

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**MUSLIM CLERGY IN
THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE OF
AFGHANISTAN**

Ruslan SIKOEV

*Ph.D. (Philol.), leading research associate,
Near and Middle East Department,
Institute of Oriental Studies,
Russian Academy of Sciences
(Moscow, Russia)*

Afghanistan's past greatly affects its present. This is especially true of the two state coups: the anti-monarchy coup of 1973, which brought Mohammad Daud to power, and the events of 1978, which brought the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to power. They were followed by a protracted civil war and foreign military interference which consecutively created the regimes of the Islamic fundamentalist-mojahedin in 1992, which declared Afghanistan an Islamic state, and of the radical Taliban movement, which established a military theocratic regime in the form of the Islamic Emirate throughout most of the country. Late in 2001, it fell under blows delivered by the international U.S.-led counterterrorist coalition and the Northern Alliance.

The nation paid dearly for the years of devastating internecine war with loss of life, destroyed political, economic, and cultural infrastructure, an altered demographic situation, and millions of émigrés. (According to the U.N., there are about three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan alone.¹) The wars and the kaleidoscopic regimes delivered a crushing blow to the centuries-old moral and ethical norms and traditional lifestyle of the Afghans, as well as to their habits and customs. Islam as an important part of the local lifestyle was no exception; the war affected the situation of the Muslim clergy and the Islamic institutions. Under the Marxist regime of the PDPA, the clergy was persecuted

¹ See: "Pul's planet," *AK-5*, 22 August, 2005.

and its members repressed. The anti-Islamic policy was especially cruel at the very beginning of the party's rule, when the clans of Mojaddidi, Waezi, Qiyani, and other respected religious figures suffered a lot. Under the mojahedin and the Taliban, the clergy was brought to the very summit of power.

The role of the clergy and its influence on the country's contemporary life stem from the nation's past. For a long time, between the 7th and 11th centuries, since the time when Islam finally established itself as the main religion of the local tribes, a multi-step social-economic hierarchy developed. It consisted of individual groups of clergy which differed in their level of material well-being and their influence on the popular masses. The *ulamaye dini* (the religious ulemas) occupied the highest steps of the structure. The group consisted of theologians—the *maulawis*, *mudarisses-mutabahhirs* (erudite persons), *faqih*s, etc. normally educated in the best Islamic centers abroad—Deoband in India, Al-Azhar in Egypt, and others.

The official clergy was recruited from this group; its members sit in the Ulema Council, the *Ihtisab* (Islamic morality police), the Court, and the Ministry for Islamic Affairs and the *Waqufs*. As bureaucrats paid by the state and supporting its policy, these people were not hugely popular among the common people.

The *Seyyids*, *Hazrats*, *Hajehans*, and *Ishans* are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, or of the righteous caliphs. A British journalist Angus Hamilton, who visited Afghanistan at the time of Emir Habibullah Khan (1901-1919), wrote that “censure of *Seyyid* (a descendant of Muhammad), a learned theologian, or of the civilian authorities was punished with 20 strikes and a fine of 50 rupees.² As a rule, members of this group were connected with Sufi brotherhoods, while many of them filled high official posts. There are 16 *Seyyids* in the parliament today. *Pirs* and *sheikhs*—heads of the Sufi orders *Naqshbandiyya-Mojaddidiyya*, *Qadiriyya*, *Chishtiyya*, *Suhrwardiyya*, *Tayfuriyya*, and others—were highly respected. Each of the orders had spheres of influence of their own. The most influential of them—*Naqshbandiyya-Mojaddidiyya* and *Qadiriyya*—had *murids* not only in Kabul and other large provincial centers, but also in all small districts of the country. The *murids* were mostly noblemen: *khans*, tribal chiefs, top officials, rich merchants, and other wealthy people. In the past, there were royals among the *murids*; the Sufi brotherhoods lived on lavish donations.

The village *mullahs*, *imams* of village mosques, teachers and *talibs* of village *madrasahs*, owners of Sufi *hanaqs*, custodians of the *mazars* and other holy places (*ziyaratgah*) where saints were buried, etc. occupied the lowest step. They existed mainly on the donations of their parishioners or work they did on the side: they grew vegetables and flowers or did primitive construction jobs.³ It was the most respected group of people who enjoyed authority and influence among the common folk, since they lived among the people and accompanied them “from cradle to coffin.”

