

Taliban Rule and the Ethnic Factor in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The ethnic factor that was long been contributing to the socio-cultural mosaic of Afghanistan was interpreted in political terms since the Soviet occupation of that country. It became more expressive during the civil war among the Mujahideen (Islamic Holy Warriors) factions and their leaders after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The rise and rule of Taliban further promoted that element despite their religious Islamist orientation. The Taliban, predominantly a movement of Pashto speaking Islamists adopted antagonistic approach towards the non-Pashtun ethnic communities of particularly, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. The heightening of ethnic tensions and the alienation of ethnic minorities cost Afghanistan the ripping up of its relative peace which the Taliban first proclaimed during their emergence. The current research focuses this aspect of Taliban domestic policies and actions and highlights their religio-ethnic political discourse for consolidating and legitimizing their own power. It also analyzes the resistance of ethnic minorities against Taliban's hegemony. Such an uncertain political situation, lawlessness and violent domestic conflict had left great imprints on the future course of events in Afghanistan because it attracted a global war against terrorism to the country and the ethnic minorities exploited the new situation to its own advantage after 9/11. The question this research work tries to address is that why the Taliban being a religious driven force exacerbated the ethnic problem and what were the consequences of the 'Afghans against Afghans' policy?

Keywords: Rise, Taliban, Rule, Afghanistan, Ethnic Factor, Ethnic Minorities

Introduction

Being a land of different ethnicities and varying cultures, Afghanistan social fabric has beautiful colors and flavors. These distinct groups have their own histories, codes, languages and practices. They all lived peacefully and harmoniously through centuries but exposure of Afghanistan to modernity and its related derivatives in the second half of 20th Century has unfortunately turned the Afghans against each other because everyone was trying to expand the space for itself at the expense of others (Sultana, Summer 2006, p. 107). The Pashtuns being a major group was not ready to hamper the status quo (Rubin, 1995, pp. 90-92) while the non-Pashtuns have refused to live under the previous settings.

The major part in the Afghan imbroglio was played by the Union of Soviet Social Republics (USSR) for backing the Afghan communists and later on by occupying the country itself (Harrison, 1995). It encouraged the non-Pashtun ethnic minorities to climb the socio-political ladder and to emerge as driving force in Afghan affairs. The Pashtun being socially and religiously conservatives were seen as a major threat to the spread of communist ideology while the situation was made favorable for the non-Pashtun ethnic minorities to occupy special position in the administration (Isby, 2010). The communist ideology was though facing a failure on ground to gain a foothold in the Afghan society but it quite successfully divided the population along ethnic lines and brought them face to face against each other.

As long as the Soviets were occupying Afghanistan, the ethnic conflict spread with a negligible momentum but when the Soviet troops evacuated Afghanistan, the ethnic element became a dominant factor. The neighbors of Afghanistan which were betting on their own horses during the Afghan *Jihad* (Islamic Holy War) became more entrenched in the Afghan conflict. They helped fanning the Afghan civil war or the war of all Afghans against all. The country was subjected to insecurities and nobody was sparing anybody. Afghanistan became the largest prison for peace loving Afghans (Kux, Spring & Fall 1996, p. 7). This all-out civil war was though fought inside Afghanistan but its strings were in the hands of foreign players who were wishing to see their own lackeys on major positions and portfolios.

Besides, Afghanistan experienced the ever biggest human crisis. Peace became a distant dream. The Afghans who were subjected to migration during the Soviet period once again were compelled to leave *enmasse* their homeland for the neighboring states. Those who left behind waited for peaceful times to arrive again. Many vices crippled in Afghan society such as unjustified murders, unnecessary showoff, display of weapons, drug addictions, sodomy, abduction and extortion for

money. The previous *Mujahideen* leaders issued religious verdict of infidelity against each other while nobody trusted their fellow Afghans (Marwat, 2012).

