

# Nation, Ethnicity and the Conflict in Afghanistan

Political Islam and the rise of  
ethno-politics 1992–1996

Raghav Sharma



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Ethnic and tribal loyalties in Afghanistan provided the lethal cocktail for the violent conflict that engulfed the country following the collapse of the Soviet backed government in 1992. The ensuing fighting between *mujahideen* groups paved the way for the tectonic social and political shifts that continue to shape events today. What accounts for the emergence of ethnicity, as the main cause of conflict in Afghanistan? What moved people to respond with such fervour and intensity to calls for ethnic solidarity?

This book attempts to make sense of ethnicity's decisive role in Afghanistan through a comprehensive exploration of its nature and perception. Based on new data, generated through interviews, field notes and participant observations, Sharma maps the increased role of ethnicity in Afghan national politics. Key social, political and historical processes that facilitated its emergence as the pre-dominant fault line of conflict are explored, moving away from grand political and military narrative to instead engage with zones of conflict as social spaces. This book will be of interest to students and scholars working in politics, ethnic studies and security studies.

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# Biographies

**Dostum, Abdul Rashid:** Born in 1954, a native of Jowzjan province. He began his career in the state owned gas refinery in Shiberghan. Initially armed to command a small group of 10–12 men to defend the gas facility he steadily rose through the ranks of the armed forces to eventually command the most powerful and mobile militia comprising 20,000–40,000 men that fought the *mujahideen* on behalf of the Kabul government. He was awarded the rank of a four star General. In 1992 he turned against his former patron Dr Najibullah and joined hands with Ahmad Shah Massoud to topple the communist government in Kabul. He founded a political party by the name of Junbish-i-Milli-ye-Islami, which espoused the cause of ethnic Uzbeks and Turkmens. He also runs a TV channel and a foundation for sponsoring studies for students largely in Turkey, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. He has forged alliances with every possible political formation in the country. Presently he is serving as the vice President in the National Unity Government headed by President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Dr Abdullah Abdullah.

**Hizb-i-Islami:** An Islamist party, founded in 1977 by Engineer Gulubuddin Hekmatyar and Maulvi Yunus Khalis. By 1979 the party split into two factions headed by Khalis and Hekmatyar respectively. The latter faction emerged as the favoured recipient of arms and money from the US through its allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia up until 1994. Notably it was the only Islamist party that vocally advocated elections for choosing the new government in Kabul.

**Hizb-i-Wahadat:** The Hizb-i-Wahadat (Unity Party) was formed under the auspices of Iran in 1988, bringing together all Shia parties under one political and organizational umbrella under the leadership of Abdul Ali Mazaari. The party claimed to champion the cause of Shia-Hazaras in Afghanistan and fought pitched battles in Kabul between 1992 and 1996 and subsequently against the Taliban. It split into four different factions.

**Jamiat-i-Islami:** An Islamist party founded by Professor Buhranuddin Rabbani while teaching at Kabul University. It is one of the oldest Islamist parties in the country and emerged as a powerful political–military front in the years of anti-Soviet resistance. The party has over the years come to be closely identified

with the Tajik ethnic constituency and remains strong in the North-eastern parts of the country.

**Kufi, Fauzia:** Member of the Wolsej Jirga since 2002. She is presently serving her second term as Member of Wolsej Jirga. She has been elected twice, in 2005 and 2010, to the lower house of the Afghan parliament from Badakshan province. Although elected as an independent candidate, politically she is close to the Jamiat-i-Islami. Prior to her plunge into politics, Ms Kufi has worked for UN agencies in Badakshan and taught English language at the University of Badakshan. She is a widow with two daughters; in 2003 she lost her husband to tuberculosis, which he contracted while in incarceration under the Taliban.

**Mousavi, Sayed Askar:** A well-known Afghan-Hazara intellectual. He has written extensively on Hazara history and culture and also taught at the American University of Afghanistan, Kabul. Presently he serves as Advisor to the Minister of Higher Education, Kabul.

**Sharifi, Omar:** Dr Omar Sharifi currently serves as Director, American Institute for Afghan studies. Prior to this he has served as Head of Research for Foundation for Culture and Civil society and as Director for the Open Media Fund, Afghanistan. Dr Sharifi was born and brought up in Kabul. He stayed on in his native Kabul through all the years of violent conflict and turmoil. He is a qualified medical doctor and also holds a graduate degree in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Columbia.

