

Revolution in Afghanistan

On 27 April 1978 the world heard that there had been a successful military coup in Afghanistan. The régime headed by Mohammad Daud, which had itself come to power through a coup in July 1973, had been suddenly overthrown by tanks and jet planes that struck in the Afghan capital, Kabul. At first it seemed as if this was yet another military intervention which, although violent and abrupt, involved no major shift in the policies, social character or international alignment of those in power: a change comparable to Daud's own coup, or to others in neighbouring Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Arab world. Yet within days it became clear that the announcements of radical change coming over Radio Kabul were more than just the ritual demagoguery of military coups: something rather more substantial had occurred.

In the first place, the coup, although carried out by the military, reflected much wider political forces. It had been preceded by mass popular demonstrations in Kabul, and as thousands of people flocked to inspect Daud's conquered palace,

now renamed the House of the People, it became evident that it had ousted a hated régime and at least temporarily embodied the hopes of a wide section of the population. At the same time it became clear that the coup was not just the product of a conspiracy *within* the military, but had been carried out on the instructions of an underground Marxist political organization whose membership was overwhelmingly civilian. This at once distinguished the new rulers from other radical military régimes in the Arab world, South Asia or Ethiopia. Moreover, it was this civilian organization, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), about which the rest of the world had previously been quite ignorant, that quickly established its predominance with a new government, headed by Nur Mohammad Taraki. The novel character of the new régime soon became even more apparent. It committed itself to land reform, to equality of the nationalities, to emancipating women, to a solution of the nomadic question. So it was that at a time and in a place suspected by few, and in a country renowned only for colonial war and narcotic plenitude, a revolutionary process of some description had begun.

International Context and Internal Conditions

However surprising the events of April, it has not taken long for the international response to assume its form. The USSR and its allies have moved with considerable decision to support the new régime, and the Soviet commitment to the PDPA has been made abundantly clear. Reactions elsewhere have been predictably hostile. The USA was, it has been reported, caught unawares by the PDPA's seizure of power, although its Iranian clients in SAVAK were not.¹ For years the Americans had relied on an equilibrium with the Soviet Union in Afghanistan: focusing short-sightedly on the strategic aspect alone of their policies, they ignored the unfolding social dynamic within Afghanistan itself and complacently expected the corrupt tribal régime to continue for the indefinite future. Within weeks, however, the US government was waging a propaganda offensive against what it again construed in uniquely strategic terms as a Soviet advance in Afghanistan—comparable to Angola and Ethiopia—and a conference of 270 US experts met under NATO auspices in Annapolis to reflect upon this new development. Referring back to Kipling's description of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Afghanistan as 'The Great Game', one American strategic expert declared: 'The "Great Game" is over and the Russians have won it'.²

Alarm of equal magnitude has been manifest in three of Afghanistan's neighbours—Pakistan, Iran and China. Afghanistan has long played a major role in Pakistani politics, by claiming to champion the cause of the six million Pushtuns or Pathans who live in north-west Pakistan and to a lesser extent the three million Baluchis in the west of the country.³ A

¹ *International Herald Tribune*, 14 July 1978.

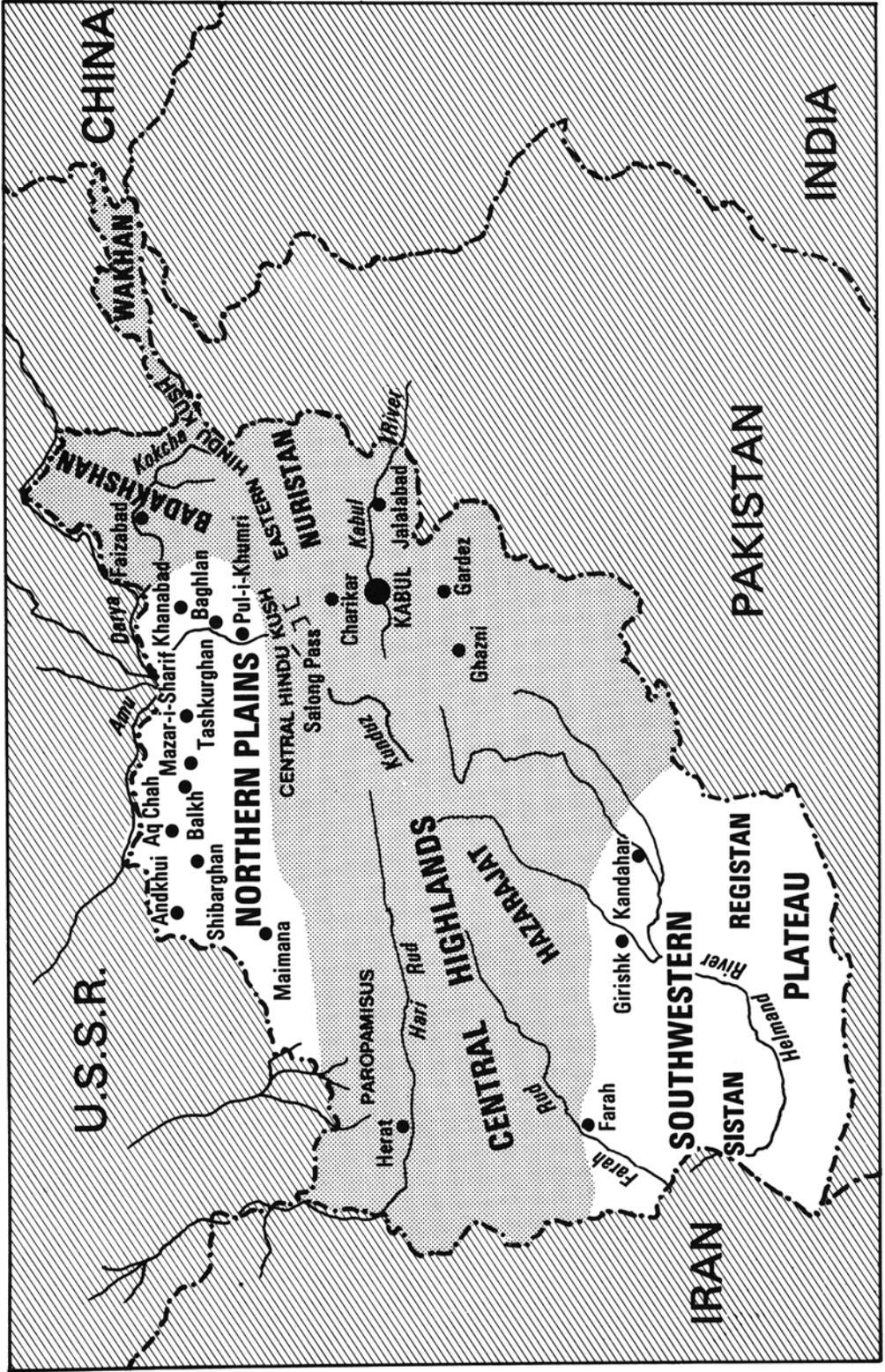
² *International Herald Tribune*, 26 July 1978.

³ The tribal minorities in Pakistan constitute only 17 per cent of the population, but occupy 57 per cent of the land. Baluchistan alone makes up 45 per cent of the country. Whilst most Baluchis live in Pakistan, there are smaller groups in Iran (one million), Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. Throughout this article the terms Pushtu (for the language), Pushtun (for the people) and Pushtunistan (for the Pushtun area of Pakistan) are used. Alternative spellings—Pathan, Pakhtun—are not used. A major survey of the impact of the Afghan revolution on Pakistan can be found in Selig Harrison, 'After the Afghan coup: Nightmare in Baluchistan', *Foreign Policy*, No. 32, Autumn 1978.

militant government in Afghanistan is seen as posing a threat to Islamabad's control of these territories, and hence to the survival of the Pakistani junta itself, still struggling to restabilize the country after the overthrow of Bhutto. In Iran, where twenty-five years of political oppression have now been answered by a massive popular upsurge, the dramatic appearance on the country's eastern flank of the PDPA government has provoked great concern. Iranian determination to oust the latter, if the opportunity arises, cannot be doubted. Finally the Chinese, loath to see any Soviet advance and particularly one menacing Chairman Hua's friends in Pakistan and Iran, have reacted coolly to the new Afghan government. Peking waited two weeks before according recognition, and Chinese diplomats have since April been co-ordinating an anti-Afghan policy in Tehran and Islamabad.

The new régime therefore finds itself caught in a precarious international situation. Faced with the hostility of its three other neighbours, it is reliant to a considerable extent on the Soviet Union—with only India, a traditional ally, providing an alternative source of support. Moreover, these external pressures interlock with numerous and profound internal difficulties. For whilst the PDPA is revolutionary in intention and whilst Afghanistan is desperately in need of social transformation, the new régime is boxed in by daunting problems. Its own organization of a few thousand cadres has an almost totally urban base, in a country where ninety per cent of the population live in the countryside. Despite the popular character of the upheaval in Kabul itself, the advent to power reflected a nation-wide crisis only in the sense that the previous régime had been decomposing under the impact of Afghanistan's many contradictions. The mobilization of the mass of the Afghan oppressed has only just begun. The relations between civilian and military appear to be vexed, and to this is added the fact that the PDPA itself is riven by a dangerous factionalism.

However, whatever the disunity inside the PDPA, it pales before that of Afghan society as a whole. Afghanistan is, in the phrase often used of its obvious counterpart Ethiopia, 'a museum of peoples': a fragmented society ruled by an ethnically particularist royal elite, in this case drawn from the Durrani section of the Pushtun nationality. A modern nation in the ideological and material sense of the word has only begun to appear; the great majority of the population have owed primary loyalty to some tribal or ethnic sub-division, and have lived at subsistence level within isolated rural communities. As in North Yemen and Angola, the persistence of tribal divisions among much of the population can act as a potent base for counter-revolutionary endeavours. Whatever kind of régime the PDPA is able to construct in Afghanistan, it will take decades to overcome the fractured structure of that society and to realize its material potential: at best, Afghan socialism will be constructed to a degree rare even in the history of twentieth-century struggles within the brutal realm of necessity. But despite the grounds for caution, it is undeniable that a social revolution is being attempted in Afghanistan: its singular importance must not be occluded by doubts about its potential or the



sparsity of the information as yet available to us.⁴

Land and People

Afghanistan occupies an anomalous place, historically and geographically, in the third world. Historically, it was one of the very few countries not to be subjected to colonial rule, and like its counterparts in this respect—Ethiopia, North Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Nepal, Thailand—this enabled pre-capitalist socio-economic structures to survive longer than was the case in countries more directly subjected to the onslaught of capitalist expansion. At the same time, the struggles through which Afghanistan did succeed in resisting European (i.e. Russian and English) pressures generated a nationalist sentiment in the country which bore many similarities to that in countries which were subjected to direct colonial rule. One important difference, however, was that the supposed champions of the national cause were the Afghan monarchs themselves who, as in Ethiopia and North Yemen, were able to use their role in the anti-Western struggle to consolidate the pre-capitalist relations prevailing in the country and hence to postpone the era of socio-economic transformation. In North Yemen and Ethiopia, social changes were blocked until, with the ferocity of long suppression, popular upsurges swept the feudal régimes away in the revolutions of 1962 and 1974 respectively. Now Afghanistan too has undergone a similar explosion, with all the force—and some of the confusions—already seen in those two earlier revolutionary upsurges.

The other anomalous feature of Afghanistan is its geographic position, since it is not clearly part of any of the conventional regional divisions of Asia. It is linked to, but not an integral component of, all three major regions which it borders—Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. It has long borders with Russia, Iran and Pakistan, and a small fifty-mile frontier with China. It covers an area of about 250,000 square miles—about equal to the size of Texas, or two and a half times the size of West Germany—but is entirely landlocked, with the nearest port Karachi over 700 miles away. The country itself is physically dominated by the mountains of the Hindu Kush, which run diagonally from heights of 20,000 feet or more in the north-east to taper away in the deserts bordering Iran and Pakistan; most of the terrain is 4,000 feet high or more. Half of Afghanistan's estimated 20,000 villages are snow-bound in the winter months. The capital, Kabul, lies on the river of the same name at around 6,000 feet.

The cultivated areas of the country lie in the mountain valleys around the central range, and beside the rivers running from them. The main agricultural areas are in the northern plains along the Russian frontier,

⁴ Despite the close historic links between Britain and Afghanistan, most of the recent scholarly literature comes from either the United States, West Germany or the USSR. The standard reference work on the country is Louis Dupree's *Afghanistan*, Princeton 1973. On the history, the best introduction is Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan*, Stanford 1969. On contemporary events see also: Richard Newell, *The Politics of Afghanistan*, London 1972; Louis Dupree and Linette Albert, *Afghanistan in the 1970s*, London 1973; and R. Akhramovich, *Outline History of Afghanistan After the Second World War*, Moscow 1966. The *US Area Handbook on Afghanistan*, Washington 1973, contains a lot of useful information.

but animal-herding nomads and agricultural settlements along the rivers can also be found in the West and South. In all about 21 per cent of the country can be used for some agricultural purposes, i.e. thirty-five million out of a total of 165 million acres; but only about five million acres are at the moment irrigated, and another ten million are either dry-farmed or allowed to lie fallow.⁵ The key to developing this potential lies in harnessing the waters that come down from the mountains in the spring. If this is done, then Afghanistan can expect rather more favourable conditions than those prevailing in either of its two more comparable neighbours, Iran and Pakistan. With sixty-two people per square mile, compared to fifty-seven in Iran, Afghanistan differs from the latter country in having much more water available for agricultural use, since Iran lacks either adequate rainfall or sufficient mountain water from melting snow to develop its agriculture without great difficulty. Pakistan, by contrast, has monsoon rains, but a much denser population (240 persons per square mile) to feed.

