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People, Politics, and Society: A Historical Analysis of Afghanistan

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Abstract

Afghanistan is located at the cross-roads of Asia and is a mountainous country. This country has a unique and long history with boundary changes and several name like Ariana, Khorasan and finally Afghanistan are the titles which acted as cradles of civilization at a time and sometimes asylums for the native fighters. From the history of Afghanistan one can see the civilized and bright periods with most times of ruining, desolation and fighting. There is fighting against neighboring countries and civil wars in Afghanistan especially in the last three centuries. Its physical shape is in a way that throughout the history various tribes and clans of the world based on warring problems have sought asylum here and easily have been mixed up and combined with native tribes in different and safe hiding places. Afghanistan is termed as the intersection of Asia with multinational people possessing variety of languages and also the center for the connecting point of various religions and cultures. The independent nature of autonomous life having mostly the tribal features and mountainous living style of the people has changed it to a spiritual power. These characteristics of the masses of Afghans are implied only in the fighting ways and not for economic progress and development. This paper attempts to analyze the geographical location, features and

composition of ethnic division of Afghan society. This paper will also provide basic information about Afghanistan especially the land and the people of Afghanistan.

Key Words: Afghanistan, crossroads, diversity, gateway, vulnerable

Introduction

Afghanistan ascertains a central geographical location. It is situated at the crossroads of great Asian civilizations which put deep influence on the complex history of this country. (1) It is the center and meeting place of four strategic, ecological and cultural areas; the Indian-Subcontinent, the Far East, the Middle East, for the Pamir Mountains intrude into Chinese Sinking and Central Asia (2). The presence of a wide diversity of races and languages in modern Afghanistan made it a military pot of different cultures (3). Its political evolution has always been influenced due to its strategic location and acting as the gateway to India. External powers launched invasions on Afghanistan throughout its history (4). Infertile Afghan land was used as buffer zone and military encampment by these forces in spite of directly occupying it. Its social structures and politics were influenced by the forces operating outside its geographical boundaries which led to determine its place in the international world (5). The Afghan borderland has always been the vulnerable region for the South Asian rulers due to successful invasions in the sub-continent from its inland routes (6). During the mid-eighteenth century modern Afghanistan came into exist under Ahmad Shah Abdali (7). Under the three Anglo-Afghan wars and World War II Afghanistan maintained its autonomy and sovereignty. Moreover it could not be subjugated or occupied to colonial rule despite losing it some regions to both British India and Russia; these powers later on determined boundaries of it. Interestingly the Afghans who are linguistically and ethnically divided have portrayed themselves as independence minded and nationalistic. It can be said there is a strong anti-colonial tradition in Afghanistan (8).

It is a landlocked country in South Asia, bordering Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. Its geography is mountainous and arid; the Hindu Kush range extend from the north-east to the southwest and separate the Northern regions from the other part of the country. The system of government can be termed as an Islamic republic; the president attains a pivotal position in the political set up. The economic system is a controlled system in which the distribution of goods and production are controlled by the central government. Kabul is a member of certain organizations in South Asia it has the membership of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) (9).

The flag of Afghanistan is of three colors namely black, red and green. Three wars fought for liberation against the British Empire have been depicted in the black color. Red stands for sacrifice prolonged efforts and blood of the people of Afghanistan to get through hardship and poverty. Green signifies peace and Islam. The importance of Islam has been

mentioned through writing on the flag which describes: 'there is no God but Allah and Mohammad (SAW) is his prophet and Allah is great.' National coat of arms has been shown with yellow color in the center of the flag which represents a mosque with a sheaf of wheat and a banner on either side. The word "Afghanistan" and the year 1298 of the Muslim calendar to show independence, 1919 have been located in the lower part of the insignia (10).

Historical Background of Afghanistan

Afghanistan came into being in the present form after passing through different stages. Its brief history can be explained as:

The Pre-Islamic Period: According to Archaeological evidence modern Afghanistan came into exist between 3000 and 2000 B.C when urban civilization flourished in the region. There are signs of first historical document belonging to Iranian Achaemenian Dynasty which ruled the area from 550 B.C to 331 B.C. The Achaemenian emperor Darius 111 was defeated by Alexander the Great who occupied the territory that is now Afghanistan. The Seleucids, Alexander's successors carried on influence in the region and Greek cultural influence spread during their rule. Later on the Mauryan Empire of India occupied Southern Afghanistan and Buddhism got infused in the region. Nomadic Kushans established an empire during the mid-third century B.C which became a center of commercial and cultural activities. The region was fragmented after the end of the Kushan Empire in the third century A.D under the Iranian Sassanian Empire.