In such a chronic and crucial situation, a messiah was awaited to address the problems of Afghans. The vacuum needed to be filled by the new force that could tackle the atrocities of *Mujahideen* commanders and could restore peace and harmony in the country. Surprisingly, the Taliban as that new force made a debut without any former recognition because till that time a *talib* of Arabic tradition was considered to be student of a religious *madrassah* (seminary). But this new Taliban Movement was a different connotation with a political flavor and for which does not necessarily need religious knowledge or uprightness but only religious posture and outlook (Nojumi, 2002).

Literature Review

Thomas Barfield's *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* is a comprehensive account of the Afghan history with Afghans as the major players themselves instead of focusing on the foreign invaders and invasions. It maintains a balance between the cultural and political aspects of Afghan history instead of making the later as the only frame of reference which as an easy task had been covered by all hitherto scholars of Afghanistan studies (Barfield, 2023). The book though talks about country's heterogeneous ethnic makeup but pays little attention to the ethnic factor itself particularly with reference to Taliban. Beside a brief discussion over Taliban's Pashtun identity which helped in the foundation of their government and policies, the book, provide for a little space of the ethnic factor during the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Recovering the Frontier State: War, Ethnicity and State in Afghanistan is another important work by Rasul Bakhsh Rais that deals with the possibilities of recovering the frontier state of Afghanistan after the ethnic entangles and external intrusions in the Afghan affairs. The centrality of its geopolitical location has compelled the author to call it a frontier state despite its popularity for connecting the South Asia to Central Asia and East Asia to Europe. The book deals in a chapter with the rise of Taliban and civil war in Afghanistan (Rais, 2008) but instead of focusing on ethnic orientation, it just give a review of all other aspects and in the next chapter switched the attention of a reader to US and war on terror. The ethnic factor particularly during the Taliban rule had expressed itself in much louder tone but it gets a little space in this important work. The book, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* by Antonio Giustozzi mix up the philosophical theories of Ibn-e-Khaldun, Thomas Hobbes and Max Weber to understand the history of Afghanistan. Giustozzi explores the role of warlords in recent Afghan history particularly in Northern and Western Afghanistan. He admires the non-Pashtun leaders for their resilience and courage which helped them survive the onslaught of Soviets, Pashtun Mujahideen and the Taliban. The book offer detailed background information about the emergence and rule of the Taliban. It examines different groups including the Taliban who used local power structures and ethnic identities for staying in power (Giustozzi, 2009). The point that the book misses is to cover the ethnic factor in detail as that overshadow Afghan history and highlight the share of ethnic conflicts to comprehend the true sketch of Afghan affairs.

Methodology

This research work particularly focuses on Afghanistan and applies analytical method to understand the ethnic factor during the Taliban era. It uses both primary and secondary sources to draw a complete picture of the events during the Taliban rule. Reports, newspaper articles and articles in research journals are the core sources as to know about the contemporary approach towards the Afghanistan situation during Taliban rule. This methodology facilitates a thorough comprehension of the intricate interplay between the Taliban and ethnic dynamics within Afghanistan.

Ethnic Groups before the Taliban's Rise

Pashtuns being the major ethnic group in Afghanistan remained as kings, presidents and military leaders of the country while the non-Pashtun ethnic groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras remained centered in the north and central Afghanistan. Other minor ethnic groups include among others, Qizilbashis, Chaharaimaqs, Nooristanis, Turkmen, Balochs and Brahvis. Beside ethnic division, the population is also divided along religious lines with Pashtuns as Sunnis, Tajiks divided between Sunni and Shi'as, Uzbeks Sunnis and Hazaras purely Shi'a while Nooristanis were converted to Islam from their previous faith of Greek religion, Qizilbash, Baloch and Brahvis Sunnis too. Each of these groups has distinct cultural and linguistic characteristics and contributes to the ethno-cultural mosaic of the country (Haber M., 2012; Kartal, 2020). An important turning point in Afghan history was the establishment of a Pashtun Durrani monarchy in 1747, which cemented Pashtun domination (Rahimi, 2017).