While no census has yet been held, the consensual 1975 figure for the Afghan population was around 16.7 millions, of whom only 14 per cent (2.4 millions) were urban dwellers, a similar number nomads and the remaining 71 per cent (11.9 millions) settled agricultural population.⁶ Kabul had a population of around 750,000, but only two other cities—Kandahar and Herat—had over 100,000 inhabitants. All these three cities, and the fourth major one, Mazar-i Sharif, lie in fertile areas but have historically owed their prosperity to being positioned on trade routes linking Afghanistan's Asian neighbours. The great majority of the population, about 80 per cent, are Muslims of the Hanafi branch of Sunni Islam, the tendency predominant in Pakistan; the remaining 20 per cent are Shi'a Muslims, as is the majority in Iran. The Shi'a have historically been discriminated against by the Sunni, but the most potent factor of division has been that along ethnic lines, with the presence of over twenty distinct groups, reflecting the influences of the three main regions surrounding the country.⁷ The largest group are the 7–8 million Pushtuns, the tribally-organized inhabitants of the South and East who have controlled Afghanistan since the state originated in the eighteenth century. Another 30 per cent of the population are Tajiks: Persian-speakers who are not tribally organized, and who form the majority of the urban—and even more so of the trading—communities.⁸ A further one million people, who are especially downtrodden, are the Hazaras, Persian-speakers of Mongol descent. Other groups include the Baluchis, numbering 100,000 in the south-western areas; the Aimaq, an 80,000-strong people speaking a mixture of Persian and Turkish; and a number of Turkic-speakers—the Uzbeks, Turcomans and Qizil-Bash. There are even smaller trading communities of Jews and Sikhs in the major towns;

⁵ *Area Handbook*, p. xxxvi.

⁶ Kevin Rafferty in *The Middle East Annual Review* 1978, p. 145.

⁷ The most detailed breakdown of the nationalities is in Dupree, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–64. For a Soviet analysis see 'Ethnography of Afghanistan', by A. Aslanov and others, in George Grassmuck, Ludwig Adamec and Frances Irwin (ed.), *Afghanistan: Some New Approaches*, Ann Arbor 1969.

⁸ Since 1964, the Persian language as spoken in Afghanistan has officially been called *dari*, after the dialect used around Kabul. The differences are not such as to lead to mutual incomprehensibility.

and in the mountains east of Kabul live the Nuristanis, a fair-haired people believed by some to be descendants of the armies of Alexander the Great.

Origins of the State

Afghanistan's exposed position in Central Asia has made it the object of millennia of invasion and conquest; only in the eighteenth century did an identifiable 'Afghan' state come into existence. It was founded by the Durrani confederation of the Pushtun tribes, under the leadership of Ahmad Khan, who in the 1740s defeated Persian invaders and proclaimed himself Amir of the Afghans. He subjected the North and West of the country to rule from the Pushtun East, and built up the power of the Durrani tribal leaders or *kbans* by giving them land in their own—and in Tajik—areas in return for provision of military support. He thereby set the pattern of almost uninterrupted rule by the Durranis for 230 years. Although Ahmad Shah's successors were unable to sustain the centralized state he had created, it was possible in the late nineteenth century for a new consolidation to occur, under Amir Abdurrahman (1880–1901) and Amir Habibullah (1901–19), both members of the Mohammadzai clan within the Durrani confederation. It was a curious feature of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century history that, at the high-point of European capitalist expansion, two distinct monarchies should have been simultaneously extending their eminently pre-capitalist systems of control over subject peasantries, in Afghanistan and Ethiopia. For the internal policies of Abdurrahman and Habibullah in Afghanistan were matched by those of Menilek and Haile Selassie in Ethiopia. They benefited equally from the tolerant exemption they were given by European powers, who for strategic reasons allowed these anomalous monarchies to consolidate their rule in this epoch. Each was to last until the 1970s, when long-delayed revolutions swept their dynasties away.

Afghanistan, like Ethiopia, did however have to face invasion from colonial powers and the annexation of territories it had historically controlled (Pushtunistan, Eritrea). Yet, in both cases, the monarchies benefited from the resulting nationalist sentiment to rally support for their régimes. On two occasions the British, partly to prevent Pushtun raids on the areas they held, but mainly to forestall what they claimed was Russian influence, launched aggressive wars against Afghanistan. In the First Afghan War (1839–42), the Afghans wiped out an invading force of 4,500 Anglo-Indian soldiers and their 12,000 camp followers; only one British participant escaped to India to tell the tale, though a few other survivors were rescued when a punitive force briefly recaptured Kabul in 1842, razing much of the city in the process. During this war, the British forces burnt whole villages and massacred their inhabitants.⁹

Thirty years later, in 1879, under the pretext that Amir Sher Ali was receiving a Russian diplomatic mission in Kabul, the British again attacked Afghanistan. The three-pronged assault once more met fierce Afghan resistance; but in May 1879, by the Treaty of Gandamak,

⁹ For details of the Afghan Wars and the atrocities of British forces see Gregorian, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–4.

Afghanistan was forced to cede control of its foreign affairs and to surrender all territories beyond the Khyber and Michni passes. In return, the Amir was to receive £60,000 a year. Aware of the depth of Afghan resentment, the British allowed the client Amir they had imposed, Yaqub Khan, to be ousted, and accepted Amir Abdurrahman, a Mohammadzai leader known for his equal hostility to both Britain and Russia. Abdurrahman concentrated on consolidating the Afghan state that had been shattered by decades of division and by the Second Afghan War. After creating the first standing army in Afghan history, he not only reimposed control from Kabul but conquered areas previously outside government influence. In order to increase the money made available by Britain, which he used in his state consolidation, he agreed to the drawing of a new frontier with British India. Defined in 1893 by mutual agreement and named the Durand Line after Sir Mortimer Durand the British official who negotiated it, this cut through the heart of Pushtun territory. In the decades to come the name of Durand, like those of MacMahon and Brévié, was persistently to bedevil relations between the peoples of Asia, long after the imperialist officers and governments they denoted had been driven away.

Although not leading to permanent occupation, these invasions had two durable effects. First, they provoked a sense of Afghan nationalism—which was thereafter often revived by news of the treatment of Pushtun tribes living in the North-West Frontier under British rule. Secondly, by sustaining the Mohammadzais with annual subsidies, the British made these monarchs more capable not only of quelling their own peoples, but of launching a counter-offensive against British India when the right opportunity arose. Just as Britain had been spurred by the international conjuncture (the Russian threat) to launch the first two Afghan wars, so the Mohammadzai took advantage of the weakened condition of British imperialism after the First World War to launch the third one in 1919.

King Amanullah: the Kemalist Option

Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, under the rule of Amir Habibullah, there had been a slow growth of nationalist sentiment in Afghanistan, reflecting a growth of such ideas throughout Asia. The opportunity to reverse the 1879 Treaty of Gandamak was taken in 1919 by Amir Amanullah, the third son of Habibullah, who seized power when his father died mysteriously—perhaps even at Amanullah's instigation. He led what was called the 'Young Afghan' movement. Realizing that, after its revolution, Russia no longer posed a threat in the North, and that Britain was weakened by the carnage of the First World War and uneasy about pan-Islamic sentiment in India, Amanullah launched his forces across the Durand Line. Militarily, the offensive was a failure: only one of the three columns made any headway, and the British retaliated by using the new weapon of air power to bomb Kabul, thus dispensing with the costly overland expeditions they had relied on in the two previous wars. But the Third Afghan War was nonetheless a political success: in August 1919, the weakened British restored full sovereignty to Afghanistan in the Treaty of Rawalpindi. In return for allowing him to conduct an independent foreign policy, the British ceased their subsidy to the Amir.

Amanullah then proceeded to renegotiate Afghanistan's position in the world. He had turned first to revolutionary Russia, and addressed a letter to the 'High-Born President of the Great Russian Republic', Lenin. The latter replied on 27 May 1919, suggesting that diplomatic relations be established and congratulating the Afghan people on their struggle. For the besieged Bolsheviks, the prospect of anti-imperialist struggle in the East offered the hope of temporary relief from counter-revolutionary encirclement, and Lenin and Amanullah faced a common enemy in Britain. Later in the year Lenin wrote a further letter to Amanullah; in it he stated that Afghanistan was 'the only independent Muslim state in the world, and fate sends the Afghan people the great historic task of uniting about itself all enslaved Mohammedan peoples and leading them on the road to freedom and independence'.¹⁰ Such hopes found an echo even further afield where Gramsci, writing on the international revolutionary tide in *l'Ordine Nuovo*, rejoiced that 'the Afghan army is threatening to invade India, thereby rekindling the insurrection in the Punjab and Ganges region'.¹¹ Stalin too was later to use Amanullah's alliance with the Bolsheviks to draw his own lessons.¹²

Such exalted strategic visions were, as it transpired, somewhat misplaced: comparable to similar hopes of that period which turned the hopelessly isolated Outer Mongolian revolution into the beacon of a total Asian upheaval. Amanullah was, as we have seen, quickly able to make his peace with the British. Soviet-Afghan relations were complicated by conflicts in Central Asia between the Bolsheviks and the Muslim leaders of the region. Amanullah was also antagonized by the republican propaganda of Bolshevik militants in the north of Afghanistan itself. Finally, the signing of a Soviet-Afghan Treaty was delayed when the Amir of Bokhara, ousted by Soviet forces, was given refuge in Afghanistan. It was only on 28 February 1921, within days of similar Russian treaties with Turkey and Persia, that a Soviet-Afghan Treaty was concluded.

The treaties with the three southern Asian neighbours marked a new point in Soviet foreign policy and proletarian internationalism: they embodied the renunciation of powers acquired by Tsarist imperialism, and the promise of equal relations between the countries concerned. The treaty with Afghanistan was especially outspoken, since it committed both countries to 'the liberation of the peoples of the East'. The Soviet Union promised technical and economic assistance, and undertook, after plebiscites had been held, to return to Afghanistan territories forcibly taken from it by Russia or the Amir of Bokhara in the nineteenth century.

¹⁰ Amanullah's period is discussed in Gregorian, op. cit., and at greater length in Leon Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919-1919*, Cornell 1973. Both discuss his relations with the Soviet Union. See also Edward Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 3, 1953, pp. 239-42, 290-2, 463-4.

¹¹ 'The Revolutionary Tide', editorial in *l'Ordine Nuovo*, 14 June 1919, translated in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, London 1977, p. 61.

¹² 'The revolutionary character of a national movement in conditions of imperialist oppression does not necessarily imply that the movement contains proletarian elements, or that it has a revolutionary or republican programme, or that it has a democratic basis. The struggle of the Amir of Afghanistan for the independence of Afghanistan is objectively a *revolutionary* struggle, in spite of the monarchist views of the Amir and his associates, since it weakens, disunites and undermines imperialism . . .', *Foundations of Leninism*, Moscow 1950, p. 104.

However, no such plebiscites were, it seems, ever held; and the British were soon able to neutralize the impact of the Soviet-Afghan treaty with a new Anglo-Afghan agreement signed in November 1921. In the following year, there was renewed friction between Russia and Afghanistan, as the Bolsheviks clashed in Central Asia with the pan-Turanian Basmachi forces led by Enver Pasha. Even more significantly, the new entente between the USSR and Britain, reached in March 1921, meant that Afghanistan once again became a neutral zone between the two powerful neighbours. It was no longer the site of struggle or the spearhead of an Asian revolutionary alliance, as originally envisaged in the Lenin-Amanullah correspondence of 1919.¹³

The coincidence of Soviet overtures to Afghanistan with those to Iran and Turkey indicates the strategic context of the period, wherein Afghanistan became one of a line of nationalist régimes along the southern Russian frontier. Whilst internally hostile to revolution (both Turkey and Iran had crushed incipient Communist guerrilla movements in the aftermath of the First World War), these states were also intent on increasing their independence vis-à-vis imperialism, and Amanullah soon began to follow the path being pioneered by Reza Khan in Iran and Kemal Ataturk in Turkey. He developed friendly ties with the latter countries, introduced comparable reforms and in 1927–8 undertook a protracted international voyage, the first he had made outside his country and the first by an Afghan monarch abroad. He visited India, Egypt, Italy, France and England, and on the return voyage Russia, Turkey and Persia. He often referred to himself as a ‘revolutionary’ and, particularly impressed by Reza Khan and Ataturk, seemed determined to transform Afghanistan as they were transforming their respective countries.

Amanullah’s first measures were in the field of education, and he brought in foreign teachers to train new intellectual and administrative personnel. He also tried to encourage schools for girls, and in 1921 introduced a Family Code which, although very inadequate, did take the first steps to reduce the subjugation of women: it outlawed child marriage and marriage between close relatives. Amanullah himself declared that ‘the keystone of the future structure of the new Afghanistan will be the emancipation of women’, and in 1928 his wife, Queen Soraya, appeared in public unveiled—apparently the first urban Afghan woman to do so. Measures were taken to develop the press, roads were built and Amanullah sought to introduce a legal system that would over time supersede the Muslim law administered by the *qazis* or Islamic judges. Amanullah also tried to follow Ataturk and Reza Khan by introducing general conscription to replace the system of tribal levies—the *haft nafari* or ‘every eighth man’ system—on which his predecessors had relied. He appointed as his prime minister a Tajik, in a move designed to loosen the Durrani monopoly of power. Finally, in the constitution he announced in

¹³ Bolshevik foreign minister Chicherin declared at the Lausanne conference in December 1922: ‘You are uneasy because our horsemen have reappeared on the heights of the Pamirs, and because you have no longer to deal with the half-witted Tsar who ceded the ridge of the Hindu Kush to you in 1895. But it is not a war that we offer you, it is peace, based on the principles of a partition wall between us’, quoted in Carr, *op. cit.* p. 464. On the conjuncture in Iran at this time and Soviet policy towards it, see my ‘Revolution in Iran: Was it Possible in 1921?’, *Khamsin*, No. 8, London 1979.

1923 and later revised, he proposed that substantive powers be transferred to the national assembly, elected by all adult men *and* women.¹⁴ In the political reforms he proposed, he was thus in some respects far in advance of Reza Khan or Atatürk.

