

## **Challenges in South Asia: Identity and Political Culture Issues**

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South Asia, as conceived for the purposes of this symposium, ecologically is a complex and diverse region of the world--consisting of both some of the world's most fertile and densely populated river valleys as well as considerable areas of inhospitable deserts and extremely rugged marginal mountainous terrains. Culturally, it is the birthplace of numerous religious traditions including Hinduism and Buddhism and a host to the third major world religion, Islam. South Asia, not surprisingly, is also the cradle of some of the world's most ancient cultures, languages and civilizations produced by the collaborative and competing efforts of various ethno-linguistic groups, both indigenous and outside conquerors and settlers in the region. In pre-colonial periods, imperial dynastic political dynamics were dominated, and to a large measure shaped, by religious discourse especially among the ruling elites. The dominant political discourses were in religious idioms and were shared and understood by the ordinary peoples inhabiting these lands.

The triumph of British colonial rule in India, aided considerably by modern fire power and lethal technologies of war and violence, armed with more efficient rational administrative techniques to extract resources and control populations, introduced a new colonial educational system peddling secular ideologies of science and modernity which began to compete with the old and traditional discourses of religion as a means for access to power and resources, especially among the emergent colonial ruling elites. Gradually, the rise and popularity of territorially based ethno-nationalism led to unprecedented levels of politicization of culture and identities in the subcontinent.

Ultimately giving rise to anti-colonial nationalist political movements which culminated in the partition of India into Muslim majority Pakistan and Hindu majority India by the middle of twentieth century (1947).

The so called “Great Game” of late nineteenth century in Central Asia with tsarist Russia, however, had already resulted in the creation of a “buffer nation-state” of Afghanistan (and other smaller Himalayan Kingdoms of Nepal & Bhutan), as well as two buffer regions within the borders of British-India: these included the five Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and the Federally Administered Northern Areas (FANA) which included small principalities of Chitral and Hunza among others, outside the British-Indian Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan. The creation of these new territorial political and administrative entities by the British colonial power, following its departure from the subcontinent, have led to border disputes among the new nation-states of Afghanistan-Pakistan and the bloody wars over disputed Azad Kashmir region between India and Pakistan. These simmering border conflicts have contributed significantly, not only to politicization of cultural identities but to recurrent violence and political instability in southern Asia.

Indeed, since partition of India along confessional lines, and the emergence of new modern nation-states in Southern Asia, identity politics generally and religion based political discourses and movements in particular have been steadily on the rise. However, surprisingly India--the largest and most diverse religious and ethno-linguistic new states-- has been relatively more successful in its management of cultural and identity politics so far. On the contrary, the situation in Afghanistan, the smallest and perhaps less culturally and linguistically diverse fragile state, has gotten steadily worse since the invasion of the country by the former USSR (1979) and the onset of popular Islamically motivated patriotic resistance (*jihad*) movement of the 1980s. The conflict

did not only lead to the defeat of the former Soviet Red Army, but also to the complete collapse of the Afghan state giving rise to proxy wars which culminated in the takeover of the country by Taliban and their international terrorist allies, Al Qaeda. Pakistan government played complex and contradictory roles in the conflict in Afghanistan, contributing to further politicization of identities and cultures in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan's own domestic affairs, beginning with General Zia ul-Haq's policies of Islamization. Policies which created, protected and promoted the rise of militant extremist Islamic radical groups (e.g., Hezb-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Taliban, Lashkari Tayyebah and others) to fight for its presumed interests in Afghanistan as well as aid in the hoped-for liberation of Azad Kashmir from India. Policies which have seriously and increasingly compromised the stability and security of Pakistan, raising questions about its future as a viable state.

