

INFLUENCE OF THE ETHNIC FACTOR ON THE FORMATION OF AFGHAN STATEHOOD

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ABSTRACT

The formation of a unified state in Afghanistan is deeply affected by the many ethnic contradictions that are greatly hindering its current development. They primarily relate to building a multiethnic state, the traditional domination of the Pashtun feudal elite in the power structures, the place and role of the non-Afghan peo-

ples in the country's economic and political life, and the relations among the main ethnic groups that populate the country.

This article examines the sources of these ethnic problems as the centralized state completed its formation in Afghanistan and how they are expressed in the country's current historical mythology.

KEYWORDS: *Afghanistan, formation of the Afghan state, border delimitation, competition among powers, Afghans and non-Afghan peoples.*

Introduction

The events going on today in Afghanistan date back to the end of the 19th century. This was when formation of the centralized state was completed and feudal fragmentation, internecine wars, and intertribal discord came to an end. This was also when ethnic problems arose in Afghanistan that continue to take their toll on the country's sociopolitical life. They primarily relate to building a multinational state, the traditional domination of the Pashtun feudal elite in the power structures, the place and role of the non-Afghan peoples in the country's economic and political life, and the relations among the main ethnic groups that populate the country.

The nature and direction of the development of the sociopolitical processes going on in the country today, as expressed in its current mythology and official historical science, can only be understood and assessed by looking at the initial formation of a united Afghan state.

Formation of the Afghan State

In 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani established the first independent Afghan state with its capital in Kandahar. It was transformed into the Durrani Empire as a result of numerous conquests. This state became the nucleus for uniting the lands of the Pashtun tribes, later taking control over other territories populated primarily by non-Afghan peoples.

The emergence and development of feudal relations among the Pashtun tribes created the prerequisites necessary for forming the state. This was also promoted by external factors, like the collapse of the Great Mongol Empire in India, the downfall of the Nader Shah Empire in Iran, and the internecine wars in Central Asia.

The Durrani nation was an example of tribal statehood. It was based on the political power of a group of Pashtun tribes called *abdali* (*durrani*), whose position was strengthened by the crisis experienced by the traditional state-building and administration system.

The state established by Ahmad Shah and his successors was distinguished by the expansionist nature of the foreign policy it pursued. While Ahmad Shah Durrani was still alive, the Afghan khans, after conquering Northwest India, Baluchistan, Khorasan, Siistan, and Balkh (for some time), reached Merv and Badakhshan. According to well-known Orientalist I. Reisner, "the Afghan conquests were an expression and consequence of the development of feudalism in Afghan society and an attempt by the khans to alleviate the class contradictions and use military strength ... to conquer and plunder neighboring countries."¹

¹ I. M. Reisner, *Razvitie feodalizma i obrazovanie gosudarstva u afgantsev*, U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1954, p. 343.

At the beginning of the 1750s, the troops of the Afghan shah subdued numerous khanates along the left bank of the Amu Darya, which became independent dominions after the fall of the Nader Shah state. By the mid-19th century, small dominions of Badakhshan, Kunduz, Andarab, Kholm, Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh, Bamiyan, Aqcha, Sar-e Pol, Andkhui, Maymana, and Shibarghan existed on the left bank of the Panj-Amu Darya.²

The Afghans' power in the territories they conquered was unstable; Ahmad Shah had to keep his troops in a state of permanent combat-readiness. After a successful campaign in 1752, Balkh became the residence of the Afghan governor, where a military station was set up. However, try as they might, Ahmad Shah and his successors were unable to ultimately subdue these khanates. As for Badakhshan, the power of the Afghan emirs was unstable and short-lived there too. As G. Arandarenko noted, Badakhshan did not "lose its independence until 1869 and ultimately fell under the control of Afghanistan."³

The regions of Badakhshan, Kunduz, and South Turkestan situated on the left bank of the Panj-Amu Darya, which became "Afghan Turkestan," were subdued during the rule of emir Abdurahman Khan as a result of the merciless combat action and harsh repression of the population's resistance.

