



# Not “Who?” but “How?”: Governing Afghanistan after the conflict

BY M. NAZIF SHAHRANI

**The** peoples of Afghanistan are one of the poorest nations on earth, victimized by over a century of misrule and nearly a quarter of a century of imposed wars, topped by the repression of the Taliban and their global terrorist allies. They are ready for, and in need of, a fundamental change in their system of governance. The terror attacks of September 11 on the U.S., allegedly carried out by Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda terrorist organization hiding in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, have not only unexpectedly exposed the tragic fate of the peoples of Afghanistan to the world, but have also raised the hopes of bringing an end to their nightmare.

The current war being fought by the United States and her allies against the terrorist forces of Bin Laden in Afghanistan cannot be won without careful planning for a just and democratic governance structure in the beleaguered country. In searching for alternatives to the Taliban, the question being asked is: who should rule in Afghanistan after the Taliban? “The usual suspects” named recently are the ex-King Muhammad Zahir Shah, the alleged Pashtoon ethnic “majority”, the opposition Northern Alliance, the leaders of the former mujahedin, a coalition of the representatives of all ethnic groups, or a vaguely defined “broad-based” government.

The ISI, Pakistan’s military intelligence service and the creators of the Taliban, apparently insist on the inclusion of “moderate” Taliban among the future rulers of the country. Proposing a centralized government is being legitimized by referring to the so-called “traditional” Afghan Grand Assembly (or *Loya Jirga* in Pashtoo). But the painful lesson of Afghanistan’s history has been that strong centralized government in any form will only lead to hegemony by one group, whether ethnic, linguistic, or religious, and abuse by the ruling group

at the expense of justice for all citizens of Afghanistan. The promise of enduring peace and just governance in a post-Taliban Afghanistan does not lie in a single person, party, tribe, clan, or ethnic group—or a combination of these, no matter how broadly based.

Afghanistan as a multi-ethnic nation was cobbled together as a buffer state in late 19th Century by British India and tsarist Russia. Its first modern ruler, Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (r. 1880-1901), was hand-picked by the British from among the princelings of a warring Pashtoon clan.

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## ***A lasting contribution?***

The question is not “Who should govern in Afghanistan?” but “How should Afghanistan govern itself?” A U.S.-led political and military coalition is poised to set in motion profound changes in Afghanistan. At this critical moment in its history, what Afghanistan needs the most is what the United States already has—the federal model of decentralized government with a strong national constitution. Indeed, this could be the longest-lasting contribution the United States and her anti-terrorism international coalition could make in Afghanistan today, and in fighting the root cause of global terrorism forever.

In return for giving up control of the country’s foreign affairs to Britain, he received arms and money to conquer and subjugate the myriad of ethnolinguistic groups. Infamous for his cruelty and dubbed the “Iron Amir” by his colonial masters, he established a firm foundation for an oppressive, corrupt, centralized system of “internal colonialism” directed against some Pashtoon tribes and the non-Pashtoon ethnic groups.

A brief experiment with constitutional monarchy from 1965 to 1973 was aborted by a palace coup, followed by the Soviet-inspired Communist regime in 1978 which plunged the country into an abyss of continuous proxy wars. These culminated in the rise of the Taliban and Afghanistan’s regrettable prominence in the arena of global terrorism.



## ***Echoes of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the Taliban regime***

Sadly, the historical tendency to monopolize centralized authority is a part of Afghan political culture, and the Mujahedin parties who came to power in Kabul in 1992 insisted on re-imposing a strong centralized authority (the familiar model of the old monarchy) over the periphery. The aims of the Taliban under Mullah Muhammad Omar, the self-proclaimed Amir al Mu'mineen (Commander of the Faithful) and their strategy of terror are similar to those of the British-installed "Iron Amir": the military conquest and re-subjugation of all the self-governing non-Pashtoon territories.

The similarities between the bloody events of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century have another significant dimension—the use of extremist Islam as a justification for terrorizing the regime's assumed enemies into submission. What is novel in the Taliban's effort is their alliance with international terrorism. The old monarchy and Taliban regimes also share the common myth, first fabricated by British India, that the Pashtoon have the exclusive right to rule in Afghanistan. This myth, which is uttered approvingly by Pakistani generals and politicians alike, has brought Afghanistan to the brink of total disaster and, if not shattered, will continue to threaten the future viability of a peaceful Afghanistan.

### ***Nepotism, cronyism and internal colonialism***

It is for this reason that priority should not be given to the question of who will rule Afghanistan. Instead, we must ask how should a post-Taliban Afghanistan be governed? Any attempt to re-impose a strong centralized regime controlled by a single family, clan, tribe, or ethnic group, whether Pashtoon or non-Pashtoon, must be and will be strongly resisted. Strong, centralized regimes in multi-ethnic societies such as Afghanistan tend to breed nepotism, cronyism, and internal colonialism by the ruling clique.

Instead, the international community should encourage and empower a government that builds on and recognizes the crucial role of the self-governing local communities that emerged in the period of anti-Soviet jihad during the 1980s. They should encourage a government which accepts the principles of community self-governance at the

The makeup of the transitional government is critical to the success of such a plan. While the ex-King Muhammad Zahir Shah can and should play a role in such a transitional government, every effort must be made to keep his old corrupt cronies from infiltrating the post-Taliban government. Care must also be taken

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village, subdistrict, district, and provincial levels, and is committed to the formation of a broad-based federal structure that reflects the ethnic composition of Afghan society as a whole.

The local autonomy and political integrity of every segment of Afghanistan's ethnic and sectarian social mosaic must be guaranteed by a new national constitution and a decentralized federal governance structure. Only then will it be possible for the peoples of Afghanistan to begin rebuilding their shattered communities and regain their self-confidence in a democratic, multinational Afghanistan.

Rebuilding an appropriate governance structure for Afghanistan will require time, patience, and an honest and dedicated transitional government. It will also require the supervision of a UN-mandated international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan.

to keep the many corrupt and abusive elements of the myriad of warring parties and of the previous Communist regime from re-entering post-Taliban governing structures.

The task is daunting, but the reward—liberation of the peoples of Afghanistan from the reign of terror—will be worth it. More importantly, if the United States and her international coalition partners can help Afghans set up a just governance structure with care and compassion, they will set a new precedent for combating the conditions that give rise to global terrorism. ☺

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