be useful is looking at some comparisons of baseline dynamics of economy, social organization and models of political authority. This would show that over long periods of time different groups in Afghanistan have displayed distinctly different models of political organization depending on 1) whether they are organized by descent group (tribal) or territory (non-tribal) and 2) the degree to which they accept hierarchical differences in social and political organization. When applied to Afghan political history such an analysis reveals that the success in maintaining a Durrani royal dynasty for 230 years had its roots in lessons borrowed from dynasties of Turko-Mongolian origin that ruled Afghanistan in the 700 years preceding the establishment of an Afghan state in 1747, not in the culture of egalitarian Pashtun tribal jirgas. Indeed the Pashtuns of eastern Afghanistan, who continually maintained a highly egalitarian social and political structure with no hereditary leaders, remained historically opposed to all organized state power, whether by outsiders or their own ethnic kin.

In an important article comparing the tribal cultures of the Middle East and Inner Asia, Charles Lindholm identified marked structural differences between the hierarchical Turko-Mongolian cultural tradition of Inner Asia and the egalitarian cultural tradition of tribes indigenous to the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Kinship terms among Inner Asian peoples made distinctions between elder and younger brothers, junior and senior generations, and noble and common clans. Political leadership was vested in rulers drawn only from distinct "royal clans" whose claim on political

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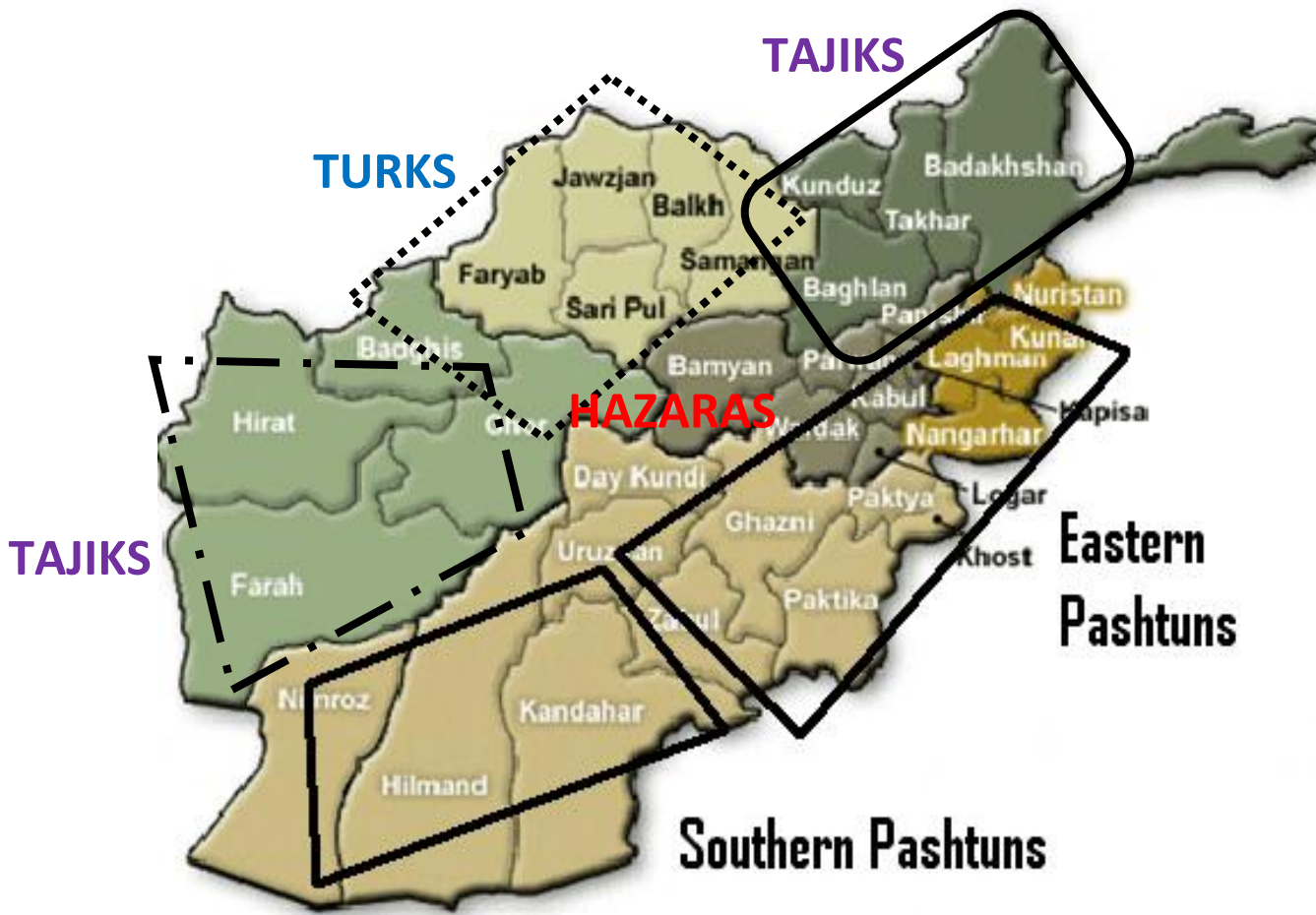
<sup>1</sup> Charles Lindholm, "Kinship Structure and Political Authority: The Middle East and Central Asia," *Journal of Comparative History and Society* 28 (1986): 334-355.