These three post-colonial modern South Asian "nation-states" or "state-nations" with deeply religious population, are ruled over primarily by secular Westernized elites, but with significantly different state-society relations in each case and degrees of popular support— ranging from armed insurgency, serious crisis of leadership and legitimacy in Afghanistan, increasing challenges to state authority in Pakistan, to a somewhat more stable situation in India despite the occasional bursts of violence in or about Kashmir as well as some leftist inspired insurgencies in remote rural regions. These important differences in state-society relations raises a number of pertinent question such as: What might explain these significant differences in state-society relations in the three South Asian states? What role, if any, the differing Afghan, Pakistan and Indian state policies towards their own various peoples may have played in the politicization of cultural identities? How have the adoption of local or community self-governance rules in India may have contributed to relative de-politicization of

cultural identities and whether & how changing the rules of governance in Afghanistan and Pakistan could do the same? What role, if any, their different governance structures, especially state political cultures, may play in garnering or losing popular support hence government legitimacy in the eyes of their own people? What characterizes the conditions of state-society relations in each case and how does the political culture and values of ruling elites differ from those they try to rule and control? Are some types of governance structures and state practices more likely to lead to politicization of cultural identities, nepotism, cronyism and corruption than others? Can governance systems help in de-politicization of cultural identities, and promotion of more peaceful communal relations and reduce official corruption, if so why and how? Exploring these and many related questions comparatively within the experiences of these three post-colonial multi-cultural modern nation-states would undoubtedly yield some clues to the relative success of India, the considerable challenges facing Afghanistan in building a viable and secure state, and Pakistan's looming crisis of governance.

In this brief presentation, for some compelling reasons, I will focus on the least successful and most problematic case of state building effort in southern Asia—i.e., Afghanistan. More specifically, I would like to discuss relationship between state-building and social fragmentation in a multi-ethnic society and the rise of extremism in Afghanistan. That is, how are social and cultural differences transformed into articulated forms of social fragmentation along ethnic, linguistic, tribal, regional and religious/sectarian cleavages? Why and how are religious piety transformed into hatred and political violence? Why the inability of the ruling elites of all stripes (monarchist, nationalist, communist, secularist or Islamists and Talibanism) in gaining the support of the ordinary people? Some answers may be found in the political culture of rulers of

Afghanistan over the last 130 years since the creation of “modern” Afghanistan as buffer nation-state (in 1880). If so, what are then the key elements of Afghanistan’s ruling elites’ problematic political culture and its consequent for state-society relations?

Political dynamics in Afghanistan generally, and those of the ruling circles since the last decades of the nineteenth century specifically, have been shaped by ideals and practices of the following four closely connected institutions of political culture: kingship (monarchy), kinship (clan/tribe) and among the Pashtun ruling circles the accompanying values of *pashtunwali* (the Pashtun code of male honor), Islam, and most importantly the political economy of dependency of the rulers on foreign subsidies or assistance. The impact of each of these institutions and their accompanying principles on the behavior of individual rulers and groups and the larger population are undeniable and hence critical for our understanding of the current crisis of leadership and legitimacy in Afghanistan. Therefore, let us briefly examine each:

**Kingship** (monarchy): Afghan (Pashtun/Pakhtun/Pathan) monarchs since the establishment of modern Afghanistan (1880) claimed their sovereignty initially to emanate directly from God. Only after 1919, the later monarch’s began to attribute it to the presumed will of the people of Afghanistan combined with the help of Almighty God which they enshrined in constitutions as the standard for claimants to the throne as well as after the fall of the monarchy (1973). In practice however, sovereignty was exercised whenever possible by means of a relatively large army, gendarmery in rural areas and police in the cities and towns, consuming the meager resources of the state, generally supplemented by foreign subsidies. On the whole, the Afghan rulers did not trust their subjects (although some of them far more than others) and lived for the most part in mutual fear of each other.

The most significant legacy of the institution of kingship (buttressed by kinship, Islam and the political economy of state dependency on foreign subsidies—the other key elements of Afghanistan’s political culture), is a claim to exclusive rights of personal sovereignty over their subjects by rulers whether monarch, or president (interim, transitional or elected as in the case of Karzai), or even Amir Mullah Muhammad Omar (in the case of Taliban). This problematic claim to exclusive rights of sovereign rule by members of one ethno-tribal community, over all the rest has turned to a virtual demand by now. The justification offered for this demand have been two fold: the Pashtun rulers were the founder of the modern state of Afghanistan (in 1747 and again in 1880); and the claim that the Pashtun constitute a demographic majority, without a census ever having been taken. The most important aspect of the right of sovereignty, other than how violently they have dealt with their political opponent (real or imagined), is the right to appoint, promote, demote and dismiss all government officials from the cabinet ministers to the lowest of local administrators. In practice, the exercise of this right has been strongly affected by the next important component of Afghanistan’s political culture—kinship.

