

## **The modernisation process in Afghanistan – a retrospective**

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**A**fghanistan has undergone numerous episodes of development and expansion within its bureaucratic and industrial sectors followed by stagnation and even regression. Of those, one of the most significant episodes was the evolution of the modern State of Afghanistan, which is generally accepted as having developed under the leadership of Amir Abdur Rehman Khan (r. 1880-1901). His process of ‘internal imperialism’ sought to expand centralised control over the whole of Afghanistan, which “necessitated breaking down the feudal and tribal system and substituting one grand community under one law and one role.”<sup>1</sup>

However, as with many other periods of development, the death of the ‘Iron Amir’ was followed by a period of stagnation under his son Habibullah Khan (r. 1901-1919) as he sought to contend with the internal strife that was a direct consequence of his father’s draconian policies; the turbulent situation in the north as Czarist Russia collapsed; and the international implications of the First World War. With reference to the latter, Habibullah’s determination to remain neutral led to his assassination. Amanullah Khan (r. 1919-1929), Habibullah’s third son, seized the throne and immediately leaped on to the well intentioned, yet hasty, road to the reform and modernisation of Afghanistan. What is significant here is the resistance that Afghan society posed, eventually halting the reform process.

Amanullah was greatly influenced by Kamalist Turkey, and the process of modernisation that it had undertaken. However, this influence can also be credited to the persuasion of his father-in-law, Mahmud Beg Tarzi. Tarzi had been expelled from Afghanistan by Amir Abdul Rahman Khan, but returned in 1902 and started Afghanistan’s first newspaper, *Seraj ul-akhbar-e-Afghanistan* (Torch of Afghan News), in 1911. During his years in exile, Tarzi was a bureaucrat in Ottoman Damascus and had direct contact with European modernism. His newspaper advocated two themes: a) Muslims must modernise or perish; and, b) colonialism and

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imperialism must go. Tarzi recognised that the Muslim world was in recession and decline due to their ignorance of modern science and institution-building, and that modernity belonged to all humanity for the taking.<sup>2</sup>

Amanullah believed that European power grew out of the West's cultural, economic, industrial, and technical development and achievements, and not only through military power. Therefore, to achieve the same goals, Afghanistan had to industrialise. However, moral and cultural factors resisted the change to a new socio-economic environment and existence. Nevertheless, Tarzi believed that the tools of modern culture were not the same as culture itself. That is, to use the tools developed in Europe does not mean that European culture must also develop in Afghanistan, leading Amanullah to conclude that Afghanistan's indigenous culture could adapt to the modernisation process. But, what does this process of modernisation incorporate?

Does modernisation only include the advances afforded by new technology, or does it also involve socio-cultural, political and economic change?<sup>3</sup> We know that Afghanistan's first attempts at modernisation were those conducted by Amir Dost Mohammad and later by Amir Abdul Rahman Khan as they centralised control through effectively detribalising and subduing regional warlords to Kabul. The latter was also able to institutionalise the army, the bureaucracy, and the royal succession. The worry in Amanullah's time was whether or not modernisation also meant the loss of control over the development of their society to external forces, especially the European nations. There is no doubt that traditional culture and social norms would change. The British industrialisation of India significantly changed social patterns and attitudes.

In the products of the handloom the magic of man's living fingers finds its expression, and it harmonises with the music of life. But the powerloom is relentlessly lifeless and accurate and monotonous in its production.<sup>4</sup>

Industrialisation, as a product, reduces the vitality of life and social customs to insignificance. Social roles, attitudes and mores change. As a result, social transformation is inevitable, whilst money and wealth become more significant in the quantification of social and interpersonal relationships. Critical reasoning pervades society and undermines the transcendental claims of religion. Greater communication and travel expand exposure and reduce traditional barriers to external influences, thereby breaking down the impact and significance of tightly controlled

cohesive community-regulatory institutions, such as the mosque. In essence, modernisation is dependant upon the theory of science and its application through technology, which includes all aspects of knowledge (physical and non-physical sciences, i.e., humanities, behavioural sciences, and social sciences); by the systematic advance and improvement of a body of knowledge and practice through experimentation in order to better comprehend nature and the world of man-made objects. The achievement of a better comprehension inevitably leads to a transformation of society in order to adjust to the greater understanding that has been achieved, and hence an improvement of some form is made to the mechanisms of society. Bertrand Russell writes:

There are direct intellectual effects: the dispelling of many traditional beliefs and the adoption of others suggested by the success of the scientific method. In the pre-scientific world, power was God's. There was not much that men could do even in the most favourable circumstances. If you wished to skip through life without disaster, you must be meek. In the scientific world, all this is different. It is not by prayer and humility that you cause things to go as you will, but by acquiring a knowledge of the scientific laws. We were told that faith could remove mountains, but no one believed it; we are now told that the atomic bomb can remove mountains and everyone believes it.<sup>5</sup>

However, in the case of Afghanistan, we know that it is a land of extremes, and so too are its people. The development of society, and the cultural variations within it has continually been stagnated by external forces vying for political and military dominance, whether for adjacent territories or for Afghanistan itself. A period of relative peace for a duration in which social mechanisms can evolve to form a bridge between the modernisation and progress of the world outside Afghanistan and the medieval society within has not been permitted to exist. Afghanistan has been, and is, a victim of external ambitions, its territorial inheritance, and strategic position in Asia. As a result, the indigenous ethnic and tribal groups share common characteristics, some more than others, with each other.

As external forces have imposed alien ideologies or traditions upon the indigenous society, and at times contrary to the socio-political culture that was extant, the consequences have often been the withdrawal of the Afghan psyche to the rigid adherence of the basic, yet core, value system within which society had previously structured its foundations.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, revolutionary changes have occurred and can be exemplified by the Islamisation of the Afghan psyche from the Hindu/Buddhist

paradigm. However, 'revolutionary', in Afghan terms, is not synonymous with the definition employed in the rest of the world. Islam took over 400 years to penetrate the social fabric of Afghan life from its first forceful encounters. Real conversion only took place through persuasion, and could never have been accomplished through forceful means.

With extremely low literacy levels throughout the country,<sup>7</sup> the main source of learning, with the exception of the few urban areas, has traditionally been from the *madrassa* (schools for religious learning), and controlled by *mullahs* (religious teachers – some of these were barely literate, and only a few actually understood the Qurán in its original Arabic script, but could pass on basic moral norms and history verbally) in the rural areas which houses the majority of Afghanistan's population. The mullahs have always had a strong and stubborn hold on the intellectual development of the vast majority of the country's population, whilst vying with any form of influence which may undermine their peculiar interpretation of moral order and their position in social and political hierarchy.

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Amanullah and Tarzi were faced with advancing society in such a way as to avoid foreign dominance and acclimatise the conservative Afghan population, especially the mullahs, to the newer realities of modernisation without a backlash. Amanullah's victory in the Third Afghan-Anglo War (1919) succeeded in bringing him the support of the religious leaders and the conservative *ulema* (religious scholars). At this time, the 'Old World Order', after WWI, was in the process of reorganisation. As the self-determination of nations was announced by Prime Minister Wilson, the spirit of pan-Islamic nationalism ensued throughout the Muslim world. Within this context, Amanullah embarked upon a programme of modernisation.

He faced an illiterate<sup>8</sup> and highly tribalised society with the powerful tool of education in the hands of the mullahs. Amanullah was proposing to increase centralised power at the expense of local tribes, chiefs, and mullahs. This would require an effective and efficient system of control, more so than the successful 'Iron Amir' had been able to institute. The

periphery's power was then considerable. Centralisation required the unification of a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious society that had hitherto only acceded control to the centre through force of arms, as during the Iron Amir's period of 'Internal Imperialism'. By the 1920s, Kabul's control was only a formality in the rural plains and mountain valleys. A situation which has replicated itself in the present day.

Amanullah's modernisation program encompassed three stages<sup>9</sup>: a) 1919-1924, modernisation of the legal and administrative framework of government; b) 1924-1928, The establishment of the Pushtun Academy and the introduction of foreign languages in schools; and, c) 1928-1929, cultural changes to the dress code of Afghans in administrative and government positions, i.e., men were required to wear Western clothes. The entire system and essence of government was targeted by Amanullah's reforms, which called into question the traditional methods and forms of patronage, personal payment, local and tribal rule. To a great extent, these had all been dictated by the nature of local power, largely based on the patron-client relationship. In reality, the entire social reality of Afghan life was up for debate and transformation.