However, Amanullah ran into serious opposition that in the end destroyed him. In 1924 his army was unable to meet a tribal threat; he had to fall back on other tribes, and the price was the halting of his reform programme. Four years later, on his return from his international trip, he tried enthusiastically to relaunch it. He summoned one thousand tribal notables and in a five-day speech told them of the world he had seen. He proposed to reform the constitution, giving more powers to the new 150-member parliament, and to extend military service to the whole country. Later he decreed that government officials would not be allowed to practice polygamy, that women were to discard the veil and that government employees in Kabul should wear western dress. While many of these measures were similar to reforms being proposed in Turkey and Iran, their instigator in Afghanistan proved to be too weak: within half a year of his return from abroad, Amanullah had been ousted. A revolt against tax collection among the Shinwari tribe near the Khyber Pass soon spread, once it was clear that Amanullah's army could not maintain order. In January 1929, Amanullah was chased from Kabul by Bacha-i Saqqo, a Tajik rebel who briefly made himself monarch. But the Pushtun tribes then retaliated under the leadership of Nadir Khan. Nadir, the commander of Amanullah's forces in the Third Afghan War and later an exile in France, re-established Durrani control by recapturing Kabul in October and killing Bacha-i Saqqo. Amanullah meanwhile, rejected by the Pushtun tribes, fled to exile in Italy, where he lived until his death in 1960.¹⁵

Amanullah's greatest mistake was that he found no solution to the problem of the army. Whereas Atatürk and Reza Khan built up armies, Amanullah neglected to do so. He abolished the traditional tribal levy system, and in so doing he both lost a secure support and antagonized the *khans*, who had used control of recruitment to strengthen their own position. He did not provide his new army with either the finance or the technical support it required, so found himself defenceless in the face of the 1924 and 1928 uprisings. There was an objective difficulty not faced by Turkey or Iran, namely the predominance of tribes and tribal leaders in the military system (a problem that has caused acute problems in the attempt to create a central army in North Yemen); but Amanullah handled this issue carelessly, thus contributing to his own downfall. There is considerable debate on why Amanullah was overthrown. Soviet historians tend to attribute the responsibility to Britain, and in particular to T. E. Lawrence (at that time in India), but the evidence suggests otherwise.¹⁶ Soviet writers also blame Amanullah for not attempting a land reform and rallying the peasantry; but this is somewhat pharisaical,

¹⁴ On Amanullah's reforms, see the works by Gregorian and Poullada already mentioned, as well as Poullada's 'Political Modernization in Afghanistan: The Amanullah Reforms', in Grassmuck et al (ed.), op. cit.

¹⁵ See Poullada, 'Political Modernization', pp. 112 ff.

¹⁶ Gregorian, op. cit., pp. 266 ff.

since the social and political limitations on him were such as to make this impossible. He is today a hero in revolutionary Afghanistan, and descendants of his branch of the royal family have not been arrested. Many of the problems and dangers Amanullah confronted have remained, half-a-century after his fall; but this time the régime attempting to transform Afghanistan does appear able to control the army and appeal directly to the oppressed sectors of society, as Amanullah could not.¹⁷

Nadir Shah: Feudal Consolidation

Once in power, Nadir Khan worked determinedly to establish his dynastic position and to rebuild the alliance with the *khans* that Amanullah had tried to dispense with. The system Nadir established was to last, with modifications, until the revolution of 1978. In a series of decrees that culminated in the 1931 constitution, a new conservative régime was formed, linking the monarchy to the landowning chiefs and the religious leaders. The significance of Amanullah's reforms is clearly shown by the force of the counter-reformation launched by Nadir. The new constitution gave all political power to the monarch, and restricted the monarchy to members of Nadir's own family, the Mosahiban. The constitution included a powerless parliament with upper and lower houses; but the real supporting influence lay with the 1,000-strong assembly of tribal chiefs known as the *Loya Jirgab*. This was given powers to veto changes in taxation, thereby guaranteeing the *khans* the ability to block any future attempts to encroach on their economic position. Nadir Shah won further support from the tribal leaders by reintroducing the traditional system of recruitment based on tribal levies, and on this basis a new 12,000-strong army was created. Nadir's régime also reversed Amanullah's other measures. All educational establishments for women were closed, women were denied the vote, and the veil became compulsory again. Nadir not only declared his loyalty to Islamic law, but handed control of jurisprudence and legislation to the mollahs. The Hanafi brand of Muslim law was declared official by the constitution. Hence the new régime reintegrated landowners and mollahs into the Mohammadzai state.

Nadir himself was assassinated in 1933 by a military cadet whose father had been a supporter of Amanullah, but this signalled no breach in dynastic continuity. The young King Zahir (born 1919) was placed on the throne, while real power remained for twenty years in the hands of three uncles: Mohammad Hashim Khan (prime minister 1933–46), Shah Mahmud (Minister of Defence, then prime minister 1946–53), and Shah Wali (later Minister of Defence). They ruled Afghanistan as a family estate; despite some expansion in education, even including the reopening of a girls' school, and the expansion of the army, the period 1931–53 was one of stagnation.

¹⁷ The most apt analogy for Amanullah is probably not Reza or Atatürk, but Mohammad Ali the ruler of Egypt who tried in the early nineteenth century to transform his country and make it independent of the Ottomans and Europeans. His venture ended in catastrophe too, with his economy in ruins and his army routed by the Turks. Taraki has given his judgement on the failure of Amanullah, stressing the absence of a central government and an army capable of imposing a new order, *Die Zeit*, 9 June 1978.

In the 1931 constitution Pushtu was made the official language, and a special Pushtun Academy was established in 1937 to 'purify' the language of Persian influences. The Mohammadzai restorationists were also careful to insulate Afghanistan from other outside influences. Both Nadir Shah and his successor scrupulously refrained from offering any aid to the Pushtuns resisting British rule, whilst they obliged the Soviet Union by curbing the Basmachi refugees in the North of the country. To offset the influence of Russia and Britain the régime developed ties with Germany, in a policy similar to that of Reza Khan, and an active German presence was established in the 1930s. During the period of the Nazi-Soviet Pact the Germans even had a plan to restore Amanullah to the throne, but Russian objections prevented them from trying to implement this.¹⁸ As the Second World War progressed, the Afghan régime gradually accommodated itself to the Soviet-British entente. Yet despite remaining neutral and avoiding the fate of Iran, which was invaded by Britain and the Soviet Union in August 1941, Afghanistan's economic problems were accentuated by the global conflict. By 1945 the country's rulers realized they would have in some degree to emerge from their isolation and undertake a measure of socio-economic development. For the first time the United States became a significant factor in Afghan affairs; the Morrison-Knudsen firm of California signed a major contract with the Afghan government in 1946, for the harnessing of the waters along the 600-mile long Helmand river in the West of the country. Soviet aid was also increased, though not on the scale it later reached. But in the aftermath of the War, Afghan politics were marked by two other developments that were to have a major, if delayed, impact on the next thirty years. They would realign Afghanistan's international relations and ultimately bring down the Mohammadzai dynasty.

The first of these developments was the Pushtunistan issue, which came to a head with the British withdrawal from India and the partition of the sub-continent. Despite official Afghan non-involvement, the Pushtuns of the North-West Frontier had resisted British rule for decades. Some tribes had risen in arms in the 1930s, but more sustained opposition came from a non-violent movement modelled on Gandhi's Congress Party. This movement was led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the father of the contemporary Pakistan politician Wali Khan and was entitled the Servants of God (*Khodai Khidmatgaran*). For reasons partly designed to endow it with a symbolic radical aura, the *Khodai Khidmatgaran* wore clothes rubbed in (red) brick dust and were known as the 'Red Shirts'. Abdul Ghaffar Khan (born in 1891 and still active today) had been a supporter of Amanullah, and many of his proclaimed policies for the future Pushtunistan were reminiscent of the reforms the defeated Afghan king had tried to implement. His demand was for self-determination for the 150,000-square mile area inhabited by six million Pushtuns in British India, leaving open whether they would then join Afghanistan or not. Thus when the British organized a plebiscite in 1947, the *Khodai Khidmatgaran* boycotted it because it allowed only two options—joining Pakistan or India. Most of those who did vote opted understandably for Pakistan, but Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his followers denied the plebiscite's validity on the grounds that only a minority of the population

¹⁸ Gregorian, op. cit., p. 385.

had voted. For its part, the Afghan government, no longer fearful of British anger, gave support to the demand for self-determination, and re-adopted the question internationally for the first time since the Treaty of Rawalpindi in 1919. Afghanistan became the only country to oppose Pakistan's entry into the UN; and in 1950, as a result of border clashes with Pushtun tribes, Pakistan closed the border between the two countries.

A commercial bourgeoisie had been developing in Afghanistan since the 1930s, as a result of increased trade with the capitalist world beyond. Based among Tajiks and Sikhs in the cities, it also entailed considerable Pushtun involvement, since the roads out of Afghanistan went through the tribal areas and the *kbans* derived revenue from taxing all traffic upon them—as well as from the growth of smuggling across the borders. The closure of the frontier was, therefore, a much more serious development than it might have been in earlier autarkic days; it resulted in Afghanistan turning where the nature of its social régime might least have oriented it—to the Soviet Union. Just as the extremely backward Imam of Yemen turned to Russia in the 1950s to sustain him in his campaigns against the British in South Yemen, so the Mohammadzais were forced by their militancy on Pushtunistan to turn to Moscow for assistance. But here there was the added factor of the two countries sharing a common frontier: something that enabled the Russians over time to provide Afghanistan with an alternative trading outlet and to break the country's previous dependence on trade via Pakistan. In 1950, the Soviet Union and Afghanistan signed a new trade agreement; over the next five years, trade between the two countries rose by 50 per cent, with the Soviet Union taking a fifth of Afghanistan's exports. In 1961, another crisis year, 55 per cent of Afghan trade was with or through the Soviet Union. The Pushtunistan issue therefore created a new alliance with the Soviet Union, one more durable and extensive than the earlier one between Lenin and Amanullah. This alliance was given added impetus as Pakistan moved closer to the United States and joined both the Baghdad Pact (later CENTO) and SEATO in the mid-fifties.¹⁹

The real factors which lay behind the new militancy in Kabul are harder to identify; in any case, as subsequent developments were to show, the commitment of the Mohammadzais to the cause of Pushtun self-determination was stronger in verbal than in real terms. Any autonomous Pushtunistan, let alone a reunification of all Pushtuns inside Afghanistan, would obviously have strengthened the dominance of the Pushtuns over the non-Pushtuns in the country and acted as a further counterweight to any increase in the influence of Iran, now developing a regional influence for the first time since the eighteenth century. The Pushtunistan policy was unpopular with the Tajiks and others in Afghanistan, whose commercial interests as traders and farmers have also been hit by border

¹⁹ Soviet positions on Pushtunistan have varied over the years. The 'Red Shirt' movement had the misfortune to develop in the height of the Third Period, and Soviet publications declared that the *Khodai Khidmatgaran* (Servants of God) were in reality servants of imperialism, like Gandhi (Gregorian, op. cit., p. 97). As the Kabul-Moscow alliance developed in the 1950s, Soviet leaders declared their support for self-determination in Pushtunistan, but they never pressed the matter in the UN or similar gatherings. A useful survey of Soviet policy in Afghanistan and towards the Pushtun question can be found in Nake Kamrany, *Peaceful Competition in Afghanistan*, Washington 1969.

closures. Moreover, there was more than a superficial resemblance between the Afghan position on Pushtunistan and the irredentism of other precarious and rightwing régimes : there are strong grounds for believing that the emphasis laid on Pushtunistan was designed as much to mobilize and divert public attention at home as to help the oppressed kith and kin across the frontier.

Apart from the British withdrawal from India, this factor may help to explain why the issue became such a live one in the late forties; for at this time another major development occurred in Afghan politics, namely the emergence for the first time of an urban opposition movement that was implicitly if not explicitly republican. For reasons that are not yet clear, but may have been due to the desire to win international and particularly US approval against Pakistan, the Shah Mahmud government allowed some liberal figures to be elected to parliament in 1949. Although powerless, they were able to use the legislature as a tribune, and a press with substantial freedom was permitted to flourish. The movement was known as the *Wikh-i Zalmaiyan* or Awakened Youth movement, and had been founded in 1947.²⁰ Between 1949 and 1952, as many as fifty of the 120 members of the lower house were in one way or another sympathetic to this critical movement. These deputies began to ask questions about government corruption, and legislated freedom of the press. The first hostility to US influence was evident at this time, in debates on the Helmand development scheme.

The extent of this movement should not be exaggerated. It was largely confined to educated Kabulis—civil servants and students. The average sale of the three main papers was 1,500 each. But even in such a limited form the movement proved too much for the government, so the Mohammadzai struck back. A student association was banned in 1950. The press was closed and, in 1952, twenty-five leaders of the *Wikh-i Zalmaiyan* were imprisoned. No such opposition was allowed in the new parliament, and instead the ruling family decided to nominate as premier one of its most energetic members, a former Minister of the Interior and then Commander of the Central Forces in Kabul, Daud Khan. Born in 1912 and a cousin of the king's, Daud represented, with his younger brother Naim Khan, a distinct and less archaic fraction of the ruling family. From 1953 to 1963, and again from 1973 until his death in the 1978 revolution, Daud was to direct the affairs of Afghanistan.

The Decade of Mohammad Daud

Daud, premier from 1953 to 1963, was most preoccupied by the implications of the Pushtunistan issue, on which he adopted—verbally at least—a militant position. In 1954 he undertook a new series of economic negotiations with the Soviet Union: a \$3.5 million loan was obtained, and relations were further strengthened when a second round of Afghan-Pakistani conflict closed the border once more in 1955. In December 1955, Bulganin and Khrushchev visited Kabul on their way home from a trip to India. They expressed 'sympathy' with the policy of Afghanistan

²⁰ On the *Wikh* movement, see Dupree, op. cit., pp. 492–7 and Akhramovich, op. cit., pp. 45–67.

on the Pushtunistan problem, and signed an agreement for a new loan of \$100 million, part of it for military purchases.

1956 was the year in which the new pattern of alliances was consolidated. In March, Pakistan hosted a meeting of SEATO which expressed support for Karachi's position on Pushtunistan, and Pakistan joined the Baghdad Pact in the same period. At this point, some members of the Afghan government tried to obtain comparable military aid from the United States. But Washington made this conditional on Afghanistan joining the Baghdad Pact, and in this regard the Afghans wanted guarantees of US support in the event of Soviet attack. When the appeal to the West failed, Kabul turned to the USSR: in August 1956, Afghanistan signed an agreement in which it undertook to obtain \$25 millions worth of Soviet arms. Thus, in an attempt to consolidate its reactionary internal position via demagoguery on Pushtunistan, the Mohammadzai dynasty had turned to the Soviet Union for arms; and US officials, whilst expressing some alarm, seemed confident that the archaic social structures of Afghanistan would combine with the understandings of global equilibrium to prevent any major upheaval. It was to take two further decades for the combustible element in this new Afghan-Soviet relationship finally to be ignited.

The most serious crisis over Pushtunistan occurred in the 1960–3 period, when the border was closed for the third time. In a dramatic display of support, the Soviet Union airlifted Afghan grape exports from Kabul, while the Shah of Iran and the Kennedy administration turned down an Afghan appeal for funds to build a new road outlet via Iran, that would have made the country independent of both Russia and Pakistan. However, it appears that the price of protracted hostility with Pakistan, and the dependence on Russia which this created, was one which others in the Mohammadzai dynasty were reluctant to sustain. In the end, Daud's intransigence on this issue led to his dismissal. Despite Soviet and Indian airlifts, the blockade caused considerable hardship, especially among the non-Pushtun merchants who were not in any case sympathetic to the Pushtunistan cause. Secondly, there was no sign that Pakistan would give way, and General Ayub Khan (himself a Pushtun) had consolidated his military régime and his relations with Washington. The Shah of Iran also undertook a diplomatic offensive to win over part of the Afghan régime to a less militant position, presaging his later and much more active concern with the integrity of Pakistan and the need to reduce Soviet influence in his region. Amidst all these pressures, Zahir Shah and his uncle Shah Wali finally dismissed Daud in March 1963.