Prior to the advent of the Taliban, regional interests frequently caused ethnic alliances to change, and ethnic militias were crucial to both the resistance movement against Soviet forces and the subsequent internal power struggles. The decades of violence and resistance struggle have heightened ethnic tensions which after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted in civil war, power conflicts and social instability. Every ethnic group in Afghanistan made a unique contribution to the country's problematic political and social structure. The remaining role was played by the absence of a single Afghan national identity, thus, setting a stage for future ethnic conflicts, especially under the Taliban (Malejacq, 2019).

Taliban's Rise to Power

The ethnic and political environment of Afghanistan changed drastically after the emergence of Taliban in 1990. The Taliban promised to restore peace shattered by civil war among the various *Mujahideen* factions and their leaders. Pashtuns tribes of southern Afghanistan particularly of Kandahar formed the rank and files of the movement. The Taliban within no time quickly took control and spread throughout the length and breadth of the country while in 1996 they established Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Kotokey, 2020).

The Pashtun identity of the Taliban became a defining characteristic of their rule, frequently causing friction with non-Pashtun ethnic groups in Afghanistan, including the Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. The multiethnic composition combined with historical animosities in Afghanistan meant that the rise of the Taliban was not seen as a unifying force for the country, but rather as a Pashtun-dominated movement. The leadership of the Taliban alienated many non-Pashtun communities of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras (Rais, 2022).

Another way ethnic tensions showed up was through opposition to the Taliban rule. Non-Pashtun leaders especially those in the north united against Taliban under the umbrella of Northern Alliance which included Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazara. The leadership of this alliance was in the hands of Ahmad Shah Massoud (Tajik) and General Abdul Rashid Dostum (Uzbek). They fought tough battles to drive out the Taliban and seized control of some areas in the northeastern Afghanistan. The underlying division in Afghan society was caused by the Pashtun-dominated leadership of the Taliban that resulted in an ethnically motivated resistance (Magnus, 1997).

The Taliban's Ethnic Policy during 1996-2001

The Taliban rule in Afghanistan started in 1996 which was characterized by a blend of strong religious fundamentalism and ethnic favoritism towards the Pashtun majority. They imposed rigid Islamic law colored with Pashtun cultural traits for strengthening their hold over Afghanistan. Their policies clearly exposed their deep-seated ethnic prejudices. They socially and politically marginalized all the ethnic minorities including the minority majorities of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras (Ibrahimi, 2023).

Although the Taliban pretended to be the representatives of the whole Muslim Afghanistan and transcends or are against all ethnic divides as they emphasized their Islamic ideology but they were unable to forge meaningful alliances with other non-Pashtun ethnic groups. Taliban regime primarily focused on maintaining control through fear and violence. Pashtun identity which is associated with the Taliban became their power base, against non-Pashtun groups who were deprived from positions of authority and subjected to harsh treatment (Giustozzi, 2010).

Having strongholds in the northern and central regions of Afghanistan, the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras became Taliban's most formidable adversaries. Under the direction of individuals like Ahmad Shah Massoud and Abdul Rashid Dostum, many Tajiks and Uzbeks under the banner of Northern Alliance opposed and resisted the Taliban. The ethnic division was widened even more by the use of violent and ethnically driven tactics to put down this rebellion (Shay, 2021).

After their ascent to power, the Taliban single out the non-Pashtun ethnic groups of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazara., particularly in regions where opposition to their authority was fierce. These ethnic groups dominated northern Afghanistan, which turned into a battlefield for anti-Taliban militias and Taliban forces. In order to silence opposition from these ethnic groups, the Taliban frequently used mass arrests, collective punishment, and killings throughout their offensives in these areas. Ethnic Uzbeks were occasionally driven into refugee camps run by the Taliban or forcibly removed from their homes (Giustozzi, 2010).