The reforms were sensitive throughout. However, those that involved the socio-religious and cultural basis of Afghan society induced intense resistance. For example, Amanullah rashly proposed to have government regulated schools for the training of mullahs, and partially nationalise the religious land (*Waqf* – religious endowments) production and rent income. He also proceeded to alienate the status of the ulema by westernising the law courts, proposed the reform of government and administrative structures,<sup>10</sup> and a revolution in the education system.<sup>11</sup>

The most sensitive issue to face the Afghan population, with reference to the male archetype, was the emancipation of women through the reform of women's rights. Amanullah declared the abolition of forced marriages through the introduction of the freedom of choice marriages, including a minimum age for marriage, and a campaign to discourage the institution of *pardah* (the veil) was initiated. The campaign encouraged unveiling, but there was no sanction on retaining the veil. Government protection was to be provided to those women who wanted to emerge from the veil. However, the Ulema and the mullahs did not interpret this as voluntary, but as an outrageous and mandatory dictate. Not all the reforms were implemented. Many, if not most, were innovative proposals only. However, the tribal, land-based and religiously-orientated power structures had to change to accommodate these proposals if they were to

succeed. Those who could not change from the old system would lose much of their wealth, whether material or abstract (i.e., pride &/or status).

The major elements in the traditional power structure were the Pushtun tribes. In Amanullah's mind, every individual was a citizen of the state and a positive contributing element of the greater reality. Hence, the tribe was defunct. In effect, the pattern of power distribution which had existed in Afghanistan since prehistory, would have to disappear if Amanullah were to succeed in his far-reaching reforms and restructuring. An important aspect of the development and centralisation of the state is the reduction of importance in the value of kinship, since when society becomes a state, the extended family essentially ceases to exist and the tribe disintegrates as a focus of socio-political organisation.

However, it would be precisely the same tribes which would have to implement these reforms if they were to succeed. The reforms did not succeed primarily because the tribal power structures were not willing to inflict such a completely self-destructive and annihilating punishment upon themselves. In retrospect, Amanullah's reforms were ingenious, yet idealistic and fantastical, in a country that had not gone through a long period of evolutionary development (in fact, Afghanistan had been in a period of developmental stagnation since its conception), which would have resulted in the gradual reduction in the concentration of power in tribal structures, and hence, the greater effective control of centralised government institutions.

To put such a grand design into operation even in the most favourable circumstances, would have required the combined talents of a gifted innovator, a brilliant administrator and a master politician. Amanullah was amply endowed with the first requirement but deficient in the other two.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular abhorrence to the tribes was the emancipation of women and their emergence from *purdah*, greater public education for the girls and courageous initiatives for the participation of women in public life, especially government institutions. There was a flood of anti-Amanullah propaganda, especially after his grand tour abroad.<sup>13</sup> Even before Amanullah's departure for his tour, the majority of the local chiefs and leaders of the tribes, the Ulema and mullahs, the traditional rural populations, and even some of his friends had already become alienated. By November 1928, after his return, disturbances had broken out throughout the country. They came to a climax when the Sanghu Khel and Alikher Khel, of the Shinwari border tribe, attacked government outposts

near the Khyber Pass. Amanullah found no support whatsoever to counter the uprising.<sup>14</sup> As the uprising grew, Jalalabad was captured by the Pushtun rebels, and Tajik rebels threatened Kabul from the north. Seeing an advantage in the chaos of reforms and the disunity between Amanullah and his army, the Tajiks pressed on. It was their first potential chance to topple their Pushtun overlords. Amanullah abdicated on January 14, 1929, and fled to Kandahar. Bacha Saqqao, the leader of the insurgent Tajiks, assumed power.

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However, within nine months, he was deposed by the traditional Pushtun aristocracy. It is important to note here that this was the first significant challenge to the Pushtun hegemony of Afghanistan. We may also compare the situation of the Tajik, Ahmad Shah Masood, who took advantage when the Communist government fell in 1992, entered Kabul and established control of all strategic positions without the mutual consent of all other Mujahideen parties, most significantly the stronger Pushtun *Hezb-i-Islami*, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

By explaining the historical context of Afghanistan and its people, the turbulence of its evolution, its resistance to foreign interference, and any kind of reform of its ultra-conservative tribal power structures and the general social reality, we may be able to acknowledge and appreciate an understanding of the mindset of the nation in general and of the individual ethnic groups also. The fissiparous tendencies and distinct ethnic and sectarian divisions are real and all-pervasive throughout Afghanistan. The dominance and significant lack of power-sharing of the Pushtuns and the retention of that dominance regardless of the cost, has changed drastically since the U.S. invasion; yet, Pushtun disaffection to U.S. favouritism for the ethnic minorities (especially, the Tajiks) has become a major obstacle to the future development of Afghanistan.