Zahir's Last Years

For the next decade, the King exercised power himself, in liaison with a few members of the Pushtun elite. These included the Minister of Defence in all the cabinets, General Khan Mohammad Khan, the surviving brother of Nadir Shah, Shah Wali, who was (as Daud had earlier been) Commander of the Central Forces; and General Seyyid Hassan, the chief of staff. The prime ministers, under the new 1964 constitution, were not allowed to be members of the royal family; but they were loyal civil servants who followed Zahir Shah's orders. Despite the ban on members of the royal family holding office, dynastic control

was as great as ever, masked by a façade of docile commoners chosen for their obedience and lack of any domestic base. After dismissing Daud, the king took what was alleged to be a major initiative—and one which, in an unintended fashion, was to hasten his downfall. He proclaimed a new constitution in 1964, replacing that of 1931 introduced by Nadir Shah. Under it there were to be general elections for a new assembly, the *Wolesi Jirgab*, which would have 215 members elected for four years. Women were to vote and stand for election, and a new body of law was to be enacted to supersede the Islamic Hanafi codes. Even political parties were to be allowed, provided they did not oppose Islam and the monarch. There was much talk of a ‘New Democracy’ and the hopes of many were, temporarily, raised.²¹

In practice, the 1964 constitution marked no major change in Afghan politics. Article 15 of the constitution explicitly stated that the king was not accountable, and he was given the power to nominate the prime minister, other ministers, and all top civil-service, military and judicial personnel. The *Wolesi Jirgab*'s powers were at best limited, and it was dominated by rural notables chosen by the King. Kabul had only four seats, and in the rural areas voting procedures were derisory: only 10 per cent of the electorate voted, and outside a few major urban centres no women voted at all. Surveys of *Wolesi Jirgab* members indicated that at least one third were illiterate and only thirty had anything more than primary education. Of the 216 members of the 1965 *Wolesi Jirgab*, 146 were tribal or ethnic leaders, and the largest of the sixteen professions was mollah (twenty-five in all). Yet in that first comparatively uncontrolled election, up to twenty critical members were elected—four of them, as we shall see, from the PDPA. The 1969 *Wolesi Jirgab* marked a retreat even from this record: the number of Durrani rose from six in 1965 to forty-three; only two PDPA members were elected, despite their fielding a number of candidates; and no women were elected, whereas four had been elected in 1965. These reactionary delegates used the powers they had to block any positive moves and to protect their own class interests. Taxation on land and livestock had remained the same for fifty years, yet they opposed any increase in it; and for three years they even opposed the establishment of an industrial development bank.²²

The 1964 constitution had also promised freedom to form political parties and freedom of the press, but after the brief period of ‘New Democracy’ in 1965 and early 1966 no such liberties were allowed. The *Wolesi Jirgab* passed a law permitting political parties, but the King refused to ratify it; and the press remained tightly controlled, especially after the 1969 ‘elections’. At the same time, the social and economic crisis of the régime was intensifying, behind the appearance of dynastic stasis; by the early seventies, Zahir Shah was under growing criticism both within and without the Mohammadzai clan. A number of different factors contributed to this situation, and provided the context in which

²¹ Dupree, *op. cit.*, gives a detailed account of this period, as does Newell, *op. cit.* and John Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, London 1967. All three accounts are, in retrospect, rather indulgent towards Zahir's new course.

²² On the social composition of the *Wolesi Jirgab*, see *Area Handbook*, pp. xiv–xv, and Christine Ridout, ‘Authority Patterns and the Afghan Coup of 1973’, *Middle East Journal*, Spring 1975, Vol. 29, No. 2.

Mohammad Daud, in league with a group of left-wing officers, could seize power in July 1973 and depose the King. The first factor was internal to the régime itself: namely, the King's manner of wielding power. Behind an appearance of benevolent concern, the King was becoming increasingly divorced from the country as he spent an ever greater amount of his time abroad. Secondly, whilst no socio-economic reforms were instituted, the state had come more and more to rely on foreign aid as a substitute for domestically generated revenues. This situation was becoming even more precarious because, as a result of a general decline in US aid to the Third World from the mid-sixties onwards, this component of the state's subsidy had been reduced. Thirdly, the country was hit between 1969 and 1972 by a severe drought, that affected 20 per cent of the population and killed up to half-a-million people.²³ Much of the wheat imported through aid agencies was appropriated by corrupt officials and then sold on the black market, and it was late 1972 before an effective distribution programme had begun. As with the Wollo famine in Ethiopia at the same time, the archaic government tried at first to deny that any famine existed; but in the end the terrible and avoidable suffering of millions of peasants revealed in the starkest form that the régime had to go.

External issues also played a role in the King's ousting. The most contentious specific issue concerned an agreement reached with Iran on disposal of the Helmand River waters. In return for receiving some of this water, Iran was to supply Afghanistan with oil; but in the charged atmosphere of the drought years, and with growing suspicion of Iran's regional intentions, this was a very unpopular arrangement. Whatever the real terms were, there was a strong feeling that the government had betrayed national interests in return for financial inducements; and this opposition reached its peak when Premiers Musa Shafiq of Afghanistan and Amir Abbas Hoveida of Iran signed the protocol for the agreement in March 1973. Simultaneously, the Pushtunistan and Baluchistan issues had come to the fore again, with the defeat of the Pakistani army in Bangladesh in December 1971, and the dismissal of the National Awami Party government in Baluchistan in February 1973, after Iranian pressure on Bhutto. Those keen to press the Pushtunistan question, not least Mohammad Daud, felt that this was a time when Afghan interests could and should be reasserted. Back in Kabul, Daud and his allies waited their chance. The *Wolesi Jirgab* had been giving what, even for it, was an exceptional demonstration of paralysis, since between mid-March and early June it had failed to meet for eighty-two sessions because it lacked a quorum. On 25 June the King left to spend the summer in England and Italy, and on 17 July 1973 Daud led a successful and almost bloodless coup.²⁴

The Rise of an Afghan Left: the PDPA

Daud's coup was in one respect little more than a shift of personnel within the Mosahiban family, and he himself certainly tried to reconstitute the

²³ *Area Handbook*, pp. xix-xxi.

²⁴ On the background to the 1973 coup, see Dupree, *op. cit.*, pp. 753-60; and *Le Monde*, 26 August 1973.

dynastic system his cousin had headed since 1933. But in making his coup, he had formed an alliance with a group of left-wing army officers and civilian militants of a different social and political formation, who represented a clandestine communist current that had been growing underground in Afghanistan for the past decade at least. A résumé of their development is, therefore, necessary in order to chart Daud's period in power and the reasons for his downfall in 1978.

So far as is known no Afghan communist party was founded in the early years of the Comintern, in contrast to all the other Asian countries bordering the Soviet Union (Turkey, Persia, China, Mongolia, Korea), where in the years following 1917 a mixture of refugees, students, prisoners of war and migrant labourers was able to form parties under the inspiration and guidance of the Russian revolution. A few militants did cross the Amu Darya river in the 1920s, and again in the 1940s to carry out republican propaganda; but it is not clear whether these reflected official Soviet policy, or whether they had any effect. The absence of a communist party was not due merely to the relatively more conservative character of Afghan society (this was hardly more pronounced than Mongolia), but also to the political conjuncture in the initial period of Comintern activity. Whereas in Persia and Turkey the Bolsheviks only formed alliances with Reza and Ataturk after a period in which communist elements had emerged, such an alliance existed from the very start of Amanullah's régime in early 1919. The Afghan monarch and the Bolsheviks had common enemies: not only the British, but also Muslim political forces in Central Asia who had designs on—and influence in—Afghanistan and were at the same time anti-communists: the Amir of Bokhara and the Basmachi pan-Turanians. There was no Bolshevik interest in founding a distinct Afghan communist party. Such a move would have run contrary to the dominant concern at that time, which was to consolidate relations with Amanullah, who headed the only state in the world at that time willing to co-operate with the Bolsheviks.

The Afghan communist movement had its origins in a quite different conjuncture, the late 1940s. Its emergence seems to have been facilitated both by the prestige the Soviet Union had won through its aid to Afghanistan, and by the democratic movement of 1949–52. If there was an external *party* influence, it came more probably from the Communist Party of India, later divided, than from the CPSU. The main recruits were intellectuals and army officers, both of whom came into contact with Russian ideas and training in their places of work. The growth of higher education in Kabul produced a small urban intelligentsia of a few thousand people, as did the beginnings of foreign education after 1945. Another factor was the growth of a flourishing literary culture, often with a strong social content. Short stories and poems, although confined to a small readership, did enable a number of writers to voice criticism of the government and concern for the oppressed.

The first period of open political expression was during the years of the *Wikh-i Zalmaiyan*. Among the members of that movement were two men later prominent in the PDPA, Nur Mohammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal. Taraki was the older man: he likes to remind people that he was born on 16 October 1917, in the days of the Russian revolution. Although by

origin a Pushtun of the Ghilzai confederation, he was born in the northern plains of the country, where his grandparents had migrated from Ghazni in the Ghilzai heartlands some time in the nineteenth century. Born into a poor shepherd's family, he grew up among Tajiks and Uzbeks as well as Pushtuns. He later went to work in Bombay, as a clerk in the Kandahar-based Pushtun Trading Company (a fruit-exporting concern), and there attended night school and furthered his education. Since the Bombay dockers were amongst the most militant stalwarts of the CPI, it may well be that this was where Taraki first felt the impact of Marxism. By the forties he was known as a writer of short stories—among them *Dried Beef* and *Get to Work*, accounts of the life of the peasantry—and he was prominent in the *Wikb-i Zalmaiyan*. After the latter was suppressed in 1952, Taraki was sent as cultural attaché to the embassy in Washington; but he resigned six months later, in protest at Daud's accession to power. He then returned to Afghanistan, where he worked in the official Bakhtar News Agency, and as a translator for the US embassy, before becoming Director of Kabul Radio. Later he lived as an independent writer, and by 1978 had published over thirty books; most of these were short stories, but two at least were on materialist philosophy, incorporating material from Soviet works.

The contrast with Babrak Karmal could not be greater. Karmal, twenty years younger, was the son of a high-ranking Pushtun army officer. A student leader in the *Wikb-i Zalmaiyan* period, he came from a much younger generation than Taraki, one whose hopes were raised and then dashed by the transient liberalization of 1949–52. It is not clear how far there exists a direct continuity between the *Wikb* and later events, and a *Hizb-i Khalq* (People's Party) founded in 1951 seems not to have had any organizational connection with the later PDPA.²⁵ But the disappointments of the *Wikb* period left their mark on a generation of militants—of whom Karmal was one—and an opposition re-emerged in 1964 when, under 'New Democracy', a degree of free political activity became possible and it was expected by many that political parties would be allowed.

The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan held its first congress in Kabul in January 1965, in anticipation of the elections planned for later in that year. Its programme was an orthodox Communist one for the period, reflecting the analyses of the Third World conventionally associated with Khrushchev or Brezhnev. It stated that Afghanistan was ruled by large landowners, wealthy merchants, compradors and bureaucrats, in league with branches of foreign monopolies. Evoking 1919, it envisaged a national democratic government to liberate Afghanistan from its backwardness. It called for an alliance of workers, peasants, progressive intellectuals, artisans, urban and rural smallholders and national bourgeois in one front, and for the unity of the working class of Afghanistan in the face of all tribal and ethnic differences. In this latter connection, it demanded primary education for all children in their mother tongue and the development of the different languages and cultures of the country. Its social demands included guarantees of the right to work, equal treatment for women, a forty-two-hour week, paid sickness and maternity leave, and a ban on child labour. In international

²⁵ On *Hizb-i Khalq*, see Akhramovich, op. cit. p. 59.

politics, it called for an end to imperialist influence in Afghanistan and support for peaceful coexistence, and stressed the 'superiority of the forces of peace and progress'.²⁶

The size or social composition of the Party membership at that time is not known, but it is hard to imagine that it was more than a few hundred, confined largely to Kabul itself. The First (and so far only) Congress elected a nine-member Central Committee, headed by Taraki as secretary-general, and a ten-member list of associate CC members.²⁷ But it was only in 1966, some months after the new law on the press was passed, that the PDPA was able to publish its paper, *Khalq* (The People). Taraki was registered as the publisher, and it was edited by Bariq Shafie, an associate member of the CC and a well-known poet. Six issues appeared between 11 April and 16 May 1966, when the government closed it down. The first issue, with an editorial in Pushtun and Persian, was sold mainly by students, to the tune of 20,000 copies; later issues sold 10,000. *Khalq's* policies were those of the PDPA (whether it actually stated it was a party organ is not clear), and its declared aim was to 'alleviate the boundless agonies of the oppressed peoples of Afghanistan'. Invoking the principles of 'the great October revolution', it called for land reform and a dominant role for the public sector. It was these demands that gave the authorities the excuse to ban it, claiming its programme was 'un-Islamic'. One supporter of the ban was quoted as saying: 'The people in the villages will believe anything, and the brand of communism propounded by *Khalq* would have confused them and made them doubt the New Democracy'.²⁸

The masses of Afghanistan were soon given other reasons for doubting the New Democracy, this time by the Mohammadzai régime itself. A year earlier, in the elections for the new *Wolesi Jirgab* under the 1964 constitution, a number of liberals and PDPA members had won seats (as had happened before in 1949). The four PDPA members were Karmal, Anahita Rabtezzad, Nur Ahmad Panjwai, and Fezanul Haq Fezan, and there were over a dozen other delegates of a liberal and non-monarchical orientation. Although they were well aware of their powerlessness in the *Wolesi Jirgab*, the PDPA members decided to use their position to challenge the policies of Premier Mohammad Yusuf, the King's nominee: during the first session, on 24 October 1964, several hundred students invaded the parliament buildings in support of Karmal, Rabtezzad and the others. On 25 October, further demonstrations by students and other Kabulis against Yusuf occurred, but the army was brought in and at least three people were killed in clashes. Yusuf resigned, and was replaced by Mohammad Hashim Maiwandal. Although the latter adopted a demagogic stand on some issues (for example, he vociferously backed the Arab states in the 1967 war with Israel), he presided over the end of the

²⁶ A summary of the PDPA programme is given by Ghafur Attar, 'Das Volk an der Macht', *Anti-imperialistische Informationsbulletin*, Marburg May-June 1978.