All of those who were against establishment of the Afghan emir's power were severely punished, the nobility and merchants particularly so, which was done for the edification of the rest of the population. For example, when Badakhshan was conquered, the emir's soldiers captured 50 merchants, who were accused of organizing attacks on the military convoys and stations. The emir instructed for all of their merchandise to be seized and their saddles and horses given to the cavalymen and artillery. As Abdurahman Khan admitted himself, despite the large ransom offered for each one, "I have ordered for them to be fired on by cannons since they have committed many crimes against my innocent people. This punishment was carried out."⁴

Two circumstances promoted the military achievements of the Afghan conquerors. First, these small khanates were cut off from their historical and ethnic base, deprived of the support of home Bukhara, and were backed up against the Amu Darya, so had no place to run. Second, after the second unsuccessful attempt to conquer Afghanistan (1878-1880) and in the context of Russia's rapid advance into Central Asia, Great Britain began rendering material and military support to the Afghan emir fighting to take possession of the northern regions.

As P. Alexeenkov noted, "contemporary Afghan Turkestan was separated from Bukhara with the active help of Great Britain and turned into an Afghan province."⁵ So there could be no talk of any voluntary striving or desire of these khanates to become part of the Afghan state.

Despite the successive periods of prosperity and decline of the Durrani nation, as well as the dynastic struggle for power among the various Pashtun tribes and clans, the numerous expansive campaigns and wars to conquer territories populated by Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and other non-Afghan peoples continued right up until the end of the 19th century. As Kazakh scientist S. Akimbekov noted, "a Pashtun state was gradually formed from the state of the Pashtun tribe of abdali, which later, as Pashtun ethnic self-awareness grew, began claiming the role of a national state for all the Pashtuns."⁶

² See: S.N. Iuzhakov, *Afganistan i sopredelnye strany*, St. Petersburg, 1885 (quoted from: S. Shumov, A. Andreev, *Istoriia Afganistana*, Moscow, 2002, p. 65).

³ G.A. Arandarenko, *Dosugi v Turkestane (1784-1889)*, M.M. Stasiulevich Printing House, St. Petersburg, 1889, p. 513.

⁴ *Autobiography of Abdurakhman Khan Emir of Afghanistan*, Published by Sultan Magomet Khan, in 2 volumes, Vol. 1, St. Petersburg, 1901, p. 55.

⁵ P. Alexseenkov, *Agrarny vopros v Afganskom Turkestane*, International Agrarian Institute, Moscow, 1933, p. 22.

⁶ S.M. Akimbekov, *Afgansky uzel i problemy bezopasnosti Tsentralnoi Azii*, Revised Second Edition, Almaty, 2003, p. 21.

The Influence of Large Power Competition

The competition that continued throughout the 19th century between Great Britain and Russia to establish, strengthen, and divide the sphere of influence in this region also promoted completion of the formation of the centralized state of emir Abdurahman Khan. The British Empire wished to secure its dominion in India, which was why it stepped up its activity in the talks with Russia held in 1871-1885 to define the northern borders of the Afghan state.

As a result, the sides were unanimously convinced that “in order to preserve good relations between them, it would be desirable to prevent direct contact of their dominions in Central Asia and ... establish neutral territory between the dominions, the immunity of which should be equally binding on both powers.”⁷

Russia expressed its willingness to recognize Afghanistan as neutral territory and pledged to refrain from interference in this country's affairs. It should be noted that in their struggle to gain control in the Central Asian region, Russia and Great Britain were pursuing almost the same political goals. In so doing, the latter particularly focused on the Afghan and Baluchi tribes living on the border with India.

When defining the gist of Great Britain's policy toward Afghanistan, I. Reisner wrote, “Afghanistan was to become a sufficiently consolidated state formation to prevent Russia from breaking off its northern provinces piece by piece, and remain backward and economically isolated, otherwise ... it would be ... a threat to India, particularly in the event of its unification with so-called independent tribes.”⁸

Great Britain regarded Afghanistan with its backwardness, lack of roads and communications, retention of tribal relations, and feudal economy as a buffer state capable of reliably protecting India from possible intervention by Russia.

In order to ensure the security of its dominions, the British government exerted maximum effort to delimit the northern borders of Afghanistan as quickly as possible. As for the country's internal situation, the British authorities long vacillated in choosing its future ruler and at first intended to divide Afghanistan into small vassal principalities. This is shown by a letter that Abdurahman Khan received from political agent L. Griffin on 14 June, 1880. It said: “As for the borders ... the whole of the Kandahar region can go to a separate ruler. For these exceptions, the government is willing to offer you the opportunity to establish full and strong power throughout Afghanistan, including Herat, as the former emirs from your family used to enjoy.”⁹ This letter also said that the British government did not guarantee Abdurahman Khan possession of Herat, but did not intend to hinder any steps the emir took to control this region either.