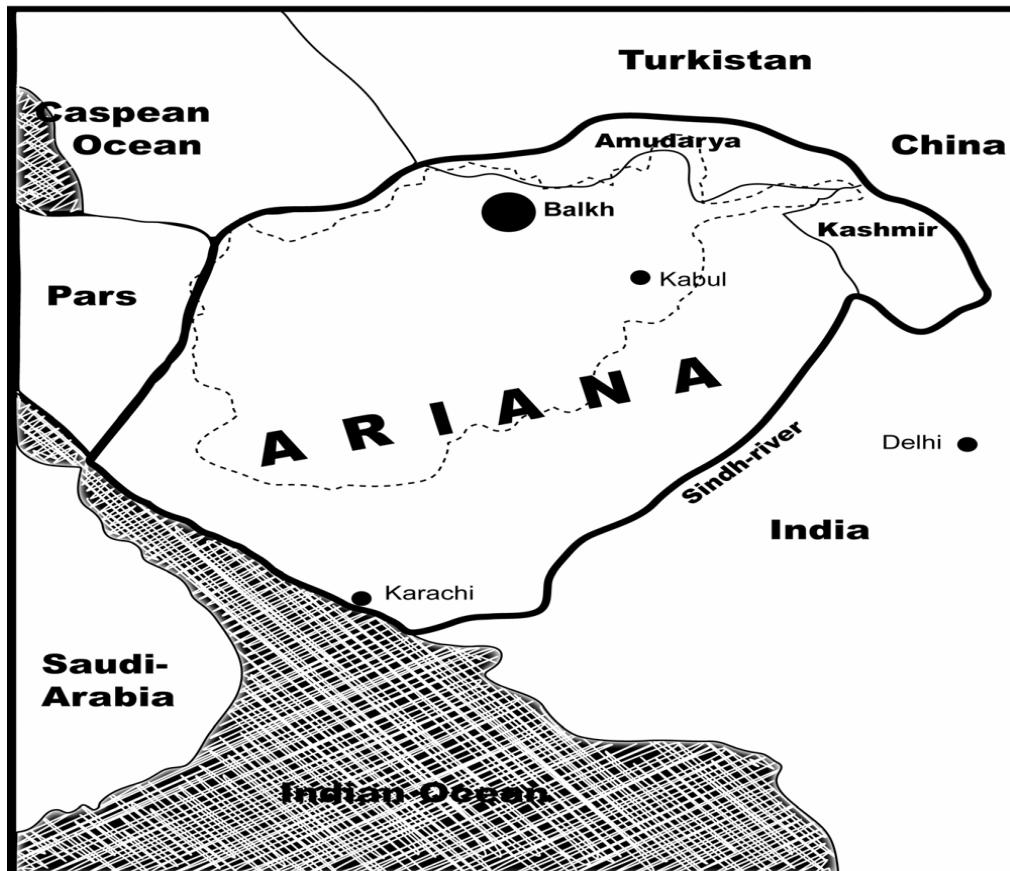
The Islamic and Mongol Conquests: At the battle of Qadisiya when Arab Muslims defeated Sassanians in 637 there started a process of 100 year conquering the Afghan tribes and introduction of Islam. During the tenth century the rule of the Arab Abbasid Dynasty and the Samanid dynasty in Central Asia had been crumbled. Later on the Ghaznavid Dynasty was the first Islamic dynasty to get hold in Afghanistan. In 1220 Mongol forces under Genghis Khan got hold in whole Central Asia. Afghanistan remained fragmented till 1380 until and unless Timur ascended on the throne. He consolidated and expanded the Mongol Empire. Till the early 16th century Afghanistan remained under the control of Timur's descendants.