²⁷ The members of the Central Committee were: Nur Mohammad Taraki, Babrak Karmal, Sultan Kishmand, Saleh Zarai, Shahrullah Shahpur, Dastagir Panchsheri, Taher Badakhshi, Nur Ahmad Nur, Shah Wali. The alternate members were: Karim Misaq, Dr Zaher, Wahab Shafie, Bareq Shafie, Suleiman Laiq, Hafizullah Amin, Ismail Danisht, Hakim Sharai, Abdul Mohammad, Zaher Ofaq.

²⁸ Dupree, *op. cit.* pp. 608 ff. This account includes a discussion of the public issues of both papers and of the October 1965 incidents.

New Democracy. By mid-1966, the independent press had been crushed. The paralysis of the *Wolesi Jirgab* and the fraudulent elections of 1969 finally buried any hopes of liberalization by the Mohammadzai dynasty.

The events of 1965–6 had a major effect on a whole generation of students and young civil servants, and left a permanent politicized legacy—as, in a smaller way, the suppression of the *Wikh-i Zalmaiyan* had done. Every year thereafter, 25 October was celebrated by the students of Kabul; and the general international climate of youth militancy and hostility to US intervention in Vietnam also found its echo in the valleys of the Hindu Kush. (In a similar way, the student movement in the archaic Ethiopian state was also beginning to develop, amid equally difficult conditions of clandestinity and isolation.) In 1967, anti-American feeling was strengthened when an Afghan student in the United States revealed in *Ramparts* magazine that the CIA had interfered in Afghan student affairs. Then, in 1968, some students broke from the confines of their university and high-school environment when a major wave of strikes, the largest in Afghan history, erupted. Between April and June 1968, twenty-one separate strikes were reported, in a number of towns—in construction, transport, textile factories, cement and petroleum plants, and gold mines. Total industrial employment was, at that time, about 30,000, with another 50,000 in construction. A dozen student strikes were reported at the same time, and some students demonstrated in support of the striking workers.²⁹ Similar student demonstrations were reported in May–June 1969 when, after a dispute over standards of evaluation, up to 15,000 university and secondary-school students clashed with the West German-trained riot police, the *Ghundeḥ Zarabeh* (Strike Force). In 1970, there were further clashes, with mobilizations on both left and right. Women took to the streets of Kabul to protest at right-wing Islamic restrictions on their emancipation; mollah-led crowds demonstrated against the use of the honorific word *Durud* (Great Praise), normally reserved for the Prophet Mohammad, in a poem by PDPA author Bareq Shafie on the centenary of Lenin's birth. While it is not clear what political character or organization the protests had, they indicated a highly charged atmosphere in Kabul.

A number of factors contributed to this situation. First, there was the specific crisis of education. Every year, between 14,000 and 18,000 students graduated from secondary school; but Kabul University could take only 2,000 a year, and Afghanistan did not have the money of its neighbour Iran to send the bulk of the students abroad. This difficulty at the point of entry to higher education was compounded by the problem of finding employment after graduation, since the increasing difficulties of the régime in acquiring foreign aid had reduced its capacity to hire the educated. In 1971, it was reckoned that 51 per cent of all Afghans with nine years of education or over were working for the Ministry of Education; and in a stagnant economy, there were no great openings in the private sector.³⁰ Faced with these obstacles, and with bewildering changes in educational syllabus (a result of the mixture of American,

²⁹ Dupree, *op. cit.* pp. 619–23. The first strike recorded was in Jabal us-Siraj textile works in 1951: see Akhramovich, *op. cit.* p. 56.

³⁰ *Area Handbook*, p. xviii. See also Baqui Yousefzai, 'Kabul University Students: a Potential Political Force?', in Dupree and Albert (eds), *op. cit.* pp. 167–82.

Russian, German and French influences), the student body was maximally discontented in its own right. Added to this was the stifling political atmosphere following the end of New Democracy, and the memory of 25 October 1965. By the early seventies, an air of suppressed but intense militancy existed at least among the intelligentsia: 'In some classrooms, the students often refuse to listen to anti-Marxist views, and an atmosphere has been created in which few academics can favourably discuss anything related to the West.'³¹ Taraki himself has, since coming to power, stated that most of the members of *Khalq* are teachers by profession, and their radicalization must have occurred at this time. In these circumstances, the new Afghan Left was able to recruit from a politicized intelligentsia; it may also be the case, though this is not clear, that it was able to win support from among the new proletarian forces that had struck in 1965.

The Split

However, the novelty and constrained circumstances in which the Left found itself had as a predictable consequence that it was also highly factionalized. In the six years following the First Congress of the PDPA, at least three separate currents grew from it. Two, the *Khalq* and *Parcham*, remained within a tenuously united PDPA; the other, the 'Marxist-Leninist' *Settami Melli*, adopted a variety of Maoism and broke away altogether. No satisfactory account of the divisions with the PDPA is yet possible. What information there is indicates that the split between *Khalq* and *Parcham* in June 1967 reflected a multiple division in which political, ethnic and personal factors combined to split the infant organization. The first issue of disagreement was that of how to respond to the banning of the *Khalq* paper in May 1966. Taraki was against trying to continue publication in a clandestine form, but Karmal favoured it, and began producing *Parcham* (The Flag). This appeared underground for some time, then openly during a brief relaxation in censorship prior to the 1969 'elections', before going underground again. Between March 1968 and July 1969 *Parcham* appeared as a weekly; it was edited by Mir Akbar Khyber, the PDPA leader whose death was later to spark the April 1978 crisis, and Suleiman Laiq, a minister in the first PDPA government.

While *Parcham's* language and content were similar to those of *Khalq*, it had a somewhat distinct position on at least two issues. The first concerned the nature of the revolutionary forces in Afghan society. Whereas *Khalq* insisted on building a working-class party with strict 'Leninist' discipline, *Parcham* wanted a broad national-democratic front to carry through the first phase of the revolution. The distinction between *Khalq's* more traditional and hard-line conception and *Parcham's* more ecumenical orientation was reflected in their divergent international affiliations. *Khalq* felt it received endorsement of its view from the resolutions of the Twenty-Fourth Congress of the CPSU in 1969, which emphasized the role of the working class in the revolutionary struggle. It may be that the defeat of Mosadeq's National Front in Iran in 1953, a year after the suppression of the Afghan *Wikh* movement, contributed to a hardening of *Khalq's* attitude to broader coalitions.

³¹ Dupree, op. cit. p. 619.

The other main issue of disagreement was on Pushtunistan—a question related to the different ethnic compositions and policies of the two groups. It appears that the membership of *Parcham* was almost exclusively Kabul Pushtuns of a relatively well-off social background. *Khalq*, by contrast, included not only Pushtuns (who tended to be of poorer origins) like Taraki and Hafizullah Amin—both Ghilzai Pushtuns—but also members from other ethnic groups. *Khalq* emphasized the need to resolve the nationalities question inside Afghanistan, and to find a ‘democratic’ solution to the nomad question—the word ‘democratic’ meaning it was not enough simply to force the nomads to sedentarize, as conventional urban wisdom would suggest. *Parcham* tended to understate these issues. Both factions supported self-determination of Pushtunistan; but whereas *Parcham* urged self-determination as the (unspoken) first step towards amalgamation with Afghanistan, *Khalq* favoured a solution based on trying to achieve a workable autonomy for the nationalities inside Pakistan itself.

Other factors further exacerbated the division. In addition to a degree of inter-ethnic animosity and inter-Pushtun conflict with the PDPA, there were bitter personal differences, especially between Karmal and Taraki, which worsened after 1973. Moreover, the two factions competed for international recognition. *Khalq* was critical of the two most obvious regional allies—the NAP in Pakistan, and the Tudeh Party of Iran—suspecting both of diluting the necessarily proletarian character of the party with indefensible frontist illusions: NAP allied for a time with Bhutto and, more recently, as the National Democratic Party, with Zia ul Haq; while Tudeh has been calling for a broad anti-monarchical alliance against the Shah.³² In addition, NAP had a position closer to *Parcham*’s on Pushtunistan. As there was a considerable flow of personnel between Kabul and Pakistan, contacts on this issue were easy to maintain. On the other hand, *Khalq* had close relations with the Communist Party of India, which gave it a degree of endorsement in its paper. *Khalq* also received oblique commendation from the CPSU. Although the Soviet party refrained from direct intervention—apart from anything else it was cultivating friendly ties with the Mohammadzai dynasty—and although no official PDPA links to the CPSU were made public, there were clear indications for those alert to such matters of a preference for *Khalq*: in the late sixties, Taraki received a Soviet literary prize for his work, whilst a party paper in the Ukraine gave favourable coverage to *Khalq*’s activities.

It is not known what the size of the organizations was at this time, but several thousand militants concentrated in Kabul seem to have been involved in PDPA activities. Of the original nineteen members and associate members of the Central Committee, roughly equal numbers adhered to each faction—a few supporting neither.³³ Yet no full

³² On NAP (now NDP) policies, see the interview with Wali Khan by Lawrence Lifschultz in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 June 1978. On Tudeh policies, see Nuraddin Kianuri, ‘Alignment of Class Forces at the Democratic Stage of the Revolution’, *World Marxist Review*, February 1976. Of course, the PCI—the *Khalq*’s associate—manifested its own considerable share of frontist illusions during its period of alliance with Indira Gandhi.

³³ The CC was divided as follows (prior to reunification): for *Khalq*, Taraki, Zarai, Panchsheri, Wali, Misaq, Ofaq, Amin, Danisht, Sharai, Mohammad; for *Parcham*, Karmal, Kishmand, Ahmad, Wahab Shafie, Bareq Shafie, Laiq, Shahpur; Badakhshi split from *Khalq* to form the Maoist *Settami Melli*; Dr Zaher left the organization.

organizational split occurred, and in the 1969 elections the PDPA fielded a number of candidates. Taraki stood in Moqur, near Ghazni, Karmal and Rabtehad stood in Kabul, and Amin stood in Laghman, a predominantly nomadic area in the north-east. The 'elections' were, as we have seen, rigged and only two PDPA members were elected—Amin and Karmal; but political activity then continued underground, along separate lines dictated by the different policies each faction espoused. It was in this period that *Parчам*, extending its hand to other discontented elements in Afghan society, was able to take the initiative.

The central area for *Parчам*'s activities became the military. In the early seventies the armed forces totalled 84,000 men, of whom 78,000 were in the army and 6,000 in the air force. The army was mainly an infantry force with Soviet T-34 and T-54 tanks; the air force had 120 combat aircraft, with Ilyushin bombers, Mig fighters and Yak and Antonov transport planes. Almost all military equipment had, therefore, come from the Soviet Union. Although military service was compulsory, only about half of the eligible men were considered fit; moreover, some tribes were exempt—as were all those in education. The top officers were members of the Pushtun elite, and a special infantry brigade, the Royal Bodyguard, was kept separate to protect the monarch. Almost eighty per cent of officers and most career soldiers were also Pushtuns; but there was a substantial non-Pushtun middle-class element, especially where technical expertise was needed, as in the air force. Pay for conscripts was extremely low, and although the armed forces were, under Russian supervision, a more cohesive force than in earlier days, they were still rent by factional disputes and inefficiency.³⁴

Certain elements in the officer corps were opposed to the Mohammadzai régime. Some had been educated abroad and were accordingly dissatisfied by the situation at home; others probably resented Pushtun domination. *Parчам*, therefore, started working in the armed forces. At the same time, it formed a tenuous alliance with Daud. A militant over Pushtunistan, the latter was also historically associated with the opening of relations with Russia in 1956. It was, therefore, natural for Daud and *Parчам* to co-operate in a conspiracy against the King. As the crisis of the early 1970s unfolded, in the manner already described, the coup was hatched. On 17 July 1973 the armed forces took over. *Parчам* found itself with a share in power, thanks to the 'national democratic revolution' it had accomplished in alliance with Daud. *Khalq*, on the other hand, was in a much weaker position, since it had refused to work in the armed forces on the grounds that this contradicted Leninist principles of party work. However, as the Daud régime consolidated itself a rift with *Parчам* soon developed and the pendulum swung back in *Khalq*'s direction. As we shall see, it was when *Khalq* learnt the need to work in the army, and *Parчам* understood the perils of frontism, that a new genuinely revolutionary conjuncture developed.

Afghan Maoism

Parallel to this evolution, there appeared a separate tendency oriented to

³⁴ On the armed forces, see Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*; also *Area Handbook*, Section 4, 'National Security'.

'anti-revisionist' or pro-Chinese positions. The PDPA itself was founded *after* the outbreak of the Sino-Soviet dispute in 1960–63 and did not, therefore, participate in gatherings such as the meeting of eighty-one Communist Parties in Moscow in 1960. China pursued a low-level aid policy in Afghanistan, and initially there does not seem to have been a pro-Chinese tendency in the country. But Chinese conceptions were already available for use in intra-PDPA disputes, and after the setback of early 1966 and the ending of parliamentary illusions a breakaway group appeared under the leadership of Taher Badakhshi, a PDPA Central Committee member. This called itself *Settami Melli* (National Oppression) and was, as its name implied, composed almost exclusively of non-Pushtuns—Badakhshi came from a Tajik area in the North-East. It proclaimed itself Marxist-Leninist, and denounced both *Khalq* and *Parcbam* as agents of the Pushtun ruling class. The policies of *Settami Melli* were pro-Chinese and anti-Pushtun. This meant first and foremost an implacable hostility to the concept of Pushtunistan: China was by this time in close alliance with Pakistan, and saw Pushtunistan as an attempt by the Soviet Union to dismember its ally. Moreover, the non-Pushtuns in *Settami Melli* saw a 'Greater Afghanistan' as threatening to increase even further the predominance of the Pushtuns within the country. This coincidence of positions led later to its logical conclusion—armed struggle by the non-Pushtun peasantry against the Mohammadzai régime and, implicitly, its Soviet allies. Again the details are unclear, but it seems that after Daud's accession to power and a general worsening in both Afghan-Pakistani and Soviet-Chinese relations, a group of *Settami Melli* militants were given military training by Bhutto in Peshawar, capital of the North-West Frontier, and then sent back into Afghanistan. There they launched a series of attacks on police and army stations in the Panj Sheri region of Badakhshan province in August 1975. After some clashes, most of the surviving *Settami Melli* militants were captured by the Russian-equipped army and taken to Kabul, where they were all subsequently murdered in captivity by Daud. Taher Badakhshi and the remains of the organization went underground.

