



# History, culture and ethnicity in Afghanistan

BY *SEDDIQ WEERA AND ALISON ROBERTS MICULAN*

## **History**

Afghanistan, during the last 200 years, has been the stage for conflicts between many powerful countries: first, between the British Empire and Russia, subsequently between US-led NATO forces and the Soviet Union, and recently among coalitions of countries that intertwined themselves with Afghan groups divided along ethnic lines.

In 1775, British companies began to colonize India. Thirty-two years later, in 1807, France's Napoleon and Russia's Alexander I signed a treaty to join forces in a bid to take India away from the British colonists. While the treaty did not result in an actual military coalition, it did highlight the tension among Britain, Russia and France as they competed to control land and further their economic interests in and around Afghanistan.

In 1837, a Russia confident of its military might continued its expansionism by attacking Afghanistan's western province of Herat. In response, the British in India planned an invasion of Afghanistan. This first military encounter between the Afghan people and British troops lasted three years, from 1839 to 1842, and cost the British the total loss of their troops. Only one wounded medical doctor made it back to India.

Almost three decades later, in 1869, Russia conquered several Central Asian territories and again arrived at Afghanistan's border. The British regrouped and began invading Afghanistan in 1878. The invasion attempt lasted one year less than the first attack. This time, having learned from the first Anglo-Afghan war, some of the British troops made it out of Afghanistan's mountains alive.

The third military encounter between Afghan warriors and British troops took place in 1919. The British relented and recognized Afghanistan as an independent country. Russia also recognized Afghanistan, but it took the United States another 15 years to do so.

From 1929 to 1953, Afghanistan remained a buffer state between East and West while it attempted to maintain a traditional society that was only gradually inclined toward Westernization. By 1953, the Soviet military and economic influence in Afghanistan was on the rise.

Balance between the influence of the Soviet Union and the Western countries in Afghanistan was seen to be disrupted when the Republic of Afghanistan began to increase business relationships with the Western world in 1977. To subvert Western influence, the Soviets backed a military coup in 1978 that brought the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to power.

From 1979 to 1989, Afghans fought and ultimately defeated the Soviet Red Army with military and political support from the U.S., Arab and European countries, as well as China (filtered through neighbouring Pakistan). Those 10 years of fierce war left one million Afghans and 15,000 Russians dead.

Two years later, the Soviet system toppled, followed by the collapse of the Afghan communist government in 1992.

With the communist government gone, Afghans were left with a completely destroyed infrastructure, 10 million landmines planted throughout the land—and still no right to exercise their free will to choose a government.

Afghanistan again became a battleground divided by more than 10 warring groups, each struggling for military victory. Nearby countries such as Pakistan, India, Russia, Iran, Tajikistan and Turkey continued to supply weapons and ammunition to warring groups in an attempt to install a government of their choice.

By the spring of 1992, it was hoped that power sharing between the parties of Rabani-Masood (a friend of Russia, Iran and India) and Hekmatyar (leader of the HIA and a close friend of Pakistan) would take place. That hope, however, never materialized and the struggle for military victory continued.

Because the emergent Rabani-Masood government in Afghanistan was a close friend of the enemies and competitors of Pakistan, Pakistan increased its supply of weapons and resources to HIA with the aim of toppling the government.

In 1994, Burahannuddin Rabani was the president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, which was in fact a coalition of three parties: 1) his own party, the ISA; 2) the Party of Unity for the Liberation of Afghanistan; and 3) the former communist group the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA). During the course of fighting between 1992 and 1994, NIMA once switched sides and fought against Rabani's government.

With growing interest in the oil resources of the Caspian Sea, Afghanistan emerged as a strategic gateway once again—this time not to India but to Central Asia. Continued war and abuse of power by warring commanders coincided with a lack of

law and order as well as a state of total moral, social, political, economic and military chaos.

The Taliban, a group of hard-line Islamic clerics, emerged as a reaction to the chaos—or, according to some analysts, as a result of a deal among Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan and the U.S.A.

In 1994, while it did not seem likely that Hekmatyar would be successful in dislodging Rabani's government from Kabul, Pakistan, afraid of an anti-Pakistani government in Afghanistan, came up with a plan to create and/or to support the Taliban.