So after their defeat in the second Anglo-Afghan war, the British colonizers lost hope of fully subjugating Afghanistan. Therefore the British government considered establishment of control over this country's foreign policy and possession of its eastern regions populated by Pashtun tribes a great success. In so doing, the British government made skillful use of the hostility and rivalry among the representatives of the royal family.

Relying on the support of the non-Pashtun population of the northern and central regions, emir Abdurahman Khan created a vast 100,000-strong army and was recognized by the British authorities

⁷ *Afganskoe razgranichenie. Peregovory mezhdu Rossiei i Velikobritanii 1872-1885*, Part I, Publication of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, St. Petersburg, 1886, p. 2.

⁸ I.M. Reisner, *Afganistan*, Komakademia Publishers, Moscow, 1929, p. 93.

⁹ *Avtobiografiia Abdurahman Khana emira Afganistana*, Vol. 1, p. 226.

as the legal head of Afghanistan, with which, however, the Durrani tribe and sardar M. Ayub Khan did not agree.

Completion of the Formation of the Centralized State

In 1881, Abdurahman Khan extended his power to Kandahar and Herat, which meant that the borders of his dominions coincided with those that existed under emir Shirali Khan. In the 1890s, emir Abdurahman Khan succeeded in subduing Hazarajat and Kafirstan. During the last decade of the 19th century, emir Aburahman Khan, who received external support, completed subjugation of the country. As I. Reisner notes, as a result, Afghanistan took on “the appearance of a multiethnic patchwork state.”¹⁰

Delimitation of the eastern borders of the Afghan state became the subject of long talks between representatives of the British authorities and emir Abdurahman Khan. In November 1893, under the threat of a new war, an agreement was imposed on Abdurahman Kahn, under which he recognized the power of the British authorities over a large part of the territory populated by the Pashtun tribes, which essentially proved to be outside the borders of the Afghan state.

In this way, as early as the end of the 19th century, British India was separated from Afghanistan by a buffer zone, which subsequently came to be called the Durand Line. This buffer zone divided the territory populated by the Pashtun tribes into equal parts.

After Afghanistan acquired its independence in 1919, the country's authorities made an unsuccessful attempt to have the agreement on the Durand Line revised. In 1947 (after Pakistan was formed), this line became the state border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The part of the territory of the Pashtun tribes that went to Pakistan became part of its Northwest Frontier Province. According to different sources, approximately 25-28 million Pashtuns live there (more than 15% of the Pakistan population). This is much more than the number of Pashtuns in Afghanistan itself, which amounts to approximately 12-14 million people (42% of the population).¹¹

Afghanistan has never recognized the Durand Line as a state border. Moreover, beginning in the 1950s, Afghanistan's foreign policy was primarily targeted at supporting foreign Pashtuns. “The Pashtunistan problem” became the most difficult and contradictory issue in relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Things even went as far as armed clashes on the border of the two states.

As already noted above, by the end of the 19th century, formation of the centralized state was completed within those borders that encompass the present-day territory of Afghanistan. The national composition of the country's population was multiethnic; the numerous tribes and peoples of Afghanistan spoke in a multitude of languages and were at different stages of socioeconomic development.

According to Russian researchers N. Aristov and A. Snesarev, at the turn of the 20th century, the size of the Afghanistan population fluctuated within the range of 4-7 million people, while according to the assessments of foreign scientists (for example, English scientist Fisher), it did not exceed 6 million.¹²

¹⁰ I.M. Reisner, *Afghanistan*, p. 95.

¹¹ See: Dictionaries and encyclopedias at Academic, available in Russian at [http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/ruwiki/137943#cite_note-5], 20 December, 2013.

¹² See: M.A. Babakhojaev, “K voprosu o natsionalnom sostave naseleniia Afganistana v kontse XIX v.,” in: *Ocherki po novoi istorii Afganistana*, Fan, Tashkent, 1966, p. 6.

Uzbek scientist M. Babakhojaev, who researched this topic, came to the conclusion that "...despite the fact that there was rather intensive emigration of non-Afghan tribes and nationalities from Afghanistan to neighboring countries in the period under review, most of the population in the centralized state that developed at the end of the 19th century consisted of non-Afghan peoples."¹³

Assimilation of the Northern Regions: “Afghans” and “Non-Afghans”

As early as the rule of emir Abdurahman Khan, mass migration of Afghan tribes to the western, northern, and northeastern regions of the state, in which Tajiks, Hazara, and many nationalities of Turkic origin (Uzbeks, Turkmen, etc.) had lived from time immemorial, began. At the same time, the indigenous peoples were resettled in the Afghan interior in order to prevent their discontent and armed uprisings. This policy was supported by the subsequent rulers of Afghanistan and continued right up until the fall of the monarchic system in 1973.