Another 'Marxist-Leninist' current separate from *Settami Melli* had earlier taken a different, less dramatic, path of opposition to the régime. This was known as the *Shu'la-i Jawed* (Eternal Flame), after the paper it produced between April 1968 and July 1969—when, like *Parcbam*, it was banned. *Shu'la-i Jawed* attacked the royal family, denounced the PDPA for 'revisionism' and demanded the expulsion of the US Peace Corps from Afghanistan. It held the same position on Pushtunistan as *Settami Melli*, arguing that 'a ruling class which suppresses its own people can never free another nation'.³⁵ Influential in the 1969 student protest movement, it never received any official Chinese commendation—which would have been difficult since China was still cultivating Zahir Shah.

Daud's Régime: Prelude to Revolution

The alliance between Daud and the *Parcbam* officers lasted for some months after the July 1973 coup. In his initial pronouncements, Daud promised substantial reforms, many of them along the lines stipulated

³⁵ Dupree, *op. cit.* pp. 616–7.

eight years before in the PDPA programme. Moreover, it appeared that the new régime was more pro-Soviet than the previous one had been—much to the alarm of the USA, Iran and Pakistan. A republic was declared and the 1964 constitution abolished. Political prisoners, including some *Khalq* members, were released. *Parчам* was represented in the thirty-five member Revolutionary Committee, and had four ministers in the government: Major Faiz Mohammad was Minister of the Interior, and Pacha Gul held the important Ministry of Frontiers, which was responsible for relations with Pushtunistan and Baluchistan. Officers close to *Parчам* assumed key positions in the armed forces, among them Major Abdul Qadir, a Tajik air force officer who played a key role in both the 1973 and 1978 coups: he was nominated vice-commander of the air force. Major Zia Mohammadzai Zia, a *Parчам* associate from the dynastic clan, became head of the Republican Guard.³⁶

Within a few months, however, the Daud régime had begun to demonstrate its limits. Although republican in form, it had done nothing substantial to dilute the power of the Mosahaban family; the King and his close relatives received stipends to live abroad, whilst Daud brought his own relatives to power. Only about fifty army officers were encouraged to retire, and General Abdul Wali, Zahir's cousin who had led the resistance to the 1973 coup and was the head of the most obdurate wing of the dynasty, was released from house arrest. Sardar Naim, Daud's brother-in-law, and Musa Shafiq, Zahir's last premier, returned to positions of influence. The two main newspapers in Kabul were run by relatives of the King. Simultaneously, the *Parчам* members were moved away from power. In 1974, Gul was sent to be ambassador in Bulgaria, and Mohammad was sent to Indonesia in 1975. The new Minister of the Interior was General Abdul Qadir Nuristani, a noted hardliner from Zahir's days. In 1975, even Major Zia, about whom many suspicions remained, was sent as a military attaché to India. The air force officer Abdul Qadir, who publicly challenged Daud at a meeting in Kabul to honour his commitment to allow political parties, was dismissed in 1974 from his command and appointed head of Kabul's military abattoir. Thus a pattern of dissociation already dismally familiar from Nimeiry's régime in the Sudan, Baathist Iraq and many other third-world countries was being repeated now in Afghanistan.

This internal shift to the right was accompanied by a change in Daud's international allegiances. While he continued to trumpet the Pushtunistan issue, he was told by the Russians that he was in no military position to confront the Pakistani army. Furthermore, the regional geometry in which Kabul was located had changed significantly with the arrival of a third force that unsettled the previous North-South balance on which Afghan régimes had relied. Iran, pursuing a regional role with US encouragement, now had the financial power and diplomatic weight to intervene in Afghan affairs, and by 1975 substantial co-operation had begun. Iran took the offensive against Russian influence. SAVAK officials worked inside the Afghan armed forces to dislodge pro-Soviet officers, and the number of Russian advisers fell from 1,000 in 1972 to 200 in 1976

³⁶ On the post-1973 régime, see *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, and *Le Monde* 28 and 29 March 1974, 4 April 1976.

(though this was partly because an increasing number of Afghans were being trained on Russian equipment in India). A larger number of non-Pushtuns came to the fore within the Afghan state, as a result of Iranian pressure, and Daud retreated on both the Helmand and the Baluchistan-Pushtunistan questions. In October 1975 he closed the border with Baluchistan, which guerrillas had been using; and with Iranian approval, he soft-pedalled on Pushtunistan. The 'destabilization' of Afghanistan reflected Iran's execution of the Nixon Doctrine in western Asia. Credits of up to \$2 billion were offered in 1975, most of them for the construction of a railway that would have run from Kabul to Mashad in Iran. The main economic rationale for this was that it would enable Iran to import iron ore from the substantial deposits discovered west of Kabul. The Shah had since 1974 been advocating an Asian common market, as a means of exporting oil in return for goods and raw materials that Iran required for its industrialization programme.

Daud's consolidation led to a repeat of the political stasis characteristic of the last years of the monarchy. No independent political activity was allowed, and in 1975 Daud announced a new government party, the demagogically entitled National Revolutionary Party, as a counter to *Parcham*. In 1977 he announced a new constitution and had it confirmed by another tribal gathering, or *Loye Jirgab*. After much discussion, in which drafts were watered down, a land-reform project was announced; but it was never implemented. Daud himself maintained a tight grip on the whole apparatus of the state, and in the last months of his rule no minister was allowed to authorize the expenditure of monies above £70 (5,000 *Afghanis*). The régime was also extremely unsteady: it faced seven separate attempts to overthrow it, including the Panj Sheri uprising, and a plot by former premier Maiwandal—who died under suspicious circumstances in prison.

Towards Revolution

These developments had a predictable impact on the PDPA factions, each of which drew corrective lessons from the turn of events. *Parcham* realized that Daud's régime would not fulfil even the 'national-democratic' role allotted to it, and by 1975 had abandoned any hope of influencing Daud. It was, therefore, pushed in some measure towards the harder line long advocated by *Khalq*. *Parcham* also lost much of the support it had once had in the armed forces, as officers such as Abdul Qadir, disappointed by the illusions it had fostered, switched their allegiances to *Khalq*. For its part, *Khalq* drew the lessons of the success which *Parcham* had enjoyed in the armed forces and abandoned its previous reluctance to work in the armed forces. It built up a military network under the control of Hafizullah Amin—a civilian cadre.

Yet despite this convergence, relations between the two factions had if anything worsened after Daud's coup, because of an obscure series of events involving Major Zia Mohammadzai, the head of the Republican Guard. *Khalq* alleged that Zia had, with *Parcham* approval, drawn up a plan to arrest and then kill the *Khalq* leadership and that he had only been prevented from so doing by *Khalq's* ability to expose this conspiracy. *Khalq* accused Karmal and his associates of co-operating with Daud in the

venture. *Parcham* replied by accusing Taraki of working with the CIA—a reference to his work as a translator for the US Embassy in Kabul and his period as press attaché at the Afghan Embassy in the United States. It was only after two years of negotiations that reunification of the two factions was achieved, in July 1977; and even then, as events after April 1978 were to show, the unity was fragile. So bitter were the feelings that mediation had to be carried out by Ajmal Khattaq, the representative in Kabul since around 1972 of the NAP and a veteran member of the Communist movement in South Asia. It is probable, too, that Khattaq's role in the negotiations reflects the ever-present and intricate relation between internal Afghan politics and the Baluchi and Pushtun questions in Pakistan. Once again, as in the fall of Daud in 1963 and his return to power in 1973, these two aspects of Afghan politics were to combine—this time to produce the revolutionary explosion of April 1978.

It is not yet fully clear why the events of April 1978 occurred when they did; indeed the PDPA leaders themselves admit that matters moved much more rapidly than they had expected. It was obvious enough that a major social and political explosion was becoming more likely; but they seem to have expected it to come later than it did—in 1980, or even later. The accelerating factor seems to have been the initiatives that Daud took vis-à-vis Iran and Pakistan. Under pressure from the Shah, Daud agreed to ratify the Helmand Waters Treaty, and in 1977 he gave public endorsement to the idea of an Asian Common Market. In November 1977 a pro-Iranian Minister of Planning, Ahmad Khorram, was killed by unknown assailants. Then, with further Iranian encouragement, Daud reached an agreement with both Wali Khan and Pakistani President Zia ul Haq, under which the former—together with a fraction of the Baluchi opposition led by Ghaus Baksh Bizenjo—would be released from Hyderabad prison and incorporated into a broader government coalition with the military. In return, Wali Khan, Bizenjo and the Afghans would adopt a less militant position on Baluchistan and Pushtunistan. In particular, Daud agreed to return to Pakistan all Pushtun and Baluch political exiles.³⁷ The difficulty was that sections of the Pushtun and Baluch movements refused to co-operate with this agreement, and in so doing they had the support of the anti-Daud forces in Afghanistan. Ajmal Khattaq, the NAP representative in Kabul, broke away from NAP (now the National Democratic Party) and founded his own Revolutionary Democratic Front. The Baluchs, organized in the Baluch People's Liberation Front, had about 6,000 refugees at Kalat and Kandahar and they also refused to leave. In March, Daud visited Islamabad, Delhi and Riyadh; on his return, he had a meeting with Baluch representatives in which he told them they would have to return to Pakistan by 30 April.³⁸

³⁷ On recent NDP liaison with Zia ul Haq, see the interview with Wali Khan cited in note 32 above.

³⁸ The Baluch opposition is divided, *grosso modo*, into two groups: those such as Bizenjo who are affiliated to the NDP, and those affiliated to the Baluchistan People's Liberation Front. The BPLF, which was founded in the early 1970s, played a leading role in the 1973–7 guerrilla war; it is a Marxist organization professing loyalty to neither Peking nor Moscow. The BPLF has rejected the idea of a 'Greater Baluchistan' reuniting the Baluch areas of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and favours a solution to the nationalities question within Pakistan on a federal basis. The Soviet Union has recently begun to grant scholarships to selected pro-NAP Baluchs, in the apparent hope of laying the basis for a new Baluch Communist Party.

Matters seem then to have come to a head in Kabul. The spark that lit the explosion came on 18 April, when the police killed Mir Akbar Khyber, a university professor and former editor of *Parvham*. He was one of those credited with bringing about the reunification of the two factions, and was popular with both wings of the party. Exactly why he was killed is not clear, but the PDPA feared that this was the beginning of an attempt by Daud to eliminate the whole of their leadership. As news of Khyber's death spread, there was a vast popular response. Over 15,000 people, mostly students and civil servants, took part in his funeral procession, which was led by Taraki. The procession culminated in a demonstration outside the US Embassy, denouncing the CIA and SAVAK. Daud responded on 26 April by arresting Taraki, Karmal and five other PDPA leaders. He also tried to arrest some PDPA military personnel, but two, including Abdul Qadir, by now back in an active posting, were able to escape. The person in charge of military affairs, Hafizullah Amin, was arrested at 11 a.m. on 26 April; but he had already given his instructions to PDPA personnel in the army, and the next morning the attack began. As crowds gathered in the central park to protest against the PDPA arrests, Mig-21s commanded by Abdul Qadir attacked the palace where Daud and his family were gathered. Fifty out of the army's total of 750 tanks moved into the city at the same time. As fighting raged, Daud, Sardar Naim and Interior Minister Abdul Qadir Nuristani were killed. At 5 p.m., the seven PDPA leaders were released from prison; they took immediate control on behalf of the civilian wing of the party—a condition laid down by Taraki for the whole operation. By 7.30 that evening, the first PDPA statement was being read over Kabul radio, and the next day a Revolutionary Council and Cabinet were announced. Elsewhere in the country, PDPA officers took control and disarmed loyalist officers—the one exception being in the heart of Pushtun territory at Jalalabad, where forces loyal to Daud held out for two more days. A new revolutionary régime had decisively, and with unexpected rapidity, come to power. What kind of society had it inherited from the Mohammadzai dictatorship? And what, on the evidence available to us, can be understood about the policies and problems of the PDPA in the months since the April seizure?³⁹

Society and Economy

On the eve of the April 1978 revolution, Afghan society was in a state of appalling backwardness. A transition to capitalism had begun, but Afghanistan was one of the countries least affected by economic or social development anywhere in the world. Since the 1930s, as commerce with the outside world had increased, the feudal régime had begun to decompose: agricultural produce and land had increasingly become commodities, and new class relations had emerged. A free labour force had begun migrating to the towns and abroad. In the towns a commercial bourgeoisie, predominantly non-Pushtun as we have seen, had emerged; there was also a parallel section of the dominant class in the civilian and military branches of the state. However, the state itself and large areas of the economy remained under the control of the large landowners and

³⁹ Accounts of the April events themselves can be found in *The Economist*, 6 May 1978; *Le Monde*, 13 and 14–15 May; and *Far Eastern Economic Review* 26 May 1978. Hafizullah Amin has given his account in an interview with *Granma*, 4 June 1978.

tribal chiefs led by the Mosahiban family (themselves large landholders), and capitalist economic development was at a very primitive level. The great mass of the population lived in the countryside as landless or nearly landless labourers. In the towns, a small working class in manufacturing and construction (about 150,000 in all by the mid-seventies) was swamped by a much larger mass of semi-employed migrants who had been drifting to the towns as pre-capitalist relations in the countryside decomposed.

Per capita income has been estimated as around \$150 in 1975, but such figures lack any precision and are really another way of saying that most of the population live at subsistence level. Of the nearly seventeen million population, an estimated 2.4 million are believed to be in some sense nomads, although only a small minority of these are full-time nomads in the sense of being tent-dwellers constantly on the move with their flocks. The majority are seasonal migrants, moving with their animals between relatively fixed positions. As the meat and skins of these animals have become commercialized—they are the country's main export—so private ownership of the herds by tribal *kbans* has developed. But whereas in neighbouring Iran the nomadic tribes are non-Persian minorities resisting the government, the Afghan nomads have not constituted a major focus of opposition, and so far little has been done to encourage them to settle.