**Kinship**: the most significant social organizational principle at local level throughout the country, and the higher levels of *qawm* (clan, tribe, ethnic group, etc.) in national politics in Afghanistan is based on the principles of patrilineal descent reckoning and patriarchal authority. Within Pashtun ruling families, kinship relations based on common practice of polygamy by the rulers have been constant sources of tension leading to serious and sometimes bloody crises of succession to power. Such conflicts have also been aggravated by the ideals and practices of *torborwali*, an aspect of the Pashtun code of male honor/chivalry (*Pashtunwali/Pakhtunwali*) which promotes intense competition among paternal first cousins, often resulting in violence and

vendettas within the ruling circles. At the higher level (beyond extended family) the same principles are the cause of considerable hidden and not so hidden rivalries for access to outside money and weapons within and between lineage, clan and tribal formations, and ethnos-linguistics groups.

At the level of state operations, kin-based identities (in practice embracing also ethno-linguistic and sectarian loyalties) have resulted in the creation and application of contested social hierarchies. Because of the abusive practices of the past, politicization of tribal, ethnic and regional identities have increasingly occupied central place during the decades of war and conflict in national politics. Indeed, identity politics continue to be the principle cause of nepotism in the appointment of government officials (of all and every ethnic group and not just the Pashtun) as well as allocation of state and/or outside resources to individuals, communities and regions by the state in the country.

Paradoxically, at this highly politicized environment of personal and collective kin-based identities, especially during the past century, kin-based groupings at the local level have helped maintain the most durable and resilient communities of trust in the rural villages, nomadic camps and urban neighborhoods (*mahulla* and *guzars*). Indeed, these kin-based communities of trust operating on the basis of informal local *shuras* (council of elders), resolving disputes (over property and other claims) are the most precious social capital the country offers to building a firm state structure for the future Afghanistan, perhaps something comparable to India's local community-based governance system.

**Islam:** The centrality of religion (Islam) in Afghanistan's national politics, especially its uses for the legitimacy of the rulers' claim to state power and authority, and as the principle means of mobilizing people for political and military action against both domestic and foreign foes, is extensively documented in literature. The role of Islam in politicization of communal identities (especially between Sunni and Shi'a, rural

and urban, Communist/secular nationalist and Muslim traditionalist, fundamentalist and extremist, etc.) has intensified tremendously in recent decades. These religious cleavages, however, are not often properly understood or acknowledged by returning secularized Afghan expatriates from the West (or their foreign patrons) who have not directly experience the jihad resistance during the 1980s and its aftermath during the 1990s, either inside the country or in the refugee environments of Pakistan and Iran. This intensification of Islamic awareness and identity among ordinary Afghans, often brought about through a prolonged exposure to a more conservative teachings of the Deobandi and Saudi-Wahhabi teachers and preachers, especially among the Pashtun communities in eastern and southeastern parts of the country close to Pakistan border areas has been profound since over 85% of more than 3.2 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan were Pashtun. Their overwhelming support for the Taliban movement in the 1990s and in their increasing support for the current resurgence of Taliban, rather than President Karzai's government, is a powerful testament to the changed Islamic expectations of the ordinary Pashtun tribesman today.

The post-Taliban leaders of Afghanistan (Pashtun and non-Pashtun alike), especially those who have returned to power from their years of exile in the West, have tried systematically to abuse, marginalize or eliminate the Mujahiddeen leaders (good or bad alike) by labeling them all as "warlords," often with the blessings and help of their international patrons and supporters in the media and even some scholars. Their presumed success in co-opting, restraining, eliminating or sidelining the Mujahideen and other local and regional leaders so far, if not re-considered and corrected, could be on their own peril. The ordinary peoples of Afghanistan, especially at the local community level unlike the rulers in Kabul, have a fairly sophisticated assessment of their local and



regional leaders (Mujahideen and otherwise) and contrary to the media claims they do not live in constant fear of the great majority of these so called “warlords”.