authority, once established, was so strong that a single ruling lineage might rule for many centuries. By contrast more politically egalitarian tribes in the Middle East found it difficult to unite and leaders found it practically impossible to maintain dynastic control for more than a few generations. This was because their large-scale political organizations were undercut by culturally based limitations on a leader's authority held by their own people. Tribes composed of such egalitarian lineages forced leaders to rule by means of consensus or mediation. While they could unite rival groups through use of segmentary opposition, leaders found it difficult to maintain a broad confederation for longer than a single lifetime. Arab Bedouins (and most Pashtuns) characteristically resisted subordinated cooperation at the supratribal level because they defined themselves through localized lineages that expected to remain autonomous. By contrast, in Turko-Mongolian tribal systems, where a hierarchical kinship organization was accepted as culturally legitimate, local lineages, clans and tribes became the building blocks of political-military coalitions created by hereditary leaders whose authority was rarely challenged from below. Large tribal confederacies (such as those in Iran, Central Asia and Mongolia) could not have incorporated hundreds of thousands of people without employing such a "top-down" imposition of order that had no room for independent political agents at the local level.

Beginning with the Ghaznavid rule (975 to 1173), dynasties of Turko-Mongolian origin established almost continual control over the territories of today's Afghanistan for seven centuries. Originally of central Asian nomadic origin, their horse cavalry gave them enough military superiority to conquer the areas they invaded. However, although Turko-Mongolian tribal leaders were skilled at building tribal confederations, they lacked the basic skills of sedentary administration and were initially forced to rely on the assistance of literate Persian sedentary advisers for administration. This led to emergence of a state with a dual organization in which a shah of Turkish origin maintained a Turkish military establishment (men of the sword) and a Persian speaking administrative structure (men of the pen), a structure successive rulers found maintained long after they had become well established and sophisticated.

This pattern was still the norm in 1500 when northern Afghanistan was ruled by Uzbeks based in Bukhara, western and southern Afghanistan by the Iranian Safavids in Isfahan, and Kabul and eastern Afghanistan by the Mughal dynasty from their Indian capital of Delhi. Pashtun leaders served as client governors for the Safavids and Mughals until the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century when Ahmad Shah Durrani took control of the eastern half of Nadir Shah Afshar's empire upon his death in 1747. While this marked the first time Pashtuns had ruled over Afghanistan, the Durrani followed a Safavid-lite model of administration that relied heavily on Persian speaking administrators and appointed governors who often had ties to the local population. The Durrani kings also managed to instill in themselves the aura of a "royal clan" that had a monopoly on succession to the throne, something more characteristic of the hierarchical Turks than egalitarian Pashtuns.