So by the time it acquired its independence, Afghanistan was a multiethnic state. The population of this country acquired its ethnic diversity from being located in the Central Asian region where all kinds of different peoples have lived from time immemorial.

On the other hand, for many centuries, the territory of Afghanistan was an arena for the Great Migration and the struggle against countless conquerors.

German geographer K. Ritter noticed this as early as the first half of the 19th century. In his work *Iran*, he wrote in particular: "The convergence of foreigners and fragmentation of natives into tribes and hordes has meant that ... until the present day, Afghanistan has been a throng of peoples, sending its population out of its colony with the greatest gentleness and subjecting it to all kinds of changes and overthrows..."¹⁴

After formation of the state, problems began emerging in relations among the main nationalities of Afghanistan. At that time, due to the increased competition between Great Britain and Russia, which was expressed in delimitation of Afghanistan's borders, the "separated" peoples (Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Baluchi, and so on) living mainly beyond its borders were forcefully annexed by this state. Later, they settled in the territory of neighboring states—Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

The Ethnic Factor in Establishing the State of Afghanistan in the Eyes of Historians and Ideologists

There are several historical works that deny the ethnic diversity of the population of Afghanistan. Certain researchers in Afghanistan itself doubt the country's multiethnic nature. In their works,

¹³ M.A. Babakhojaev, op. cit.

¹⁴ K. Ritter, *Iran*, Part 1, Translated and supplemented by N.V. Khanykov, The Imperial Academy of Sciences Printers, St. Petersburg, 1874, pp. 382-383.

they focus attention on the outstanding features of the Pashtuns and the exclusive role they played in establishing Afghan statehood.

For example, as early as the end of the 1930s, professor at Kabul University Najibullah claimed in the preface to his work *Ariana or Afghanistan. A Brief History of Afghanistan* that all the nationalities and peoples of Afghanistan are “Afghans” and comprise a “single Afghan nation.” The author called all the states existing in Antiquity and the Middle Ages (before the formation of the Afghan state in 1747) “Afghan” and declared that the Afghans should take historical credit for the material and spiritual culture created by the joint efforts of all the peoples living in the country.¹⁵

Other Afghan scientists believe that only the Pashtuns are the aboriginal residents of Afghanistan, and all the others (non-Pashtun peoples) are “newcomers.”

Some scientists think that “some of the Pashtun tribes” are Tajiks. According to others, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and other ethnic groups populating the northern provinces of Afghanistan appeared after Central Asia was conquered by Russia and the civil war (1920s).

Attempts to distort historical reality are still going on today. An example is a book by S. Afgan called *The Second Sakao* published in Pashto by the Center of Afghan Culture in Germany. Later, it was translated into Dari and published in Kabul. The author of the book looks at the entire history of Afghanistan of the 20th century from the position of great Pashtun chauvinism and ignores the existence of the non-Afghan peoples. Without dwelling on the content of this book, we will only note that in the appendix, S. Afgan defines the tasks for preserving Afghanistan’s national unity and territorial integrity. Along with supporting the traditional demands of the Pashtun nationalists to recognize all citizens of the country as “Afghans” and making Pashto the only state language, he advocates adopting tough and essentially opportunistic measures.

In order to ensure the security of the northern regions, S. Afgan suggests creating a “security belt” out of the Pashtun tribes of the southern, southeastern, and eastern provinces along the border regions with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as around the most important cities and communication facilities.¹⁶

The book also notes that “as a result of the intrigues of external enemies, the Panjshir Valley was often used against the rest of the population of Afghanistan.”¹⁷ According to the author, in order to prevent these intrigues, the local inhabitants of the valley (Tajiks) should all be moved out and Pashtun tribes settled there.

It should be noted that not only are representatives of the foreign Pashtun diaspora supporters of preserving national unity by taking similar drastic measures, the same position is also held by certain circles, primarily official, within Afghanistan itself.

Attempts at direct falsification and distortion of historical reality aimed at giving the Afghans credit for all the achievements of material and spiritual culture of the country’s past are not confirmed by a single fact. The settlement of tribes and peoples in the territory of Afghanistan in the Middle Ages and in Modern Times can also be clearly seen in historical chronicles and from the testimonies of contemporaries.