The Taliban concept was sold to the US because of that faction's aim of collecting weapons from extremist Islamic groups and facilitating the extension of an oil pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. On a national level, Afghans who were tired of the state of total chaos did not resist the mission of the Taliban to bring law and order and to collect arms.

The Taliban take-over of Kabul in 1996 as well as Mazaar-e-Sharif in 1997 and again in 1998 was warning enough for India, Iran, Russia, Tajikistan—and even Turkey—to step up their support for the toppled Rabani government and to prevent the establishment of a pro-Pakistan, pro-Arab, purely Sunni government in Afghanistan.

In the midst of the current crisis, Pakistan is again worried about the establishment of an anti-Pakistani government in Afghanistan through a Northern Alliance military take-over—which could happen if the Northern Alliance takes advantage of the US-UK military attacks on Afghanistan. While Iran, India and Russia are excited about a possible shift of power in Afghanistan, Pakistan is trying to use political, diplomatic and military means to ensure what it sees as an adequate share of pro-Pakistani Pashtoons in the future government of Afghanistan.

Though there is no question that the current threat of global terrorism must be addressed, the current Afghan proxy war demonstrates a lost opportunity for preventive diplomacy and the potential for further and more serious unrest. Competition among neighbouring and regional countries makes the likelihood of civil war in Afghanistan, partition of Afghanistan or Pakistan, or the collapse of Pakistan, much greater.

Unless intensive diplomacy is put in place to transform current competition among the neighbours of Afghanistan into mutual understanding and regional cooperation, the vicious cycle of governance from the outside will continue to jeopardize any effort for a sustainable peace in Afghanistan and, for that matter, stability in the region.

### **Culture**

While inter- and intra-tribal relationships may have changed over the centuries, codes of honour have remained strong among most Afghans. Towering pride and glory are attached to sacrifice and bravery demonstrated while protecting religion, people, land, and sovereignty. Even though levels of dedication to such beliefs vary considerably across the people in times of peace, they become heightened exponentially in the face of threat.

Afghanistan's military history also has been shaped by its terrain. The natural topography has forced invasions by troops in single-file, the cutting off of supply routes, and the inability of artillery to keep up with infantry. These factors have proved disastrous militarily, not only at the time of the Anglo-Afghan war, but a century later during the Soviet conflict as well.

The very fact that invaders and colonists have been unable to settle in Afghanistan may have contributed to the sustainability and strength of Afghan culture and traditions. In addition, the clan and tribal systems have made the mobilization of Afghans easy and

efficient, particularly in cases of national emergencies. Mobilization is further facilitated by a traditional mechanism called the Grand Assembly or Loya Jirga where the tribal leaders and chiefs make decisions that are supported by their village or tribesmen.

Most Afghans have strong religious beliefs. Almost all are Muslim, with a Sunni majority. Shiites represent the second largest group, and there is a minority of Ismaelites and Ahl-Hadees. Religion has been a key factor in uniting diverse Afghans and motivating them to defend against invaders. It should be mentioned that small groups of Afghans follow Hinduism and Sikhism and an even smaller number follow Judaism.

### **Ethnicity**

Afghans live in clans and tribes. Their ethnicities include: Pashtoon, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, Baluch, Nooristani, Qezil-bash, Pasha-Ee and Aimaq. Historically, complaints about incidents against certain ethnic groups and claims of injustices have created tension and, from time to time, hostilities and acts of revenge within Afghanistan.

For example, non-Pashtoons argue that the Pashtoon Royal family's monopoly over political power for some 250 years constitutes "national oppression." Pashtoons on the other hand, complain that the monopoly of Dari as the official language and the language of instruction (in educational institutions) for the same number of years or even longer represents "cultural oppression."

Ethnic and religious divisions became deeper as crimes were committed in the cities of Kabul in 1993 and 1995 (Sunnis against Shiites), Mazaar-e-Sharief in 1997 and 1998 (Tajik against Pashtoon and then Pashtoon against Tajik and Hazara) and Bamian (Sunni Pashtoon against Shiites). Even though the degrees of ethnic hatred and prejudice vary across the nation, it is obvious that the general public is less affected than are politically motivated Afghans. ☺