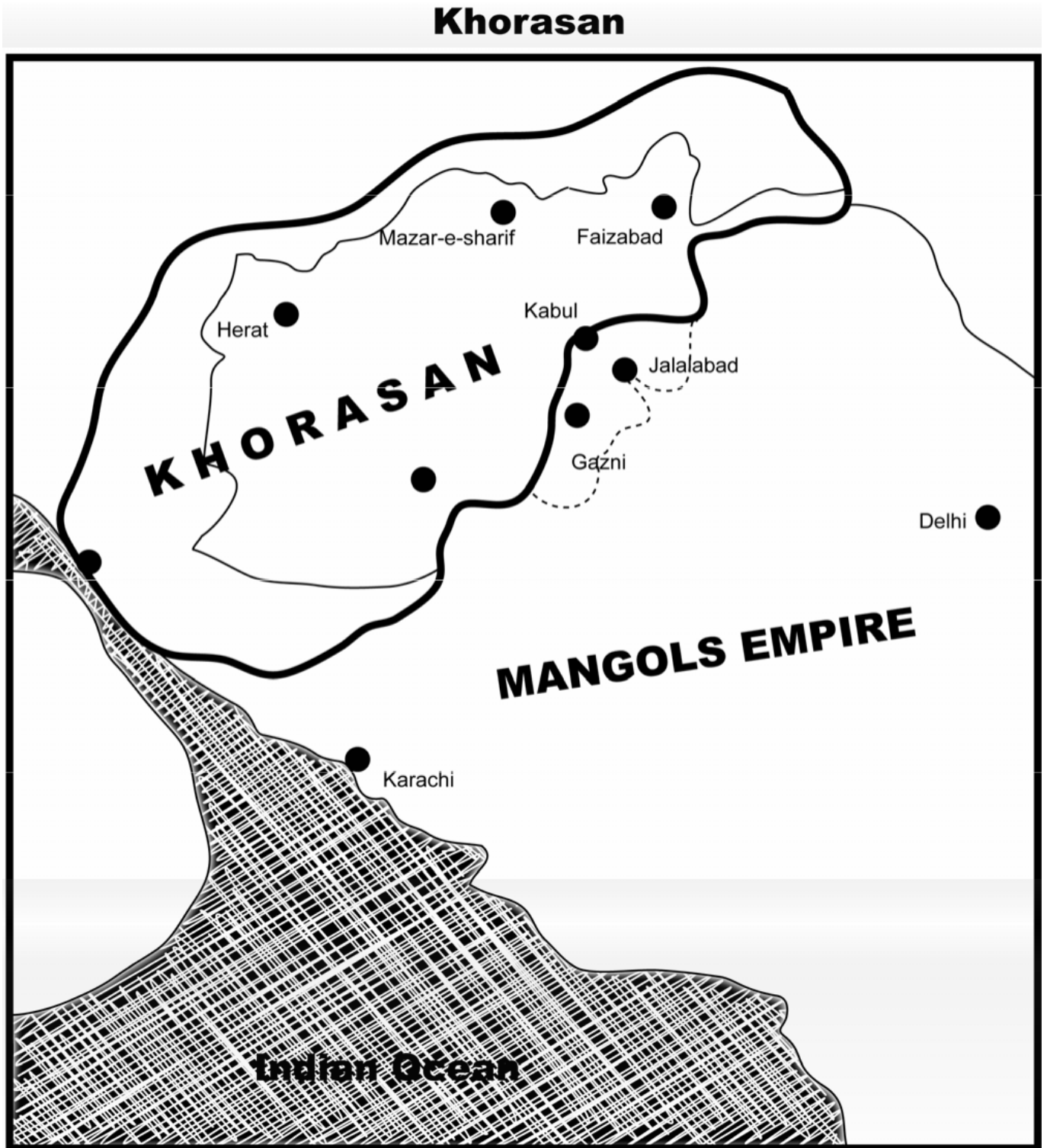
The Pashtun Rulers: The Mughals gained the control of the region in 1504 and contested for the next two centuries with the Iranian Safavi Dynasty to gain control over the Afghan territory. In 1747 after the death of the great Safavi leader Nadir Shah indigenous Pashtunes became rulers of Afghanistan for the next coming years under Durrani dynasty. Ahmad Shah founder of the Afghan nation became the first Durrani ruler who united the Pashtun tribes and by 1760 built an empire based on solid foundations extending to Delhi and the Arabian Sea (11).