V. Grigoriev, who is one of the first Russian researchers to study the history of the peoples of Afghanistan in his appendices to K. Ritter’s *Geography*, which address the question of the composition of the indigenous population of Afghanistan at the beginning of the 19th century, wrote that it “...consists of two main strata: (1) of the predominating people who occupied it in historical and even

¹⁵ See: T. Najibullah, *Ariana yo Afyonistan. Ta’rihi muhtasare Afyoniston* (Ariana or Afghanistan. A Sort History of Afghanistan), Al-Azhar, Peshawar, 1379, pp. 12-20.

¹⁶ S. Afgan, *Sakavii duvvum* (The Second Sakao), Dorulnashr, Kabul, s.a., p. 156.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 160.

relatively recent times, Afghans, and (2) of peoples living in the country before it was occupied by Afghans and mostly subdued by the latter: Tajiks, Swati, Gindki, Siahpushi, and so on."¹⁸

Later in the section titled "Newcomers of the Old and New Times," V. Grigoriev mentions a "third branch" of the population consisting of the remnants of the hordes that came to this country with different conquerors: Arabs, Kyzylbashi, Indians, Armenians, Jews, Hazara, Jaghatai Turks, and so on.¹⁹

In his work *The Development of Feudalism and State Formation among the Afghans*, well-known Orientalist I. Reisner proved the illegitimacy of the claim of several Afghan historians about the exclusive role of the Pashtuns. His conclusions were based on the study of numerous historians, historical chronicles, the works of Russian Orientalists, and the testimonies of English and European travelers who visited Afghanistan during the first half of the 19th century.

He wrote that in the 11th century (and later) the settled population occupying the territory that is now part of Afghanistan mainly consisted of Tajiks in the region between the Hindu Kush and Sulaiman Mountains and various Indian nationalities between the Sulaiman Mountains and the middle reaches of the River Indus. As for Afghans, "they were initially located in the region of the Sulaiman Mountains and were nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes... and were at a much lower level of socioeconomic development."²⁰

Even earlier, I. Reisner noted: "Afghans could not be the bearers of 'higher culture' in Antiquity and the Middle Ages because they transferred much later than others from the communal-ancestral system to class society and feudalism. The class system evidently arose in the 16th-17th centuries, and statehood in the first half of the 18th century. The Afghans, who developed into a nation later than others, were inevitably subjected to the cultural impact of other peoples of India, Central Asia, and Iran, and also of the Tajiks and Uzbeks."²¹

The Afghan state (on the part of its rulers and Afghans in general) managed to overcome the dynastical struggle in the first half of the 19th century among various clans of Pashtun tribes and retain its statehood primarily thanks to the centrifugal efforts of the Tajiks. According to Kh. Nazarov, it was precisely due to this factor that feudal fragmentation was surmounted and a centralized Afghan state was formed: the country triumphed over dismemberment and retained its territorial integrity.²²

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Afghanistan is the homeland not only of Afghans (Pashtuns), who gave the country its name, but also of all the nationalities and ethnic groups populating it long before the formation of the state itself in the mid-18th century. In other words, its multiethnic character is not the result of Afghanistan's development over the last one or two centuries, but of its historical peculiarity. This is shown by the numerous monuments of historical writing and by the evidence of Chinese and Arab travelers,

¹⁸ K. Ritter, *Zemlevedenie Azii. Geografiia stran Azii, nakhodiashchikhsia v neposredstvennykh snosheniakh s Rossiei. Kabulistan i Kafiristan*, Translated and supplemented by V.V. Grigoriev, St. Petersburg, 1867, p. 592.

¹⁹ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 636, 642.

²⁰ I.M. Reisner, *Razvitie feodalizma i obrazovanie gosudarstva u afgantsev*, p. 102.

²¹ I.M. Reisner, "Reaktsionnye idei v sovremennoi istoriografii Afganistana," *Bulletin of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences*, No. 5, 1948, p. 109.

²² See: Kh. Nazarov, *K istorii proiskhozhdeniia i rasseleniia plemen i narodov Tsentralnoi Azii*, Irfon, Dushanbe, 2004, p. 86.

as well as of Europeans who visited Central Asia and the Middle East in the Middle Ages and in Modern Times.

For a long time, the thesis on the ethnic majority of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan was used to justify their political supremacy over the country's other peoples. Such claims cannot be sufficiently substantiated if only because in the past there was no way to determine the size of the population or its ethnic composition. A population census has never been carried out in Afghanistan that has encompassed all of its strata. The statistics available do not fully reflect the real picture and are more of an approximate nature.