**Spanta, Rangin Dadfar:** Rangin Dadfar Spanta is a native of Herat province. He fled Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion, eventually settling down in West Germany as a refugee where he was active in the Green party. He holds a doctorate in Political Science from the University of Aachen, Germany where he also taught for a number of years. Prior to taking up his first Ministerial assignment as Foreign Minister in 2006 he taught at the University of Kabul. He served as Foreign Minister and subsequently as the National Security Advisor in the government of former Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

# Preface

Afghanistan returned to the international spotlight after two decades of amnesia in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Contemporary political sociology in Afghanistan bears a strong impression of the bloody conflict, in which various world and regional powers have been involved in varied ways that have ravaged the country for nearly four decades.

Crafting new civic institutions and decent political norms in the face of dramatic reconfiguration of the socio-political landscape has been a grave and complex challenge. The international community continues to grapple with it, invariably in disjointed fragments, despite the fifteen year-long US led intervention in Afghanistan. The most telling sign of the deep social-political metamorphosis the long conflict has spawned is the explicit ethno-political salience on a scale unlike any in the past. Inevitably that deep fact colours contemporary discourse in as also on Afghanistan. This is the context in which this book focuses upon the period 1992–1996; seminal years in the making and consolidation of the ethno-political salience as pre-eminent.

Attempts to make sense of and respond to social-political changes engineered by prolonged armed conflict have often in considerable measure been informed by simplistic frames of reference and analysis. That has often entailed a projection of the Afghan social setting through a rigid ethnic prism, invariably conceptualized as pitting the Pashtun majority vis-à-vis the non-Pashtun minority.

The cardinal argument of the research is that the nature and duration of the conflict has fundamentally changed the basic contours of the social-political relations of groups in Afghanistan. ‘Ethnicity’, an ancient Afghan social fact, has been politicized by the conflict well beyond its original frame and pushed, by enduring ‘disarticulation’ between the *national minorities* and the Afghan state, to the political centre-stage.

This seminal shift is marked by the entry of new social groups into the political arena, accentuated by the active involvement of external actors through their ethnic or sectarian proxies. These critical shifts began in the late 1980s and crystallized during the years of incessant violence under *mujahideen* rule (1992–1996). Its implications are vividly borne out in the changing conceptions of ‘nation’ and ‘ethnicity’. Hence the proposition that conflict despite its lethal destructive edge also carries a certain transformative dimension.

In the Afghan case this transformative dimension may be seen in the renegotiated social equations, moved by the emergence of new social–political formations and normative expectations of equal standing and opportunity as Afghan nationals. The tragic irony that informs this rhetoric of parity is instructive. Insistence on ethnic parity happened in the midst of the general breakdown of institutions and norms. Shifts induced by the conflict in long entrenched social equations dramatically underscore the meaning and significance of a ‘conflict zone’ as a ‘social space’ inhabited by living people with robust human expectations. That also enables us to grasp the vehemently simplistic analytic frames that posit ethnicity as primordial, unchanging social substance. Specifically, such analysis sees the Afghan conflict as a battle between neatly ascribed groups locked in blind binary opposition. Equally misplaced are explanations that see the conflict solely as a naked contest for power; ethnicity merely a powerful instrument for personal aggrandisement.

The primacy of ethnicity has been characterized by Olivier Roy as the ‘failure of political Islam’. That in some measure indeed holds true. But the word ‘failure’ here sounds excessive. It fails for instance, to account for the enduring power of pan-Islamic rhetoric – ISIS or Daesh in recent years its most radical avatar – to mobilize and compel legitimacy even within the discourse of *national minorities*. Hence the attempt to take a rigorous look at ‘ethnicity’ and ‘nation’ as both concept and lived experience, over a long duration of extreme violence and militarization. In the Afghan case under study that has meant the enigmatic prevalence and valorization simultaneously of raw brute force and the rhetoric of some overarching normative: pre-eminently, Islam and ethnic parity.

This work is the outcome of pointed thick conversation between deep anthropological facts, political theory, historical works and field interviews notes on Afghan socio-political responses gathered over the last few years under the lengthening shadow of armed conflict.

# Acknowledgements

Afghanistan is a stupendous country whose people, culture and history continue to captivate my attention, seven years after I first set foot there. The idea for much of what this book seeks to address has been informed by encounters with ordinary Afghans and their everyday life rhythms in an otherwise exceedingly fraught situation in Afghanistan. I am grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst) for bestowing on me a grant to pursue my research.

Foremost I would like to thank all the people in Afghanistan without whose sustained support this book would not have come to fruition. My friends and colleagues at my now former workplace Community World Service, Kabul who not merely encouraged my research pursuits but also generously indulged me with their warmth and hospitality. My research was aided in more ways than I could possibly acknowledge by the support I received from my very dear friend Hizbur Rehman. A constant companion who saw me through the many highs and lows of my work, my research assistant and now close friend Zabiullah Farhang.