# DISTRIBUTION OF MAIN AFGHAN ETHNIC GROUPS



Pashtun East	Pashtun South	Turks	Tajiks
Egalitarian social structure	Hierarchical social structure	Hierarchical social structure	Egalitarian social structure
Achieved leadership brittle	Inherited leadership strong	Inherited leadership strong	Achieved leadership weak
Strong military tradition	Weak military tradition	Strong military tradition	Uneven military tradition
Resisted government control	Accepted government control	Accepted government control	Accepted government control
Subsistence agricultural economies	Irrigated agricultural economy & urban base	Pastoral subsistence economy	Urban trade & rural subsistence economy
Low population density, lack of urban centers	High population density in both rural plains and urban zones	Low population density	Urban population high density, low rural density

The Durrani succeeded in establishing themselves as a ruling dynasty in part because managed to place themselves above all other Pashtun groups. Non-royal southern Pashtun leaders accepted this state of affairs because they benefited from state subsidies, tax free land grants, and government favoritism. The eastern Pashtuns, their potential rivals for leadership, also accepted Durrani supremacy but for a very different reason: they were too egalitarian and too divided by local rivalries to be able to unite under a supreme leader of their own. However, unlike the Turkish dynasties whose unbroken lineages lasted centuries, Afghan rulers regularly faced competition for the throne from rival Durrani clans. Ahmad Shah's Popalzai/Sadozai clan was forced to cede power to Dost Muhammad's Barakzai/Muhammadzai clan in 1825 and another internal dynastic change occurred in the aftermath of the 1929 civil war when Nadir Shah's Musahiban lineage displaced King Amanullah and his heirs. Literate urban Persian speakers ("Tajiks") generally avoided competing for power directly. Instead they followed their time tested strategy of co-opting the Durrani the same way their ancestors had handled the Turks: through their mastery of government administration, finance and purveyors of the region's high culture. (The failed attempt by the Tajik rebel Habibullah Kalakani to secure the amirship in 1929 bore out the difficulties of attempting to rule directly.) The Turks in the north, while politically sidelined, had always been content to accept rule from urban centers, whether by the Uzbeks in Bukhara or the Pashtuns in Kabul.

Such broad scale political strategies played themselves out in post-1978 Afghanistan. The leaders of the Peoples Democratic Part of Afghanistan (PDPA) government were eastern Pashtuns and almost completely purged the old Durrani elite from power. However they proved unable to consolidate their authority among their own people and had a disturbing tendency to murder one another. In the war that followed the Pashtun military leaders on both the PDPA and the mujahideen sides were overwhelmingly eastern Pashtuns and few Durrani military leaders emerged on either side. The Tajiks revived their military tradition and became unified fighting forces under Ahmad Shah Masud in the east and Ismail Khan in the west. The Uzbeks under Abdul Rashid Dostum formed an effective militia but sought regional autonomy rather than national power. The Taliban leader Mullah Omar (of eastern Pashtun tribal origin) attempted to break the old model of power by declaring a clerical regime, but his Islamic amirate collapsed in the face of the American invasion of 2001. Despite its military victory, the predominantly Tajik Northern Alliance reverted to their traditional template by accepting a Sadozai Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, as leader of the country while maintaining strong influence over government institutions. The easy reestablishment of a Durrani ruler once again demonstrated the fractiousness of the eastern Pashtuns and their inability to coalesce politically. (One Ghilzai explanation of this was a curse by an 18<sup>th</sup> century Muslim *pir* who proclaimed the Ghilzais would live under Durrani control for seven generations, "Badshahi da Durrani, tura da Ghilzai," [Kingship to the Durrani but to the Ghilzai the sword].<sup>2</sup> While such large scale generalizations

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<sup>2</sup> Akbar S Ahmed. 1982. "Nomadism as ideological expression: The case of Gomal Nomads." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17(27)(Jul. 3, 1982), p. 1104.

may explain no specific political action, the structure of political relationships in Afghanistan do appear to create a bias toward one set of outcomes as opposed to others.