A new history of Afghanistan

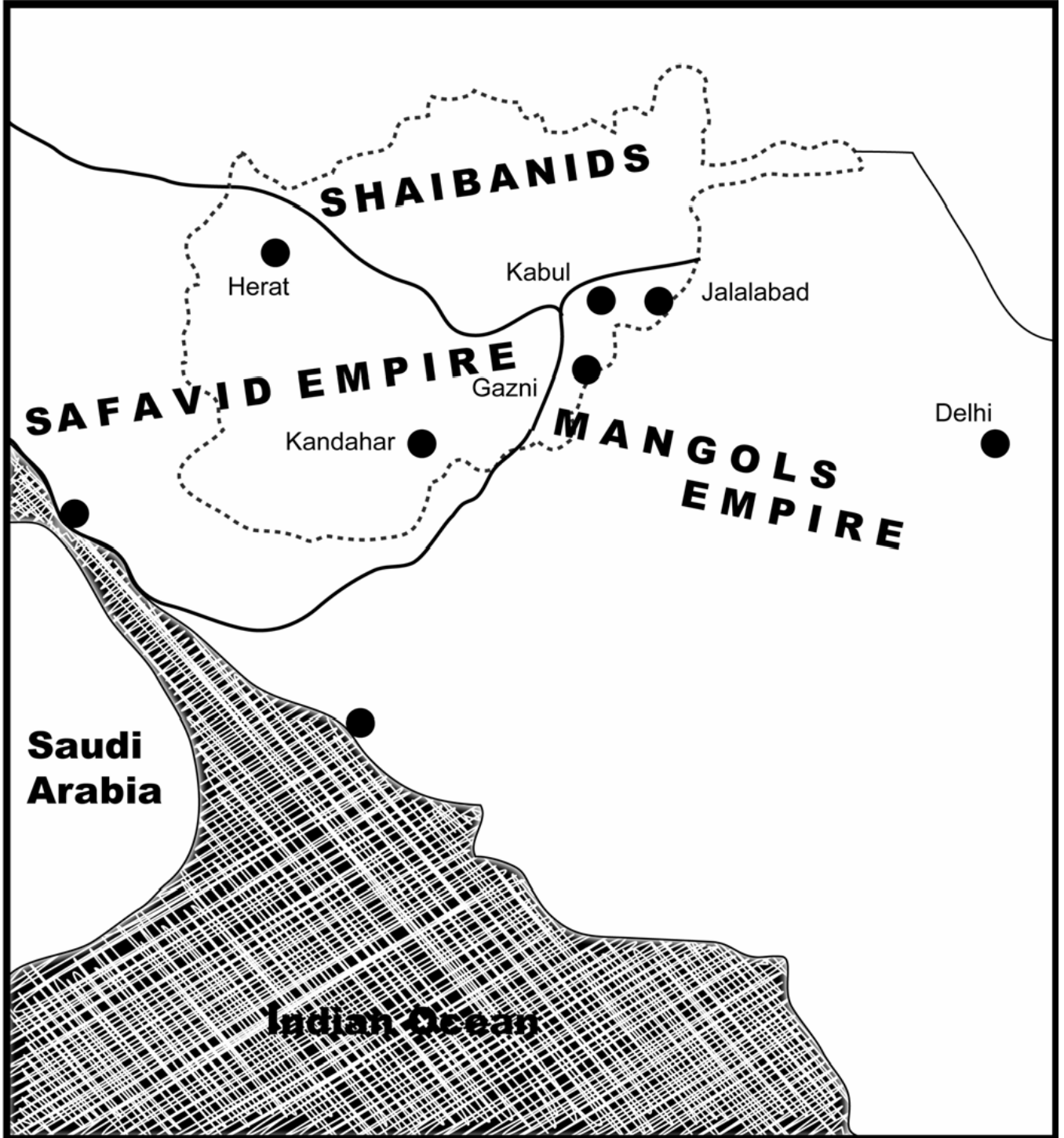


Ariana





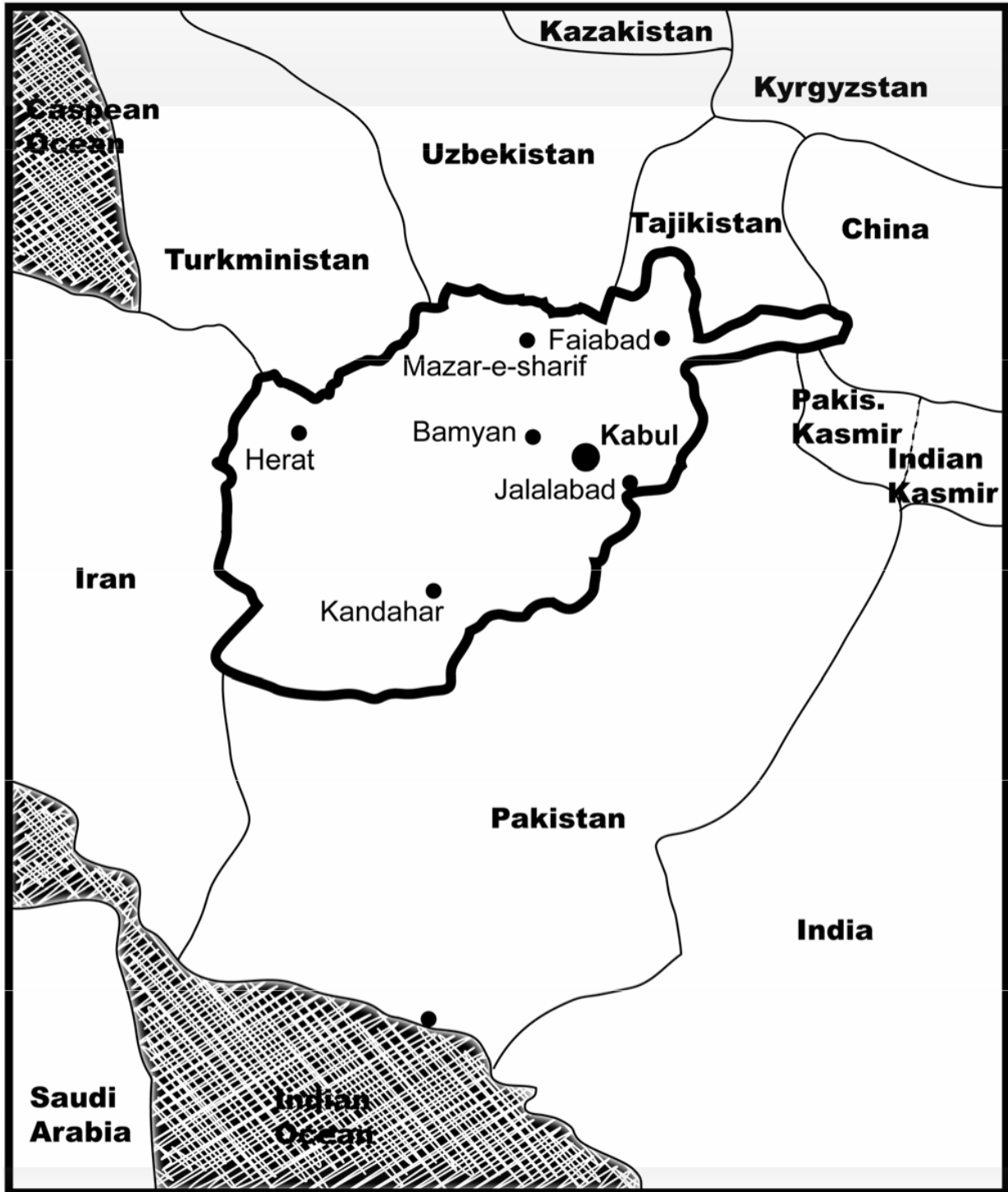
Divisional Khorasan



Afganistan after 1747



The present Afghanistan after 1893



Source: Dr. Ghulam Ahmad Waak University of Helsinki, Aleksanteri-instituutti 2005.

The Afghan state with the passage of time developed a number of distinctive features in the administrative and political domains. Primarily it was labeled as a dynastic state. For two centuries there was a monarchical system in it however during the era of Ahmad Shah Durrani it took the shape of tribal confederation. The Afghan state during the nineteenth century had transformed in a pre-modern form (12).

During this era rulers were dependent on external patrons while taxes in spite of cash were collected in form of tribute. Shah Shuja was a known ruler during this period who ruled the state in a manner as craven subordination to pressures of a patron. State affairs during Amir Abdul Rahman Khan witnessed a considerable consolidation especially tax collecting got strengthened (13).

Later rulers lacked the determination of Amir Abdul Rahman Khan. His successor Habibullah was a low key ruler and assassinated in 1919. Amanullah contrary to his father Habibullah did several reforms and tried to modernize his country but was overthrown in 1929(14).

Nadir Shah, a Pushtun aristocrat, became ruler of Afghanistan after a short gap of non-Pushtun rule. His rule lasted till his death in 1933 and for the next forty years his son Zahir Shah occupied the throne. He was overthrown by his cousin Mohammad Daoud in 1973. There was end of dynastic rule when Daoud was killed in April 1978 because of communist coup (15).

The British and the Russian empires rivalry in the 19th century described and held the status of Afghanistan as a classic buffer state. There was a 'Great Game' between the potential competitors as the British entrenchment in India led towards the foundation of a number of protectorates and the Russian advancement into Central Asia paved the way for competition (16).

Afghanistan's official date of independence is August 19, 1919 when it entered in the Treaty of Rawalpindi which ended the third Anglo-Afghan war (17).

Political Structure of Afghanistan

A new constitution for Afghanistan was framed in 2004. Political structure includes executive, legislature and judicial system. As far as executive of Afghanistan is concerned President occupies central position he is head of state as well as government. The president and two vice presidents are elected by popular vote to five years terms. Under 2004 constitution of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai was elected as the first president. Ministers are appointed by the president after the final approval of the Wolesi Jirga (People's Council). There are 34 provinces of Afghanistan and governor of each province is appointed by the president (18).