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In Germany at my host institution, University of Erfurt, I received unstinting support and encouragement from my *guru* Professor Dr Frank Ettrich. I also owe a special thanks to Dr Teresa Koloma Beck for carefully reading through my drafts and sharing her insightful comments. Without their critical attention and guidance this research would have remained impoverished in more ways than one.

Finally I would like to thank my wife, sister and parents, who have been a constant source of support and encouragement. In particular I am deeply indebted to my father, Suresh Sharma from whom I have learned more than can be acknowledged.

Raghav Sharma, New Delhi

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# Acronyms

AIG	Afghan Interim Government
AIHRC	Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission
CARs	Central Asian Republics
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HIH	Hizb-i-Islami (Hekmatyar)
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRP	Islamic Renaissance Party
ISI	Inter Services Intelligence
IUAM	Islamic Unity of Afghan Mujahideen
JIA	Jamiat-u-Islami
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PSC	Protracted Social Conflict
SAZA	Revolutionary Organization of Afghan Toilers (Sazman-e-Enqalabi-Zahmatkashanha-ye-Afghanistan)
UN	United Nations

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# Glossary

***Firman*** Royal decree

***Ghazi*** Honorary title bestowed on Rulers/warriors who fought in the cause of Islam

**Harkat-i-Shamal** Movement of the North founded by General Dostum and Mumin after defecting from the Kabul government. It claimed to fight for rights of ethnic minorities predominantly in the North

***Jirga*** Assembly

**Junbish** State Militia turned *mujahideen* party, predominantly comprising Uzbeks and Turkmens

**Khalq** Radical wing of the Afghan Communist party, predominantly rural and Pashtun in membership

**Parcham** Relatively more moderate faction of the Afghan communist party, first led by Babrak Karmal and later by Najibullah. More popular with non-Pashtuns and urban populace

**Shura-ye-Nazar** Supervisory Council. Set up by Ahmad Shah Massoud in 1984 to unify *mujahideen* armed formations in the North.

**Shura** Consultative Council

**Wahadat (Hizb-i-Wahadat)** Hazara *mujahideen* party, headed by Abdul Ali Mazari.

**Watan (Hizb-i-Watan)** Fatherland Party, formerly PDPA headed by Najibullah

**Wolsei Jirga** Lower house of the Afghan parliament

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# 1 Introduction

It is very difficult to have a unified narrative or understanding of the period between 1992 and 1995/1996. Everybody has a different understanding of it. For some groups for instance such as the Hazaras and the Uzbeks that was the first time in over 100 years that they emerged as players in the national politics . . . developments between 1992 and 1996 completely shifted the balance of power. It in a sense moderated a lot of claims and at the end it created a lot of space that will effect Afghanistan's history for the course of the next 100 years in terms of power sharing, in terms of the definition of legitimacy and in terms of whole idea of citizenship.

(Interview, Sharifi, Kabul, 2012)

The cardinal argument of this book is that the nature and sheer duration of the conflict has fundamentally changed the basic contours of social–political relations of groups and communities with each other as well as with the state in Afghanistan. ‘Ethnicity’, an ancient Afghan social fact, has been politicized by the conflict well beyond its original frame and pushed, by heightened ‘disarticulation’ between *national minorities* and the Afghan state, to the political centre-stage. This seminal shift is marked by the entry of new social groups into the political arena, accentuated by the active involvement of *external actors* through their ethnic or sectarian proxies. These critical shifts began to crystallize during the years of incessant extreme violence under *mujahideen* rule (1992–1996). Its far-reaching implications are vividly borne out in the changing conceptions of ‘nation’ and ‘ethnicity’. Hence the disturbing irony that ‘conflict’, despite its lethal destructive edge, carries a certain transformative dimension.

Consider in this context the clarification in the aftermath of the defeat of Kabul's Taliban rulers by Lakhdar Brahmi, United Nations' Special Representative in Afghanistan, concerning the ‘ethnic balance’ in the proposed new order of Constitutional Governance: ‘the ethnic balance we have tried to work out here is, I think, 11 for the Pashtuns, eight for the Tajiks, five for the Hazaras, three for the Uzbeks and one or two for the others, the smaller groups’.<sup>1</sup>

Lakhdar Brahimi's clarification concerning the social composition of the proposed post-Taliban Afghan order of Governance was reflective as much of a desire on the part of the international community to put in place a more orderly