

The history of Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is not simply a poor country. It is one of the most economically and socially backward, war ravaged, famine stricken and desperate places on earth. Yet the USA, the world's biggest imperialist power, has launched a prolonged military onslaught on it. This can only add to the devastation which Soviet intervention, CIA sponsored civil war and the reactionary medievalists of the Taliban have so far achieved.

Afghanistan proper came into being in 1747, following a nine day council meeting ? a Loya Jirga ? of the warlords and tribal leaders (khans) of the dominant ethnic group, the Pashtuns. They elected an Emir, Ahmed Shah Durrani, and his dynasty ruled Afghanistan until 1973. Yet this unbroken royal lineage did not mean that national unity and a modern nation state had emerged. Far from it. The king mainly served as an arbiter between the clans, tribes and disparate nationalities who inhabited the region.

The factors militating against modernisation were numerous. Afghanistan's geography was a major factor. A vast and inhospitable desert in the west, highlands in the centre, and enormous mountains in the east and north (the Hindu Kush), meant that the country was carved into distinct chunks by nature itself. Herat, an oasis town in the west, was a world apart from Kabul in the foothills of the Hindu Kush. Different influences and different cultures grew and became entrenched in this fragmented landscape.

Only a small portion of the land (around 20 per cent) was fertile. Large sections of the population were nomads. Others relied on an ancient tribal system, dominated by large landowners, in order to survive. Loyalty to the clan meant being able to work a small plot of land. Being able to eat ? and enjoying the protection of the clan from rivals out to steal your produce ? reproduced and reinforced an essentially feudal system.

As late as 1979 the cities and major towns of Afghanistan ? Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar ? E ? Sharif and the capital, Kabul ? were inhabited by only around five per cent of the population. Years of war have slightly swelled the urban population with refugees. But the modern urban classes of Afghanistan remained too weak in numbers and too divided in politics to lead the transformation of the country. In particular the core of the working class (industrial and service waged worker) to this day numbers hundreds of thousands, rather than millions. The majority of the 20 million population live in tiny rural villages, the mountains and the deserts.

The establishment of a monarchy was only possible with the consent of the khans. The interference of that monarchy in the affairs of the tribes that the khans ruled was excluded from the outset. Any attempt at interference was met with violent resistance. When King Ammanullah attempted systematic modernisation in the 1920s (with help from Soviet Russia) he was driven from the throne and replaced by the more pliable and traditional Pashtun monarch King Zahir, who ruled from 1934 to 1973 and is now being talked of as the new ruler of Afghanistan.

In such circumstances the emergence of a genuinely Afghan national consciousness was thwarted. The

population remained divided between several distinct nationalities, deeply hostile to each other. The main group, the Pashtuns, have dominated and oppressed the others – Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras plus many smaller groups – for centuries. Unity has only ever come about episodically, usually during conflicts with the big powers (Britain in the 19th and early 20th century; Russia in the 1980s).

Ethnic conflict has been compounded by religious antagonism. The Hazaras account for around 20 per cent of the country and are Shi'ite Muslims. The majority of people in Afghanistan are Sunni Muslims. Such was the persecution of the Shi'ites by the Taliban in the late 1990s that Shi'ite Iran was on the verge of invading to defend its religious co-thinkers.

Despite all of these disadvantages Afghanistan has always been an important country for the imperial powers, the regional powers and, of course, for the former Soviet Union. It is, by virtue of its location, a vital crossroads in the trade routes between the Indian sub-continent, the far east, the Middle East and Europe. Its cities grew as great trading centres during the heyday of the spice trade. The quickest land route to India lay through the valleys and across the mountain passes of Afghanistan. The Khyber pass, to this day is a major trading thoroughfare. Even if you know next to nothing about Afghanistan you will probably have heard of this famous pass.

In addition Afghanistan has always acted as a kind of natural buffer zone between the great powers. In the nineteenth century it was the setting for the 'Great Game' between Britain and Tzarist Russia. It quite literally stood between a Russia that was expanding into Central Asia and a Britain determined to rule eternally over the lucrative sub-continent.

Three times British expeditionary forces crossed into Afghanistan – 1838, 1878 and 1919 – in a bid to place it under direct colonial rule. Three times they were beaten back. In 1878 Britain did secure control of the country's foreign policy, a major prize given the conflict with Russia. But the attempt to maintain this in 1919 saw the mighty British empire humbled by the ill equipped but utterly determined Afghan tribesmen.

In the later twentieth century it was a vital barrier between the USSR and Iran (a threat when the pro-US Shah ruled and when the Islamic fundamentalist Khomeini replaced him) and pro-imperialist Pakistan. It was in order to maintain its ability to play that role that the USSR launched its fateful invasion of the country in Christmas 1979.

But by 1988, after killing over one million people and blasting mountains and cities alike, Russia began to withdraw its troops and by 1989 had conceded defeat.

Today Afghanistan's geopolitical importance is supplemented by the need for a safe pipeline across the country to carry the plentiful natural gas and oil of Central Asia to an energy-craving west.

The USA was still busy trying to secure the contract for this pipeline for Unocal, a US oil multinational, when the current crisis broke. Selecting Afghanistan as a target for attack in the aftermath of September 11 is therefore not just to do with 'terrorism'. It is also prompted by the prospect of getting that pipeline after all, and with it access to the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia.

As a result of all of these factors – internal and external – Afghanistan has never made the leap into modernity that each of its neighbours undertook.

It has been preserved not simply as a semi-colony, but as a profoundly backward, feudal dominated and nationally divided semi-colony. Its remarkable and successful repulsion of invaders – British and Russian – has not given rise to a modern nation state. Rather, the victories have strengthened the feudal warlords

and landowners and their antiquated system of tribal rule. This society was perfect for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Backward, divided, war weary but still at war with itself ? enter the Taliban, ?god?s invincible soldiers.? But their mission was not to create a modern nation ? it was rather to take it back.

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