As was evident from the nationwide uprisings in reaction to Amanullah's reforms, every advantage is taken by minority groups to secure the reins of power or gain greater political leverage if the opportunity presents itself. It is, therefore, evidently clear that once the coverage of Pushtun dominance is lifted, albeit for short periods of time,

the fissiparous tendencies, tensions, and most importantly the underlying root causes to conflict and the need for the abolition of the social disparities between the ethnic groups and acceptance of equality at all levels of social intercourse, come rushing to the fore, as exemplified by the Tajik and Uzbek seizure of power to reverse Pushtun dominance (especially, Durrani – recently under the Taliban) during the American bombing campaign of Afghanistan (2001- present).

However, the present status quo can easily be reversed once the external mechanisms of interference subside. Nevertheless, a solution that is amicable to all parties will begin to come to pass only once the Afghan society has evolved to such a state that a consensual government, which recognises the universal equality of all peoples, races, and ethnicities, arises from within the country without the stigma of external interference, yet is accepted by the internal and external power elites, albeit at the cost of their vested interests.

## Notes & References

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- <sup>1</sup> Wilber, Donald. N., *Afghanistan*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed (New Haven: 1962), p. 19.
  - <sup>2</sup> Poullada, Leon B., *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919-1929: King Amanullah's Failure to Modernise a Tribal Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 1973), p. 41.
  - <sup>3</sup> Lloyd and Susanne Hoerber Rudolph provide a definitive outline of the more significant characteristics of modernisation: a) Utility is more important than the non-rational; b) The individual rather than the group is the basic unit of society and politics; c) Local prejudices give way to larger viewpoints; d) Work is separated from family, residence and community in bureaucratic organisations; e) The groups that people live and work in are based upon choice, not birth; f) Age gives up some of its authority to youth, and men some of theirs to women; and, g) Mastery rather than fatalism determines the attitude towards the material and human environment. For further reference, see, Lloyd and Susanne Hoerber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, quoted in, Cyril Black and Louis Dupree et al, *The Modernisation of Inner Asia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe: 1991) p 18.
  - <sup>4</sup> op. cit. Note 2 (Poullada, 1973), p. 5, Quoting Raindranath Tagore.
  - <sup>5</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *The Impact of Science on Society* (NY: Columbia University Press: 1951), p. 3.
  - <sup>6</sup> Op. cit. Note 2 (Poullada, 1973), p. 4.
  - <sup>7</sup> UNESCO, *World Culture Report 2000*, table 19, p. 391.
  - <sup>8</sup> Dupree has estimated the literacy level at an astoundingly low level of 2 per cent in 1900 - Black, Cyril., and Dupree, Louis., *The Modernisation of Inner Asia* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe: 1991), p. 146.
  - <sup>9</sup> Op. cit. Note 2 (Poullada, 1973).
  - <sup>10</sup> The tax system was reorganised; the first government budget introduced; the abolition of internal customs; the implementation of a road building programme throughout his reign; the initiation of a telegraph and telephone system; the abolition



of forced labour on roads (*corvee*), and of the ancient system of *baqiyat* whereby a bureaucrat's heirs were held responsible for his debt by the State; the abolition of tribal subsidies; the introduction of commercial law; and, the introduction of an anti-corruption campaign.

<sup>11</sup> There were proposals for the introduction of a secular curricula for selected schools; adult literacy classes; two girls schools in Kabul; co-ed for the 6-11 year old students; a medical school; vocational schools; the provision of educating boys from leading families abroad; and, compulsory primary education.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit. Note 2 (Poullada, 1973), p. 144.

<sup>13</sup> Between December 1927 and July 1928, Amanullah, his wife, Queen Soraya, and a number of government officials, visited England, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Italy, Persia, Poland, Turkey, and the USSR. The aforementioned are not in chronological order.

<sup>14</sup> Shah, Sidar Ikbāl Ali., *The Tragedy of Amanullah* (London: Alexander-Ouseley Ltd: 1933).