Legislature is consisted of two houses: upper house and lower house. Wolesi Jirga or the House of the People is the lower house. Its powers and functions are to make, ratify and approve the actions of the President. There are 249 members of the Wolesi Jirga. Its members are directly elected by the people for five years terms. Out of the total members 68 seats are reserved for women and 10 for the Kuchis, a large seminomadic group. The Upper House is called Meshrano Jirga (the House of Elders). There are 102 members of the upper house. These are indirectly elected by the provincial councils, district councils and the president. Its members are appointed after the completion of Wolesi Jirga election. This House performs advisory functions. Apart from this veto power has been given to this House. A Loya Jirga can also be convened by the government to decide about matters of urgent importance related to national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. There is also an assembly which is empowered to amend the constitution and bring charges against the president must be constituted by the members of the National Assembly and chairpersons of the provincial and district councils.

The apex court is consisted of nine judges including Chief Justice and all are appointed by the president and approved by the Wolesi Jirga. All the judges are appointed for the period of 10 years. They are responsible to manage the personnel, budgets and working of the entire local, regional and national court system. The high and appeal courts work under apex court. Judicial procedures in Afghanistan are influenced by local traditions and authorities. Each province has a lower and a higher court. Availability of trained jurists is very rare. In 2002 the transitional government hired Italian judicial experts to train defense lawyers, prosecutors and judges. The majority of local court officials got education from Muslim religious schools and lacked judicial skills. A large portion of the current law code is based on laws passed under the last king, Muhammad Zahir Shah and the new national judicial system has not been well organized and established on modern lines. Local elders and tribal authorities resolve criminal cases in the rural areas. Taliban laws in most of the areas are in effect. Majority of the cases in all provinces are resolved in accordance with Islamic and tribal laws (19).

The area of Afghanistan is 652,230 sq.km. According to 2009 estimate its population is 28.396 million. Its fertility rate is 6.53. Life expectancy at birth is as: 44.64 years for total population in which 44.47 years for male and 44.81 years for female in accordance with 2009 estimate. According to 2000 estimate the literacy rate in male and female is 43.1 % and 12.6 % respectively. The unemployment rate is quite high which 40 % is. The economy of Afghanistan is very bad and instable due to continuous civil war and terrorism. It is landlocked extremely poor and dependent on foreign aid. There are many social problems like shortage of medical care, jobs, clean water, electricity and housing. Among others include: huge opium trade, criminality and corruption (20).

Ethnic Groups in Afghanistan

Devastated and demolished by wars over the last four decades, it has made all its efforts for stability, solidity and peace regardless of grave internal and external challenges, together with its demography, geography, history and global power politics. It has remained a “multi-ethnic state”, possessing more than “one ethnic group, speaks too many languages, and has multiple and multi-layered identities” (21). One thing important about Afghanistan is its division on ethnic basis. Its main ethnic groups can be explained as under:

Pashtun

Among the ethnic groups Pashtuns are the largest Afghan ethnic group. Their primary language is Pashtu. They strictly follow ‘Pashtunwali’. The term ‘Pashtunwali’ is coined by anthropologists in their writings. This deals with their way of life as it is an unwritten code or set of values. Pashtuns portrait themselves as an independent and fierce in their characteristics. They deem themselves as the rightful leaders of Afghanistan. The backbone of Taliban was the Ghilzai Pashtun tribe. The famous Pashtun proverb is worth mentioning here: ‘I against my brother, my brother and I against my cousin: I, my brother and my cousin against the stranger’.

Tajik

After Pashtuns the second largest ethnic group is Tajik. Tajiks are about 25-30 % of population. They speak Farsi (Persian) or Dari and they refer to themselves as ‘Farsiwan’. They are opponent to Taliban and formed the backbone of Northern Alliance. Their social organization is not based on tribe rather on geography. Their source of unity is perceived threat against Pashtuns. Religiously they belong to Sunni faith while a few of them are the followers of Shia sect.

Hazara

They claim themselves Mongolian descent. They are supposed to be distinct ethnic and religious group. There is found a sense of deprivation and discrimination in them. Most of them are Shia Muslim. They are usually deemed as anti-Pashtun and anti-government. There are found two main groups in them one is Hazarajat (Hindu Kush in Central Afghanistan) while the other is those found outside Hazarajat (Central and North Afghanistan). They oppose Taliban. They are supposed to be occasional feuds with nomadic Kuchi.

Uzbek

Uzbeks are the mix of Turkic-Mongol descent. They speak Uzbek and Dari language. They are mostly Sunni Muslims and settled in North Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. They introduced Afghanistan's national sport 'Buzkashi'.

Nurestani

They link themselves to Alexander the Great and Quraysh tribe of Arabia. They inhabited in North East Afghanistan. They embraced Islam in the late 19th century. In past they were termed as Kafirs (infidels). They speak 5 languages with different dialects.