The Hazaras ethnic minority primarily as Shi'a Muslims were the target of systematic discrimination by the Taliban (Saikal, 2012). The Taliban saw them as heretics and frequently subjected them to horrific cruelty. One of the most notorious Hazara killing, committed by the Taliban took place in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif (Muhammad, 2023) which the Taliban lost momentarily but regain its control in August 1998 culminating in an ethnic cleansing campaign. More than 2,000 Hazaras were methodically liquidated by indiscriminately killing men, women, and children in door to door targeted operations. The Amir-ul-Momineen of Taliban, Mullah Omar considered Hazaras as non-Muslims, thus providing justification for their ruthless persecution. Human Rights Watch documented this massacre, by highlighting Taliban's sectarian and ethnic orientations. This tragedy has tarnished Taliban reputation and makes it as only an ethnically discriminatory ruthless regime (Hakimi, 2023).

Beside Mazar-i-Sharif, Hazaras were subjected to violence and their houses were demolished around 2000 in their heartland of Bamiyan (historically a well-known place of Buddha sculptures) of central Afghanistan. The Taliban displaced and massacred Hazara in Bamiyan, and performed the notorious act of cultural vandalism by destroying the gigantic Buddha statues of Bamiyan in 2001 to give the impression of a control over the Hazara people, for whom Bamiyan represents a cultural homeland (Centlivres, 2008)

Taliban's Ideology and Ethnic Issue

The philosophy and governance of Taliban is though perceived by their adversaries and the western literature as being Pashtuns promoting and securing Pashtun nationalism or were serving the religious cause which is not true because the Taliban developed a version of the Islamic faith, which combined and blended unchecked violence with a Pashtun culture. They neither served Islam because they were a Devobandi political force which wanted to capture power in Afghanistan and majority of Taliban cadres never joined or succeeded in completing *madrassah* (Seminary) education nor have they helped Pashtun uplift because whatever scant knowledge about the Pashtuns struggle in Afghanistan they had was in religious terms of their own choice. There is no denying the fact that Taliban were largely from Pashtun background, especially from the eastern and southern parts of Afghanistan where tribal systems and Pashtun identity have long been strong but it is also a reality that *madrassah* and group ideology of force have transformed their views and outlooks. They sometimes took refuge in Islamic teachings when necessary and sometimes would revoke the Pashtun code of honor, Pashtunwali by relying on its ideals like honor, retaliation and hospitality.

This particular aspect of displaying Pashtun nationalism by the Taliban during 1996-2001 led to the marginalization of non-Pashtun tribes. By taking advantage from the Pashtun-centric ideology, the Taliban leadership favored the pro-Taliban Pashtun interests in governance and neglected any role to Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras in administration for their holding of

the belief that the Taliban uphold Pashtun dominance in multiethnic Afghanistan. This dynamic exacerbated ethnic tensions. According to Amin Saikal, the Taliban promoted Pashtun nationalism which served as a catalyst for their military efforts to establish a Pashtun-centric power structure that frequently alienated other ethnic groups (Saikal, 2010).

The Taliban have historically suppressed the cultural practices of non-Pashtun groups for being incompatible with their vision of a single Islamic society. This principle was especially applied to the Shi'a Hazaras as their beliefs conflicted with Sunni orthodoxy and that is why according to the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia, the religious identity of other groups such as the Hazaras became a target of persecution, which was frequently justified under the pretext of religious conformity. Their strict Sharia governance also not recognized the ethnic diversity in Afghanistan and worked towards the promotion of a homogenous vision of Islamic rule that minimizes or eliminates ethnic differences. The Taliban interpreted Islamic Sharia even excluded women (including Pashtun women) and minorities from meaningful participation in public life (Rais, 2022; Ibrahim, 2023).