Data on ownership of land among the settled population is scanty, but the information available indicates that there are large and growing inequalities in the countryside, which have been accentuated by the commercialization of crops, the drought of 1970–72 and a continuous land hunger. A survey in 1967 of 1.2 million families in the countryside—containing well over half the total agricultural population of 11.7 millions—showed that 500,000, i.e. over 40 per cent, were totally landless. Of those with some land, 40 per cent had holdings of half a hectare or less, and another 40 per cent had less than four hectares. The minimum area for family subsistence is around five acres for irrigated land growing unimproved wheat, and twenty hectares for unirrigated land. Hence, even within the category of those owning some land, less than 20 per cent of owners had enough for family subsistence.⁴⁰

TABLE I
Land Distribution in Afghanistan, 1967

<i>Size of Holding</i> (hectares)	<i>Per cent of Holders</i>	<i>Per cent of Land</i>
0–0.5	40	4
0.6–3.9	40	25
4.0–19.9	17.8	29
20.0–99.9	2	34
100+	0.2	8
	100	100

SOURCE: *Area Handbook for Afghanistan* 1973, p. xxxvi.

⁴⁰ Information on land tenure can be found in *Area Handbook* pp. xxxvi ff., and in Eberhard Rhein and Ghanie Ghaussy, *Die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung Afghanistans 1880–1965*, Opladen 1966, chapter 3.

The urban areas of the country, now containing about fourteen per cent of the population, have long existed as trading and military centres, but migration to the towns has accelerated with the land hunger. To-day Kabul, mainly Tajik in composition, has a population of around 750,000, and is marked by inequalities characteristic of the migrant situation: two thirds of the migrants are men—many from the impoverished Hazara areas—and the top 6 per cent of city households earn 40 per cent of the total income, whereas the bottom 56 per cent earn only 15 per cent of the income.⁴¹ About 40 per cent of those in the cities work directly or indirectly for the state, and the numbers working in manufacturing are comparatively very small. About 1 per cent of the total working population is employed in industry, and of these two thirds are in textiles and food-processing.

The economic structure is, therefore, still overwhelmingly agricultural, and the country has been stagnating for decades. Estimates of GNP vary from \$1.5 to \$2.5 billion, and it has been growing only at around 2.4 per cent per annum, or about the same rate as population, for the past ten years. The most acute consequence of this is the growing labour surplus, but it has also caused an overall decay of the socio-economic structure. Agriculture accounts for 56 per cent of GNP and for most exports, since these are fruits, nuts and skins.

TABLE 2
Afghanistan's Exports 1975-6 (million US \$)

<i>Commodities</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Natural Gas	46.3	19.6
Fresh Fruits	20.1	8.5
Dried Fruits, Nuts	54.7	23.2
Karakul Skins	10.4	4.4
Ginned Cotton	35.3	15
Carpets and Rugs	16.1	6.8
Cement	1.2	0.5
Others	51.4	22
	235.5	100

SOURCE: Ministry of Planning.

The main crops are wheat, rice and corn; but although production has risen somewhat in the sixties, the area under cultivation has contracted. Industry provides an estimated 11 per cent of GNP, and its main export product is the carpet. Apart from the smallest plants, nearly all industry is state-owned; the only heavy industry is in electrical production and cement. There is no significant productive bourgeoisie. Mineral extraction is still at a very early stage, but substantial quantities of gas (3,500 million cubic metres a year, earning over \$30 million) are exported from Sheberghan in the North to Russia, and very large amounts of iron ore—over two billion tons—have been discovered at Hajjak, ninety miles west of Kabul. Neither gas nor iron have yet been properly exploited, because of the investment problems involved, but they could be in the future; and there is a likelihood, given geological features, that oil will be discovered as well.⁴²

⁴¹ *The Guardian*, 4 July 1978.

⁴² For a general survey of the economy, see Rafferty, *op. cit.* note 6.

In recent years, the Afghan state has become increasingly reliant on foreign aid to sustain its activities; but most of this money has gone to fortifying the régime rather than transforming the country. By far the largest aid donor has been the Soviet Union, which between 1954 and 1976 gave \$1.3 billion, the third largest amount given to any non-Communist developing country, after India and Turkey, and by far the largest amount per capita. In return for its aid, the Soviet Union has taken gas and fruit exports. The United States has accounted for about one third of all aid, most of it in grant form, and in recent years Iran has also offered, as we have seen, substantial amounts. The World Bank too has been a substantial aid donor to Afghanistan. Yet what this aid has meant is that the day on which the economy is transformed has been postponed. The development plans announced since 1957 have meant little. It transpires that in the first two years of the grandiose seven-year plan for 1975–82, less than half the monies allocated for those years were actually spent.⁴³ Afghanistan has continued to use its foreign exchange to import consumer goods (75 per cent of the total import bill), and in recent years the debt repayment problem has further exposed the limitations of this policy. Debt servicing will rise from \$28 million in the mid-seventies to \$160 million by 1983, or from 5 to 40 per cent of total foreign aid. It is this disastrous situation which the new revolutionary government has inherited from the Mohammadzai.

Potential and Problems

It is possible to summarize the strengths and weaknesses of Afghan society in 1978 in the following terms, highlighting the major problems that the régime will have to tackle. On the one hand, there is considerable room for the expansion in agriculture that will be necessary to finance future growth. Up to two thirds of the whole country is potentially grazing land and, like Mongolia, Afghanistan could integrate livestock as a permanent feature of a transformed economy. Moreover, only 60 per cent of the potentially irrigable land is now cultivated; without exaggerating this point, it is worth recalling that prior to the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century the northern plains sustained a population much larger than that which is now there. Afghanistan is, in the long run, in a far better economic situation than its neighbour Iran, where supplies of water and cultivable land are, compared to total area and population, much more limited by natural constraints. With proper exploitation, the mineral resources of the country can also generate supplies to industry and foreign exchange; and if oil is discovered, this will add a further asset to the economy. With planned social and economic organization, a population that is today still under twenty million could thus sustain much higher levels of prosperity, in what is by third-world standards a comparatively well-endowed country. On the other hand, enormous problems exist today, which any régime will have to confront and which will take decades to surmount.

Health

While, outside drought years, Afghanistan—unlike South Asia—is not marked by serious malnutrition, disease and sanitation are appalling.

⁴³ Taraki in his interview with *Die Zeit*, 9 June 1978.

Infant mortality is 269 per thousand. The average life expectancy is thirty-five years—compared to fifty in Pakistan. An estimated three quarters of the population in some areas suffer from trachoma, and half the population has intestinal problems.

Education

Literacy is between 5 and 10 per cent, and almost totally the preserve of men. In 1977, only 17 per cent of children of school age were in primary education, though this was both free and supposedly compulsory; of these, only 11 per cent were girls. The total number of students in higher education in 1970 was only 8,074.

The Position of Women

In the rural sector, women participate in production; but women in the towns and those with some education find their lives still circumscribed by the most rigid oppressions. A survey in the early 1970s of the 100,000 Afghan women who have received some kind of education found that only 4.5 per cent were actually working, the majority as school teachers. Prejudice, combined with the labour surplus, prevents women from breaking into urban employment. As we have seen, women's position in voting and in education, though legally guaranteed, has been very restricted. Most women still wear the *chadri* or cloak-like veil in the towns. The 1971 Family Law abolished neither polygamy nor the bride-price.⁴⁴

Unemployment

The rate of employment is officially 20 per cent, but may be much higher, especially since the drought of the early seventies. No figures are available, but it is believed that up to one million Afghan men have migrated abroad to seek casual work—most to Iran, but some also to Pakistan and the Gulf states.

Tribalism

The majority of the population organized along tribal lines are settled farmers, most of them Pushtuns. Tribal structures divide the oppressed from each other and enable the *khans* to consolidate a socio-economic position based on the labour and the military prowess of their followers. Every Afghan ruler who has tried to centralize the country since the 1740s has encountered tribalism as a problem, and it will no doubt long plague the revolutionary régime.

The National Problem

The nationalities issue is intertwined with the problems of tribalism and reconstruction of the Afghan state on a new democratic basis. Afghanistan is a mosaic of nationalities, with the Pushtun Durranis on top; multiple interacting oppressions running downwards to the Shi'a Hazaras and the subject Tajik peasantry, the *hamsayas*. Again, such a

⁴⁴ A general survey of the position of women is given by Erika Knabe in 'Afghan women: does their role change?', Dupree and Albert, op. cit., pp. 144–66. Knabe gives a significant index of the social entrapment of women when she writes (p. 163): 'To date, not a single case is known to the author of an unmarried woman living alone in an apartment separate from her family.' A fuller presentation of her work is contained in *Die Frauenemanzipation in Afghanistan*, vol. 16 of *Afghanische Studien*, 1977.

complex tangle, which has found its reflection in the ranks of the PDPA itself, will take decades to supersede. No one familiar with the record of earlier revolutions on this subject can underestimate the difficulties lying in wait for the Afghan people in the realm of nationalities.

Islam

There are in Afghanistan about 250,000 mollahs—religious leaders who have in the past opposed reforms that reduce their social importance, and all too quickly accused régimes they opposed—such as Amanullah’s—of being atheistic. As the Soviet record in Central Asia has shown, and as has been demonstrated more recently in the only Islamic revolutionary state, South Yemen, protracted confrontation with the religious personnel *can* be avoided, while a longer process of social change and materialist education is undertaken. Yet the counter-revolution has already entitled its party the *Hizb-i Islam*, the Party of Islam, and no doubt it will seek to use religion in the struggle against the PDPA régime.

The Revolutionary Government

The government installed on 27 April had two central decision-making bodies: a thirty-five-member Revolutionary Council, with thirty civilians and five military, and a twenty-one-member cabinet which had initially three military. The PDPA controlled all posts—no independents were brought in to provide cover—and of the eighteen civilians in the cabinet, at least eleven were members of the original PDPA Central Committee of January 1965. *Khalq* had a majority of the posts. The new cabinet was headed by Taraki, now aged sixty-one, who was also secretary-general of the party, president and prime minister. Most of the other officials were of a younger generation. Hafizullah Amin, the Foreign Minister, was born in 1929; Karmal, vice-president, is the same age; Bariq Shafie was born in 1932; Abdul Karim Misak, the Minister of Finance, in 1937. They were, therefore, in the main representatives of the new intelligentsia that emerged in the forties and lived through the *Wikh-i Zalmaiyan* and ‘New Democracy’ years. At least four of the government members were also literary figures in their own right—Taraki, Shafie, Suleiman Laiq and Misak—the latter three all being poets.⁴⁵

The régime moved quickly to destroy the Mohammadzai’s power base. The Republican Guard on which Daud had relied was dissolved. Only one of between sixty and eighty generals in the armed forces was retained.

⁴⁵ The original cabinet of 28 April was as follows (with their party affiliations, designated by K or P in parentheses): Nur Mohammad Taraki, Prime Minister (K); Babrak Karmal, Deputy Prime Minister (P); Hafizullah Amin, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs (K); Colonel Mohammad Aslam Watanjar, Deputy Prime Minister and Communications (P); Colonel Abdul Qadir, National Defence (P); Shah Wali, Health (K); Nur Ahmad Nur, Interior (P); Dastagir Panchsheri, Education (K); Sultan Ali Keshtmand, Planning (P); Suleiman Laiq, Radio and TV (P); Salem Mohammad Zarai, Agriculture (K); Abdul Qadir Misaq, Finance (K); Abdulkarim Sharai, Justice (K); Anahita Rabtehad, Social Welfare (P); Abdul Quddus Qorbandi, Trade (K); Mohammad Ismail Danisht, Mines and Industries (K); Lieutenant-Colonel Mohammad Rafi, Public Works (P); Mohammad Mansur Hashemi, Water and Power (K); Mahmud Suma, Higher Education (K); Nizamuddin Tahzib, Border Affairs (P); Bareq Shafie, Information and Culture (P). Hence of the eighteen civilians in the cabinet no less than twelve had been members or associate members of the 1965 PDPA Central Committee.

Twenty-three members of the royal family, including some who like Daud had died in the coup itself, were deprived of their citizenship. Many senior civil servants and diplomats were retired and replaced by militants in their thirties and twenties. Thousands of people were removed from the state apparatus. Over the following weeks, up to 8,000 people were released from jail, and the files of thousands more were burnt in public.⁴⁶ At the same time, the lower ranks of the State apparatus—both civilian and military—remained untouched, and in particular it was evident that the possibility of counter-revolutionary resistance from the lower ranks of the armed forces had not been eliminated merely by the removal of the top officers.

The government's programme was presented by Taraki in a speech on 9 May.⁴⁷ He stressed that the oligarchic régime instituted by Nadir Shah in 1929 had finally been overthrown, and outlined a thirty-point programme covering domestic and foreign affairs. The leading item in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's (DRA) programme is land reform. The legislation proposed under Daud in 1975 was never implemented. Taraki has announced that new legislation is being prepared, over a period that may take up to two years. However, the government has already announced the cancellation of the debts of poor peasants, especially acute since the 1970–72 drought; it says that this measure will benefit up to eleven million people. A new ordinance on peasant co-operatives has already been announced, and from it one can infer that the ownership ceiling for qualification as a poor peasant will be ten acres of irrigated land (twenty of dry). This will probably form the basis of the new rural ownership system, although individual farmers will be encouraged to join co-operatives.

The DRA has begun to restructure the state institutions. Luncheon and food ration allowances for all government employees have been equalized, and as part of the campaign to turn the army into a 'people's army' communal eating for officers and men has been enforced. Taraki has also promised to institute much stricter state control of import-export trade; this will also cover a major area of commercial activity where the Pushtun tribes are active—smuggling. There have already been protests from *kbans* at a decree banning border tribes from cutting down trees in order to smuggle the wood to Pakistan. On nationalization, Taraki has said that the state will take at least (51 per cent) control of major enterprises.

A census, already scheduled before the revolution, will begin next year. The régime has appealed for economic aid from India, the USA and Iran to fund its development projects. Side-by-side with the land reform, a new five-year plan is being prepared. Measures have also been taken to tackle some of the major social problems—the position of women, the nationalities, and the nomads. Point twelve of the government programme commits the DRA to ensuring equality of rights of women in all social, economic, political, cultural and civic respects, and Taraki has

⁴⁶ *Dawn* (Pakistan) 30 August 1978.

⁴⁷ On the land reform programme see *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27 September 1978, and Taraki's interview with *Die Zeit*.

already stated that the bride-price will be abolished: in October a decree limiting the dowry or bride-price to £4 and banning arranged marriages or marriages of women under 16 years was enacted. The cabinet included one woman, Anahita Rabtezad, a PDPA deputy in the 1965 *Wolesi Jirgah* (though this was not the first time a woman had been a minister in an Afghan cabinet).