Turkmen

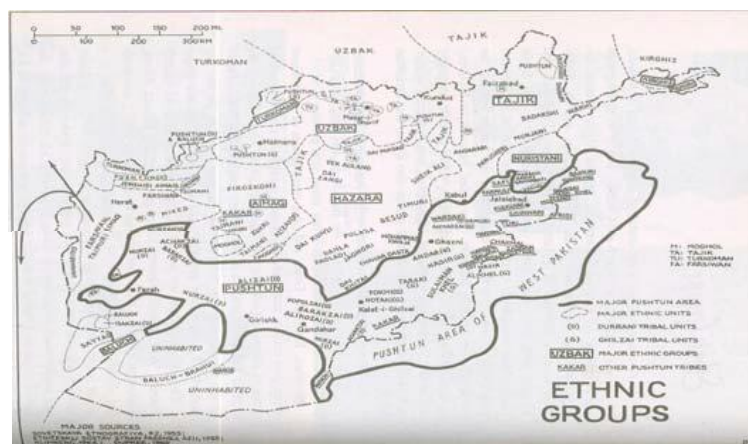
They belong to Turkic-Mongol descent. This ethnic group is Turkic-speaking. Mostly they are farmers and herdsmen. This group is based on tribe structure with patrilineal genealogies. Their main business is related to jewelry and carpet making.

Kuchi

They are supposed to be nomadic herdsmen. They cross borders with ease. Literacy rate is very low in Kuchi group. They are pro-Taliban. Their population is about 3 million. During and after the Soviet-Afghan war they were affected much by landmines.

Other Ethnic Groups

Other ethnic groups found in Afghanistan include: Gujjar, Kabuli, Hindus, Baluch, Sikhs, Qizilbash, Aimak and Pashai (22).



Source: Dupree. Louis. (2010). *Afghanistan*. Oxford University Press. p. 58.

The population statistics for the major ethnic groups are highly controversial in the absence of an accurate official census.

Ethnic Group	%
Pashtun	42
Tajik	27
Hazara	9
Uzbek	9
Aimak	4
Turkmen	3
Baluchi	2
Others	4

Source: Youngerman, Barry & Wahab, Shaista. (2007). *A Brief History of Afghanistan* InfoBase Publishing, New York. P. 14.

The Type of Work by Different Groups

The type of work done by different groups in Afghanistan can be divided along regional and ethnic lines.

Pashtuns

They are generally traders, merchants, animal breeders and farmers.

Tajiks

They are skilled artisans, town-dwelling traders, herders and farmers. Many Tajiks due to their wealth are deemed as middle and upper class citizens.

Uzbeks

Uzbeks are engaged in breeding the karakul sheep and an excellent type of Turkman horse and also are farmers and stockmen.

Hazaras

They are usually very poor and do subsistent herding and farming. They occupy the lowest socio-economic bracket in Afghanistan.

The Family System

People of Afghanistan have strong beliefs, values and norms about the family and behavior of its members. To meet many aspects of daily life Afghan families are highly dependent upon one another. The roles related to family are complex and they vary depending upon region and ethnicity. In Afghan society the family is deemed as the most

important institution. The Afghan family is termed as endogamous, patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal. Although polygamy is allowed but is not practiced widely (23).

Geographical Location of Afghanistan

Afghanistan is located in the heart of Asia and is a landlocked country. The waves of migrating people passed through this region over the centuries and was described by the Arnold Toynbee as the 'roundabout of the ancient world' leaving behind a mosaic of linguistic and ethnic groups (24).

Afghanistan's existence as an independent state, internal political development and history is determined due to its strategic and geographical location at the crossroads of West, South and Central Asia. The geography of Afghanistan features a wide variety of terrain and encompassing 245,000 sq. miles. There are mountains and deserts, narrow mountain valleys, a few fast flowing rivers and all these require extensive labor for human existence. The geographical division of Afghanistan is as the Hindu Kush Mountains divide the country into southern two thirds and northern third which culminate at the Pamir range merged with the North West. The Pamir range is usually known as "the roof of the world" due to convergence of many mountain ranges and lies near the four countries namely Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and China (25).

Its geographical location and borders can be explained as: in the northeast it is bordered with China via the Wakhan corridor (26). There are Fars or Iran on its west. In its south there is Baluchistan segregating it to the Indian Ocean while Khyber Pakhtun Khwa lies on its East (27). There is 1,206 km border of Afghanistan with Tajikistan; 2,430 km border with Pakistan; Turkmenistan shares 744 km border; Uzbekistan has 137 km border with it; further it shares 76 km border with mainland China and 976 km border with Iran (28).