As according to the requirements of the time, the Taliban have tried to minimize their Pashtun tilt and only to highlight their religious identity for presenting themselves as national Islamic movement as against to a Pashtun nationalist movement. Rhetorically they believed on the establishment of an Islamic state to benefit all Afghans, regardless of their ethnic background because Islam transcends ethnic boundaries while practically they strictly acted upon ethnic cleansing of non-Pashtun minorities. They pretended themselves as a genuine national force rather than merely a Pashtun-dominated militia and through this narrative they aimed to win over non-Pashtun communities (Kotokey, 2020).

Afghanistan's Ethnic Divide and the Regional Dynamics

The ethnic diversity of Afghanistan has long caught the eye of its neighbors, all of whom are quite interested in the dynamics its internal ethnic population. Afghanistan's ethnic divisions have long been exploited by Soviet Union, India, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) in particular, to further their own regional agendas.

The Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and the main source of Taliban support, have close relations to Pakistan for its ethnic, cultural and religious connections to the Pashtuns of Pakistan and for its sharing of the long and porous border of Durand Line which is inhabited by the Pashtuns on both sides. Pakistan has had a significant impact on the Taliban since the 1990s, when its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was instrumental in their ascent to power. While on the other hand, the connection between Pakistan and the non-Pashtun communities in Afghanistan is more complex. The variance and instability in the non-Pashtun areas can have an impact on Pakistan's own ethnic dynamics and security but it paid little heed to that aspect. An interesting fact is also that Pakistan did not enjoy the relations with the Taliban because it lost credibility and respect which it earned by supporting the *Jihad* against the Afghan socialist regimes (Maley, 1998).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) backed Pakistan in its policy first towards the *Mujahideen* and then towards the Taliban for promoting Wahhabism and for preventing Shi'a Iran from gaining a foothold in Afghanistan. KSA also wanted to contain Iran from exploiting the oil resources of CARs (Roy, 1996). Saudi Arabia also along with Pakistan and UAE recognized the Taliban government as legitimate in 1996 (Hokayem, 2011). When Taliban entered the north, Saudi Arabia and its foreign minister, Turki Al-Faisal promised assistance to them for bribing the individual commanders of the north in general and of Mazar Sharif in particular (Hoffman, 2001). Even it provided 400 pick-up vans for quick penetration into the defense lines of the Northern Alliance (Rashid, 2010). Nevertheless, after the episode of Osama bin Laden, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Taliban deteriorated as the formers asked Taliban for handing over to it for his alleged involvement in the attacks of American embassies at Kenya and Tanzania (Hoffman, 2001). Mullah Omar first agreed but later refused Saudi demand, for which the Saudi intelligence's head reminded him of its support but Mullah Omar insulted him resulting in the cut-off of an official assistance (Burke, 2003; Hokayem, 2011).

The Shi'a Hazara community in Afghanistan had drawn Iran's intense concern after the sever Taliban persecution. They looked towards Iran for assistance and later put its weight behind the anti-Taliban organizations of Northern Alliance (Saikal, 2012). At the time of Taliban attack on Bamiyan Iran showed great concern because its diplomat was already killed by the Taliban. Iran mobilized its troops along the border of Afghanistan but the intervention of United Nations Organization (UNO) ensured peace by convincing the Taliban to hand over the corpse of Iranian diplomat and release the Iranian truck drivers (Rashid, 2010).

Both Iran and Pakistan used their ties with ethnic factions in Afghanistan to exert influence and frequently backed opposing sides of each other. Ethnic dynamics in Afghanistan are closely linked to regional security and alliances and ethnic tensions have impacted neighboring countries and their foreign policies. The support and backing of Taliban by Pakistan and the support of Iran behind Hazaras reflect clear regional dissensions and futile peace efforts.