The improved means of communications—i.e., some seven million cell phones, some of them with video capabilities; many private television channels, and numerous radio stations, and a thriving print media— has undermined the hypocritical attempts by the post-Taliban Western trained technocratic and professional ruling elites to deceive the presumed illiterate, hence “ignorant” Afghan Muslim masses. The ordinary people are insisting on adherence to the basic Islamic values of decency, fairness and justice and are making their judgments about the conduct of their new leaders on the basis of well known and much admired principles of Islamic leadership. For example, leadership qualities attributed to the Third Khalif of Islam Umar al Khattab (624-644 AD) who is reported to have articulated the required attributes for his own successor as the leader of Muslim community in the following manner: “someone strong without roughness ..., ... flexible without weakness, thrifty without miserliness, generous without extravagance.” These are indeed rare qualities unlikely to be found in the ruling circles of Muslim nations in general and in post-Taliban Afghanistan in particular today.

The relationship of the ordinary peoples of Afghanistan with Islam has been generally devotional and a complete source of guidance for managing their personal and collective lives. The relationship of their rulers, the power elites (regardless of their ethnic and tribal affiliation or ideological inclinations), on the other hand with Islam in Afghanistan, with rare exception, has been purely instrumental and generally ambivalent or negative or extremist and abusive throughout the Afghan history, including the post-jihad and the Taliban era. Indeed, these constant and consistent instrumental uses and abuses of Islam by the power elite have been one of the main reasons for the lack of trust and often silent and sometime militant opposition to the governments which has

characterized state-society relations in the country for much of its modern history, especially the last three decades. The increasing trust gap in the post-Taliban regimes headed by President Hamid Karzai (who is incidentally regarded highly for his personal piety), over the last several years has gradually widened, lending reluctant popular support to the Taliban extremists, especially among the Pashtun. Not finding appropriate means to bridge this trust gap between the state and society systemically and urgently could only accelerate the impending disaster to come.

**Political Economy of the State Dependency on Foreign Patrons:** The Durrani Empire (1747-1793), the predecessor to modern state of Afghanistan in the 1880s, was built on the war economy of leading armies to the Indian subcontinent for booty to the tribal *lashkar* (militia) and collection of taxes and tribute for the state treasury. This possibility for funding the Durrani state came to a quick end by the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Britain took control of Hindustan (India) in the southeast and the Russians began to press down south into Turkistan in the north. The new possibility offered by the European colonial superpower (British India) to those aspiring to rule in Afghanistan, especially after their 1879 invasion, were modern weapons and substantial cash subsidies, but with a hefty price tag which has haunted the successive rulers of the country since Amir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901) who accepted the offer. The price asked for and granted was the acceptance of the Durand Line as the official frontier with British India and relinquishing the foreign policy of the new buffer state of Afghanistan to their benefactor, the Viceroy of British India (which was reclaimed by his grandson, King Amanullah in 1919). This historic capitulation by Amir Abdur Rahman (the alleged founder of Modern Afghanistan) amounted not only to relinquishing the richest and most fertile territories occupied by the eastern Afghan (Pashtun) tribes, but also divided the Pashtun homelands into what came to be known as the FATA and NWFP within British

India, and since 1947 as part of Pakistan. The non-recognition of the Durand Line since the creation of Pakistan by the successive rulers of Afghanistan has become one of the major sources of tension between the two countries and arguably one of the main causes of the rise of Pashtun nationalism in the region and political instability, especially during the last three decades and the current Taliban insurgency.

The installation and/or maintenance of all heads of state in Afghanistan from the “Iron” Amir Abdur Rahman (1880) to President Karzai (2001) either directly or indirectly has been managed by outside power(s). The only exception to this rule are King Amanullah (and his nemesis, the Tajik ruler Amir Habibullah II who ousted him) who reportedly refused the offer of support from the former USSR (in 1929) to reclaim his throne. The man who ousted Amanullah was not looking for external patron and his rule did not last even a full year.

The acceptance of substantial arms and cash from potential (and real) foreign enemies of Afghanistan by the rulers to keep their untrustworthy subjects under control was not and continues to be not an easy undertaking. It often forced them to engage in xenophobic discourse against their foreign patrons, smelling of double talk and divided loyalties. This problem may have been less complicated when they had a single foreign master (British India), as was the case from 1880 to after WWII. With the end of the “Great Game” and the onset of the Cold War, finding patrons in a bifurcated world required a great deal of skill at begging and even more keeping the balance from tipping in favor of one or the other. The inability to keep the balance, as happened with President Muhammad Daoud (1973-1978), cost him not only his life and the lives of 17 members of his immediate family, but eventually also the loss of the country to invasion and occupation by the former Soviet Union.