Geographical Zones

Keeping in view terrain, climate and population Afghanistan can be divided into eight geographical zones. The eight regions which begin from east to west are: the central mountains of greater Hazarajat; the high altitude Wakhan; the semitropical lowlands of Logar, Kunar, Laghman and Jalalabad; the mountains valleys lie in its south starting with Badakhshan southern to the Nuristan and Panjshir; the northern plains known as Afghan Turkestan; foothills and the plains of the Kandahar region; the southeast mountain regions including greater Paktia and the western regions around Herat (29).

Climate

Climate of Afghanistan is generally of the arid or semi-arid steppe type, dry or hot summers and featuring cold winters. The areas and northeast mountains have subarctic

winter conditions. Extended south, monsoon effects moderate the climate near the Pakistan border and increase rainfall as far inland as central Afghanistan. In the Kabul region of the northeast, there occurs the highest precipitation. While in the southwestern plains region there are the highest temperatures and lowest precipitation where summer temperatures reach 49° C. In the northeastern mountains low temperatures range from -15° C in winter to 0° C in summer. The climate of the north-central Turkistan plain is increasingly arid closest to the northern borders with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Natural Resources

Konduz Province in the north and Helmand Province in the south are deemed as fertile crop-growing while agricultural resources are found in the form of grazing land in Afghanistan. There are major reservoirs of copper, iron, coal, chrome, salt as well as a variety of minerals like uranium, silver and gold can be traced out in Afghanistan. The most abundant hydrocarbon resource is natural gas. There is recognition of substantial oil deposits however not yet quantified. There is shortage of water for all purposes in it which is very alarming condition in near future (30).

Afghanistan and its Tribal Structure

Since the middle of the 18th century Afghanistan emerged as recognizable political unit. Before this it was not known as Afghanistan due to lack of political identity and national cohesion. There are many ethnicities found in Afghanistan and the term Afghans is used to refer Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen and other ethnicities inhabited in it. Historically the term Afghan is usually attached to the Pakhtuns. Khushal Khan Khattak has beautifully portrayed it in his poem as-“pull out your sword and lay any one, which says Pashtun and Afghan are not one! Arabs know this and so do Romans: Afghans are Pashtuns, Pashtuns are Afghans!” (31).

The names “Afghan’ and ‘Afghanistan” were used by Hudud-al-Alam in the 10th century AD (32).

The great deal of autonomy enjoyed by Pashtun tribes and clans right from the day one. Their major tribes include: Momand, Durrani, Yusufzai, Ghilzai and Afridi. All these tribes follow ‘Pashtunwali’ which is a strict code of honor whose main principles are justice and revenge for misdeeds or insults, asylum and hospitality to every person seeking help, defense of homeland, personal independence and fierce defense of Zan (woman), Zar (wealth) and Zameen (land). As far as local government is concerned it is managed through Jirgas (Councils of tribal elders) to ponder tribal affairs and the resolution of certain problems. One thing which is common is rivalries found in various tribes and carry on from generation to generation. The sedentary farmers speak Pashto and some of them live as nomadic herders (33).

The Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik each share culture, history and language. Contrary to Pashtuns these three groups follow a less tribal political organization and often recognize the rule of different regional Khans (34).

Conclusions

A variety of different lessons can be drawn from Kabul's geography, ethnic division and structure of government and inference drawn cannot be according to the viewpoints of many. Most of the distinct interests, likings and perspectives have been merged in the wider politics of struggle within their country and civil war going on from the last so many years has affected much to Afghans. The words of novelist Doris Lessing: 'We cry to you for help, but the wind blows away our words' truly reflect the sentiments of Afghan people. Most of the international actors are ready to manipulate the suffering of the Afghans without understanding their real problems in any serious manner; this can only, in the long run, breed cynicism about ulterior western motives in utilizing resources and troops to the Afghan war.

Afghanistan is an underdeveloped country. Constant wars in the past and continued civil war going on among warrior factions badly hit this war torn country. Conventional traditions of the tribes and differences between governments of neighboring countries and the Afghan government played an effective role in making it underdeveloped country. Several tribes live in the neighbor states and a small number of them reside in Afghanistan. Historically these small number of people were used by their majorities and occasionally against their ruling class. On the other hand rise of extremism fastened this process. Among the others mountainous location of Afghanistan is the other cause of illiteracy and poverty. Now the western countries want to help to Kabul government for economic development and strengthen its democratic institutions while neighboring countries on the other side do not want to help and cooperate to Afghanistan. Terrorist's attacks are launched from the boundaries of some neighboring states against the newly elected democrat government of Afghanistan. Intelligentsia and the public of Afghanistan want peace, development and democracy in Kabul, therefore, they need and expect whole cooperation, contribution and help of the neighboring and civilized states otherwise Kabul cannot to go farther alone.

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