The government has already taken some measures to end Pushtun domination, although for a variety of reasons it may have to move slowly on this question. It has committed itself to respecting all the languages of Afghanistan, and every child will now receive primary education in its own tongue, before learning either Persian or Pushtun later on. It was announced on 15 May 1978 that Radio Kabul would henceforward include programmes in Uzbek, Turcoman, Baluchi and Nuristani; by September, weekly papers had begun to appear in Uzbek and Turcoman, with another planned in Baluchi. The great solvent of the nationalities problem, as of the tribal question, will of course be land reform, which will remove the economic foundation on which much domination of non-Pushtuns by Pushtuns and of tribal members by the *khans* has historically been based.⁴⁸

The régime's international relations have been dominated by the hostile reaction of the advanced capitalist countries and of the three Asian neighbours apart from Russia—Iran, Pakistan and China. All three have evinced alarm at the turn of events in Afghanistan, and soon after the April revolution the Chinese foreign minister Huang Hua visited both Pakistan and Iran, where he voiced concern about unnamed 'social-imperialist' advances. The Chinese are believed to have stressed to the Pakistanis that their main enemy is no longer India but Afghanistan; and the Shah, already preoccupied by a mass revolt at home, has made similar observations. The DRA has, however, tried to mollify Chinese fears by speedily recognizing North Korea and breaking with the South. More generally, it has taken a cautious stand. Although Taraki received Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the old *Khodai Khidmatgaran* leader, soon after 27 April, DRA officials have stressed the need for a 'democratic' solution in Baluchistan and Pushtunistan, and the hope that peaceful negotiations can solve the issue. In September, General Zia ul Haq visited Kabul, and Taraki is expected to pay a visit to Islamabad. On the Helmand Waters treaty, the position is less clear; Foreign Minister Amin has denied a statement attributed to him by the BBC according to which the DRA would not now recognize the previous agreement.

Afghanistan's relations with the Soviet Union and India have, on the other hand, developed predictably, building on foundations already established. Most Western comment has concentrated on the supposed 'strategic advance' the Soviet Union has made in Afghanistan, and there is no doubt that relations between the two countries are much closer than before. There is no evidence to suggest that the Soviet Union played any direct role in the recent events, but they almost certainly had foreknowledge and thereby gave approval to the PDPA decision. It is,

⁴⁸ A further 'social' policy has been the restriction on the provision of *chavs*, Afghan marijuana, which in the early 1970s enticed a colony of around 6,000 hippies to Kabul.

however, already known that the DRA has resisted Soviet requests to take over some development projects (such as the colour television system); and there has never been a lack of Afghan complaints about the terms on which debt repayment to the Soviet Union has been arranged. On the other hand, the Soviet Union can play the major role in helping the DRA to consolidate itself and undertake the long overdue development of Afghan society. As in South Yemen, Angola, Ethiopia and for that matter Vietnam, the Soviet Union has not encouraged the development of a revolutionary process; but once such a process has passed a certain stage, the Soviet Union has extended much-needed help to the régimes in these countries—a help without which their programmes and even their very survival might be in doubt. The closer links between the two states were reflected in a twenty-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed by Taraki and Brezhnev in Moscow on 5 December 1978.

Since the 27 April revolution, the number of Soviet military advisers in Afghanistan has reportedly risen to 3,000; on 15 May, Tass announced that the Soviet Union was helping Afghanistan to set up 'a special organization to protect the young state from encroachments upon its independence and internal security'.⁴⁹ Over forty new economic agreements have been signed, although most of these are merely the continuations of earlier agreements discussed under Daud. Not only can the Soviet Union, for all its limitations, provide valuable technical and economic assistance, but it also has experience in Soviet Central Asia of handling many of the social problems faced in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the DRA has emphasized its desire to obtain aid from other sources, including the World Bank, and neither it nor the USSR will want to sever the already established links between Afghanistan and non-Soviet sources of assistance.

The Major Problems

It is far too early to evaluate the record of the DRA. The potential for a massive and long-delayed transformation of Afghan society is certainly there, but there are major problems that now confront the régime, and which have already broken through the surface of unity and confidence evident in the days following the April revolution.

1. The PDPA itself is a small, mainly urban-based and predominantly middle-class party, in a country where 80 per cent of the people live off the land, are illiterate and are entrapped in local if not tribal particularities. The official PDPA membership figure is 50,000, but other independent evaluations range from 3,000 to 10,000—even before the dissensions following the party's advent to power. The new régime's implantation outside the main urban centres is very weak, and the inevitable temptation will be to rely on the armed forces rather than the party to implement policies. A decisive land reform would do much to alter this situation; but in the absence of either pre-existing peasant support or qualified cadres experienced in rural work, the PDPA could quickly become embroiled in additional problems.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 15 May 1978.

⁵⁰ Since this article was finalized for publication, the revolutionary council has issued a land-

2. The unity within the PDPA between *Khalq* and *Parcham* lasted for less than three months. In early July, it was announced that a number of *Parcham* leaders had been sent abroad as ambassadors: Karmal to Prague, his brother Baryallai to Pakistan, Anahita Rabtezzad to Belgrade, Nur Ahmad Nur the Minister of the Interior to Washington, Abdul Wakil to London. In August, events took a more dramatic turn when it was announced that three leading officials had been arrested on charges of organizing a conspiracy to overthrow the government, in league with an unnamed foreign power: they were Abdul Qadir, Minister of Defence, Major-General Shahpur Ahmadzai, the Chief of Staff, and Mir Ali Akbar, the head of the Jumhuriyah Hospital in Kabul. Later it was announced that two ministers, Sultan Ali Keshtamand, the Minister of Planning, and Major Mohammad Rafie, Minister of Public Works, had been charged with 'subversion'. In October, Kabul Radio declared that Abdul Qadir had 'confessed' to his activities, and that he would be placed on trial. All but three *Parcham* members (Laiq, Shafie, Watangar) have now left the government, and the officials expelled as ambassadors in July have now, it seems, been 'recalled'. Why exactly the division came is not clear; but there is little evidence to support the thesis generally sustained in the Western press that *Parcham* have represented a more faithfully pro-Soviet line than *Khalq*. *Khalq* accuse *Parcham* of pursuing a 'petty-bourgeois deviationist line' involving both left and right opportunism. *Parcham* claims its policies are more radical than *Khalq*'s, and accuses the latter of making unwarranted concessions to nationalism. Whatever the reasons, this fragmentation of the PDPA must have been a serious blow to the DRA's programme, since apart from diverting scarce energies into factional disputes it has also further depleted the already low numbers of party cadres available. Similarly, the exile student community abroad, within which strong PDPA influence can be noted, has predictably divided along *Khalq* and *Parcham* lines, those in Eastern Europe favouring the former, those in Western Europe the latter.

3. The forces of counter-revolution have, after initial hesitations, begun to reassemble. Most of the royal family itself is now either dead or complacently exiled, and is unlikely to lead a counter-revolution; but other forces that benefited from the old order are active. These include landowners, tribal chiefs, upper civil servants and mollahs, and there are reports of thousands fleeing to Pakistan where they have predictably appealed for help to Saudi Arabia and Iran. A *Hizb-i Islam*, Party of Islam, has been formed, and since early June there have been reports of tribal rebellions in the traditional Durrani strongholds of Nangarhar north of Jalalabad. Another exile group, the National Deliverance Front, claims the allegiance of over 100 members of Daud's 1977 *Loye Jirgab*, and the scope for resistance and sabotage against the DRA is therefore considerable. Government leaders have blamed opposition on the Muslim Brotherhood, and Taraki himself has made a point of inviting tribal delegations led by their *kbans* to come to Kabul and meet him—in the historic traditions of Afghan rulers—and has repeatedly stressed the

reform decree. The maximum holding per family is limited to between six and sixty hectares, depending on the quality of the land. All holdings above that are to be expropriated without compensation and distributed to poor peasants and agricultural labourers. No mention has yet been made of collectivization. (*Le Monde*, 15 December 1978)

DRA's respect for Islam. Nevertheless, the dangers of counter-revolutionary action, given the nature of Afghan society, the weakness of the PDPA and the ferocity of the DRA's enemies, must be substantial.

4. The régime's capacity to survive over the next few years and achieve a decisive implantation will, apart from security considerations, depend on its economic record. 1978 has seen a relatively good harvest, but it will take time to develop the irrigation systems that will prevent another disaster such as 1970–72. Unemployment will also take years to solve. Moreover, in the short run, the régime is especially vulnerable at the level of trade and distribution, where the bazaar merchants are most likely to resist state control and exploit the inevitable post-revolutionary shortages to evade controls. Measures designed to limit price fluctuations in the Kabul bazaar immediately after the revolution have, it seems, already been abandoned in the face of merchant opposition; and the scope for further difficulties will remain until an adequate state-controlled retail system exists—a matter of several years. The stake which many Pushtun *kbans* have in transport and smuggling to Pakistan will also alert them to the dangers of DRA intervention.

5. The régime faces a hostile regional environment. The immediate response of Western embassies in Kabul was to diffuse a 'black propaganda' campaign, according to which thousands had been slain by the PDPA. Taraki has stated that less than a hundred people in Kabul itself were killed, and about twenty-five arrested. The only other area of conflict was Jalalabad. Now, behind a mask of politesse, the Western governments and their regional allies are waiting for a moment to act. They stress the unstable nature of the DRA government. No coherent counter-revolutionary force has yet emerged; but as in North Yemen after 1962, it is evident that a peasantry plagued by tribalism and religious mystification can, under certain circumstances, be temporarily mobilized to fight a new urban-based revolutionary régime. The United States, China, Iran and Pakistan could all exploit the DRA's difficulties. On the other hand, the latter has two advantages that the beleaguered Yemeni revolutionary republic of 1962 never had: it already has a functioning 80,000-strong army; and it can threaten similar difficulties for its neighbours in both Baluchistan and Pushtunistan, if Iran and Pakistan interfere in Afghan domestic affairs.

6. The role of the Soviet Union raises a number of questions that require explicit answers. Since Western propaganda had presented recent events in Afghanistan uniquely as part of a Soviet process of 'expansion', one left response has, perhaps inevitably, been to play down the Soviet presence and deny its importance. This is, however, inadequate. As far as the April coup itself was concerned, there is, as noted, no evidence of any direct Russian involvement. But Afghanistan has long been an extremely important country in Moscow's eyes. It has a 1,000-mile border with the Soviet Union; it is the largest per capita recipient of Soviet aid in the non-Communist world; and thousands of Afghan civilians and military have been trained in the USSR. There exists a long tradition of Soviet writing on Afghanistan,⁵¹ and coverage in the Soviet and Eastern European press

⁵¹ On Soviet studies of Afghanistan, see notes 4 and 7 above.

since April has been remarkably comprehensive. Nevertheless, the real reasons for the 1978 coup had nothing to do with an alleged 'Soviet expansionism'. Rather, it expressed the delayed release of tensions internal to Afghan society, which the Soviet Union had, if anything, helped to postpone by sustaining the Zahir and Daud régimes. If there was an external destabilizing element, it was not Russian but Iranian initiatives that provided this—and so ultimately, through the Nixon Doctrine, US policies which upset the long-standing equilibrium in Afghanistan. The rightist development of Daud's régime after 1974, and the policies on the Helmand Waters and on Pakistan that he adopted under Iranian pressure, led in the end to the April coup. The Soviet Union seems to have been reluctant to resist these developments until the revolutionary government came to power, but was fortunate that a local revolutionary agent could respond to the new imbalance created by the Iranian, and indirectly US, initiatives.

7. The major question for socialists elsewhere is not what the role of the Soviet Union was, but rather whether a revolution has occurred and what kind of revolution this is. The influence of the Soviet Union on the new political and economic structures of Afghan society will, in this context, be considerable; and it is here that the greatest cause for concern may arise. A revolution, in the sense of a seizure of power by an oppressed class through a process of mass mobilization, has not occurred in Afghanistan. Events there are not, for this reason, comparable to what happened in China, Vietnam or Cuba. What has occurred is the seizure of power by a radical sector within the state apparatus, led by civilians (most of them teachers or other kinds of civil servant) and aided by army officers. The officers include Pushtun and non-Pushtun elements, and were able to construct a conspiracy despite the difficulties encountered after Daud's turn against *Parcham* in 1975. The programme of the PDPA is, however, a revolutionary one, aimed as it is at a socialist transformation of Afghan society and at expropriation of the existing ruling class. In internal politics, the three key measures embodying this are land reform, nationalization of industry and the removal of 'anti-democratic' elements from the state apparatus. The determination to alter the position of women and resolve the nationality question are also of central importance. In foreign relations Afghanistan, already in an anomalous position as far as third-world countries are concerned, is consolidating even closer ties with the Soviet bloc. Fidel Castro's welcome to the Afghans on the occasion of their joining 'the family of revolutions' is eloquent in this respect. A revolutionary process is, therefore, under way in Afghanistan.

The overall role of the Soviet Union in this process will undoubtedly be positive. First, through provision of military aid, it will help the new Afghan régime to survive and face the very real threat of counter-revolution. Secondly, whatever the problems about gas prices and the like, Soviet economic assistance under the new régime will help to bring greater benefits to the Afghan people than decades of US-Soviet equilibrium under the Mohammadzai. The area for greatest concern must lie rather in the kind of political impact Soviet assistance will have. It is noticeable that the new Kabul régime has laid less emphasis on the construction of new institutions of democratic expression and power

than on other parts of its programme. Taraki has said that a new constitution will be promulgated, but it seems to be taking second place to the land reform and the five-year plan. The manner in which the 'confessions' of Abdul Qadir and the other ousted leaders were announced in September is extremely ominous; and no doubt the modestly entitled 'special organization' that Tass announced on 15 May will have its hands full in the coming years, given the very real threat of counter-revolution. The capacity of the PDPA to resist Soviet political models has, therefore, yet to be tested. On the one hand, it was founded after the worst years of Stalin's control of the international Communist movement; on the other, its exposure to Marxism appears to have been entirely to the vapid formulations of official Soviet textbooks in the fifties and sixties, from which it is unlikely to derive a firm commitment to socialist democracy. The PDPA does, however, appear to have a realistic and sensitive grasp of the particularities of Afghan society, and it may be that—in an international Marxist climate much more diverse than that of two decades ago—other political considerations will have their impact.

The greatest test, and opportunity, for the realization of the revolutionary potential of the new régime lies in the land reform: its capacity to transform the property relations and social conditions under which the great majority of the Afghan population live. The nature of Afghan society was such that it was extremely difficult for the PDPA to build a mass rural base; faced with the threat of elimination by Daud in April 1978, they quite rightly took the initiative and seized power. Whatever the problems, they hold before the Afghan people the hope of a new era and of a socialist transformation of that country. For this reason they deserve the support of revolutionaries throughout the world.