Since the onset of the jihad resistance against the Khalq-Parchan regimes (1978-

1992), however, the role of foreign subsidies and international military and humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan has become extremely complex and complicated. In the pre-war era the central government received the largess (in arms and /or in cash) and disbursed it with some minimal degree of international oversight. With the formation of multiple resistance power structures outside the country (in Pakistan and Iran), and the arrival of numerous international entities, (Muslim and non-Muslim, governmental, NGOs, UN, and others), without any kind of central coordination, Afghan society and polity became a fair game for all those who expressed interest. Slowly and gradually numerous chains of multiple dependencies from the villages of rural Afghanistan stretched out all over the globe via Peshawar parties for weapons, cash, medicine, teachers (madrasas), doctors and more, not only to fight the Soviet occupation but also to survive conditions of war and deep insecurity.

The collapse of the oppressive central authority, however, had very positive consequences for the local communities across the country. It gave them the opportunity to produce effective local organizational structures and leadership not only for fighting the war of liberation but also providing, with help from the international NGOs, the basic medical, agricultural, educational, judiciary and security needs of their communities. These community-based organizations with leadership at the local and regional levels were and still are the most valuable assets produced during the prolonged years of war. If the post-Taliban government had tried to institutionalize, reform and strengthen them-- instead of attempting to destroy and weaken them-- in the name of expanding the reach of the central government, the country would not have been faced with its current environment of security crisis and lack of confidence in the government and its international patrons.

Sadly, lack of vision and planning for a culturally appropriate governance of a war shattered multi-ethnic society in post-Taliban Afghanistan has produced at least four parallel governments nationally: the US Embassy and military; the UN and its ISAF-NATO forces; International NGOs, World Bank, IMF, the Asian Bank; and the weakest of them all, the Karzai government. The first three have territorial claims to parts of the country, have their own much larger budgets, army and police and most of them also have extremely expensive private security organizations working for them. Each operates independently on the basis of rules and regulations of their own. As such they are not subject to laws of Afghanistan and pay little heed to the occasional demands of the utterly dependent Karzai government. There are also countless other entities in the capital, the provinces and districts who are doing what a properly conceived effective post-Taliban Afghan government should have been doing. For example, private security firms owned by people of influence (many of them the true former warlords or new warlords in-the-making) are serving foreign entities, and national NGOs owned by high government officials are engaged in graft through pyramid schemes pretending to do reconstruction projects, and more. These are then the realities of Afghanistan's elite political culture produced and reproduced during more than a century of efforts in building a strong centralized, often tribalized nation-state in a multi-ethnic/cultural Afghanistan. It is these legacies of a dysfunctional governmental system operating on the basis of a problematic set of rules of governance embedded in the equally dysfunctional principles of political culture which are, in my view, responsible for the extreme case of crisis of leadership, legitimacy and governance in Afghanistan and to a large measure in Pakistan. What is called for therefore, on the part of international community and especially US engagement by President Obama's administration in Southern Asia in general and in Afghanistan in particular, is not to condone or promote

these legacies of the elite political culture by propping up a dysfunctional state system. Instead, what needs to be done is to address such legacies by devising and introducing a more culturally appropriate governance system based on rules, processes and practices similar to those in India.

More specifically, what is needed at minimum is to question the fundamental assumptions underlying the policies of the last eight years of state or nation-building in post-Taliban Afghanistan (and their chief architects and promoters here in the United States and in Afghanistan & Pakistan), which have brought the country once again at the brink of another disaster. Unfortunately, the contemplated US military surge of 30,000 more US soldiers or building a huge 400,000 men Afghan security forces, which are not sustainable in the long run, are unlikely to work in Afghanistan. We must re-conceptualize security as a problem of trust between states and their societies and between and among nations. Current approaches to security in Afghanistan by means of building and hiding behind high walls, making use of bigger guns, more spies and soldiers has not worked and is unlikely to produce peace and security in that country or the region. Gaining and building trust among the peoples requires systemic change in state-society relations in southern Asia and must be built from the bottom up, if it is to grow on a firm cultural and community foundations.