Northern Afghanistan which is home to a large population of Tajiks and Uzbeks is significant area for all the Central Asian Republics (CARs). As CARs got late independence from the former Soviet Russia and were having their own internal problem that is why they entered late in the Afghan war for dominance. Tajikistan because of an certain political situation at home was unable to provide direct financial and military support to the Tajiks in Afghanistan but served as facilitator and as a resupply base to Russian and Iranian military assistance to the non-Pashtun leaders and groups particularly to Ahmed Shah Masoud (Rashid, 1999).

Another Republic was Uzbekistan which has historically backed ethnic Uzbek leaders like Abdul Rashid Dostum for countering the Taliban. It became worried about the security situation along its borders after the emergence of an extremist organization of Taliban which could destabilize Central Asia in the form of a refugee flow from northern Afghanistan. Uzbekistan though provided inconsistent support to Afghan Uzbeks but was of great significance. It maintained supply point for arms transfer and the maintenance depot for the combat aircraft at the garrison town of Termez, from where the arms and ammunitions, fuel, armoured personnel carriers, spare parts and other mechanized vehicles were supplied to Mazar Sharif through the Friendship Bridge at Termez. It also allowed Iranian military goods supply to the Northern Alliance

across its territory. However, it made a shift in its policy and established links with Taliban to avoid increased Russian presence in the region but remain cautious of Taliban support for Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan-IMU which they continued to support secretly. On the other hand, Turkmenistan remained neutral during the Afghan conflict because of its own internal situation and because of a dream for oil and gas pipeline through Afghanistan. It supplied oil to all the Afghan warring factions including Taliban and Northern Alliance. While Kyrgyzstan closely watched the Afghan situation and was feeling a threat from Taliban-backed IMU which it dealt with military operations with Russian support (Hoffman, 2001). Russia even stationed its military along the border of Kyrgyzstan to protect it against any kind of attack after 2000. Another important state among CARs, Kazakhstan did not show interest in the Afghan conflict except a warning to Taliban after Mazar Sharif incident (Maley, 1998).

Conclusion

The Taliban emerged as a new force in Afghanistan that carried out a fundamentalist Sunni Devobandi ideology mixed with a Pashtun cultural flavor. It was indeed a new innovation in Islam because majority these *Madrasah* students have neither completed their Islamic education to understand the real message of the Abrahamic religion nor have they been trained as Pashtuns to grasp the knowledge of Pashtun cultural and religious background which in general was very moderate and tolerant towards other communities. Although on the basis of their Pashto language they seemed to be Pashtuns to the outer world but keeping in mind their training and education they were aliens to the society because they knew much about the foreign Muslim scholars and Islamist movements but were very less acquainted with the struggle and efforts of their forefathers which they often interpreted in Islamist terms.

As far as ethnic policy of the Taliban is concerned, there is a need to understand the dynamics of their emergence and rule. The non-Pashtuns who were treated at par with the Pashtuns by the Afghan monarchy became rivals of the Pashtuns during the Soviet period by denouncing the rule of a majority and on focusing on their goal of getting a major share in power. They challenged the Pashtuns over their claim of possessing the right to rule in Afghanistan and fall prey to the propagandas of outside regional states. They instead of allying themselves with Pashtun majority preferred to become lackeys of foreign countries just like the Taliban for the vested interests of their supporters and of their own groups.

The Taliban adopted repressive measures against the non-Pashtuns not on religious grounds but on political and ethnic grounds. They revoked ethnicity against the ethnic minorities because it best suited their political agenda. The entry of Taliban in northern Afghanistan was seen by non-Pashtuns as a temporary stay but when they realized that they had no intentions of leaving the north massacred thousands of Taliban to avoid experiencing Pashtun domination. It infuriated Taliban and in retaliation they started ethnic cleansing which continued till the American announcement of war against terrorism and the establishment of interim government with a major share of Northern Alliance in it. The Taliban after their ouster continued struggle against the government and foreign troops but after their recapture of Afghanistan in 2021, the ethnic factor still seems to be a reality and Taliban has brought no changes in that stance because the language-based Pashtun character of the movement is clearly visible.

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