Historical documents contain ample evidence of the role religion and the clergy played in social and political life. All of its constitutions, from the first adopted in 1923 to the current one of 2004, testify that the history of the Afghans is a history of struggle between civilian and religious powers carried out with alternating success. The clergy fought stubbornly to retain its influence in the courts and schools, the traditional spheres of the Muslim clergy. An analysis of all the constitutions revealed that each time secular power retreated, the clergy fortified its position in the sphere of jurisprudence and education, and vice versa. With his court reform, King Amanullah Khan radically limited the powers of the *Shari'a* judges and delivered a blow to clerical influence in the judicial sphere.

It was the dissatisfied clerics who plotted against the king. “Those of the *ulema* who knew how to plant an idea about the king as an unfaithful person damned by the Most High in the minds of the people were especially respected,” wrote Afghan historian Mir Gulyam Muhammad Gubar.⁴ As soon

² See: A. Hamilton, *Afghanistan*, London, 1908, p. 128.

³ See: *Azad Afghanistan*, No. 2, July-September 1999.

⁴ See: M.G.M. Gubar, *Afghanistan na puti istorii*, Moscow, 1987, p. 166.

as the deposed king was replaced by Nadir Shah, the clergy restored its shattered position and even strengthened it: this was when the Council of the Ulema was set up and the Islamic morality police—*Ihtisab*—restored.

Later, in 1933 when Muhammad Zahir Shah became the king the clergy lost its influence in courts and schools for a long period of time until the downfall of President Najibullah in 1992. The 1964 Constitution adopted under Zahir Shah said that the “observance of religious norms and rites” was not obligatory, as it was under the previous Constitution of 1931. The clergy obviously lost its influence on social life.⁵

Part of the national elite did not limit its ambitions to schools and courts: guided by the principle of indivisible spiritual and secular power, it wanted to rule the country or, at least, to control the spiritual sphere in order to become incorporated into the country’s political structure. Never strong enough to replace secular power, this part of the elite preferred compromises and cooperation. The top clerics remained loyal to secular power, at least while its corporate (read: economic) interests remained safe. But any hint of threat to its privileges and social status provoked a conflict with secular power under the slogan of protecting Islam against faithless rulers branded as “Godless” and “foreign puppets.” Shah Shuja fell victim to this in 1842; the above-mentioned Amanullah Khan suffered the same fate in 1929, to be followed by Najibullah in 1992. British author Angus Hamilton wrote about this early in the 20th century: “Religion is the only seat of trouble from which rebels might emerge.”⁶

At all times, the leaders of the Islamic ulema cherished the dream of finally turning Afghanistan into a “genuinely” Islamic state with secular and spiritual power concentrated in the hands of the clergy, which alone would decide the country’s fate. Among the numerous testimonies of this there is a highly thought-provoking document. In 1920, Premier Sardar Abdul Quddus Khan asked the Kandahar ulema to offer their opinion about “constitutionalism and the Afghan constitutionalists” and received a highly revealing answer: “The Caliphate is the only acceptable form of statehood for Afghanistan since this form alone strengthens faith.”⁷

The chimera is still alive: nearly 80 years later, the Taliban mullahs said in so many words that they regarded the Islamic Emirate they created as the first step on the road toward a world-wide caliphate. *Tulu-e afghan* (Afghan Sunrise), an official newspaper, said: “It is our cherished dream to see all Muslim countries in the world united into one, single and indestructible Islamic Caliphate and acting as one great force.”⁸

The Muslim clergy of Afghanistan had another role to play: the mullahs and the ulema have always been a catalyst of popular unrest; they mobilized the masses to resist foreign aggressors.

Famous Sheikh Najm ud Din Ahund-zada, better known as Hadda Mullah or Hadda Sahib, Mullah Din Muhammad, known by his nickname Mushqi Alyam, Mullah Abdul Gafur Langari, Mullah Rashid Ahund-zada, Mullah Halil, and Mullah Muhammad, all of them common village clerics, are still remembered for their contribution to the three wars against Britain. Confronted with the fierce cleric-led resistance of the local people, the Brits had to admit: “Religious feelings against the British were very strong, while Islam, with which we clashed, proved to be a rock.”⁹ In 1979, too, it was the top Muslim clergy who launched a war against the regime of PDPA and foreign (this time Soviet) troops. On 26 January, 75-year-old Pir of Qadiriyya Mia Guljan Tagavi issued a fatwah that called for a jihad against the “godless PDPA government and its allies.” According to other sources, it was Sebghatullah Mojaddidi, head of the Naqshbandiyya-Mojaddidiyya order, who pub-

⁵ See: *Constitution of Afghanistan*, Kabul, 1964, pp. 24-25.

⁶ A. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 115.

⁷ M.G.M. Gubar, op. cit., p. 150.

⁸ *Tulu-e afghan*, 30 October, 1996.

⁹ M.E. Yapp, *The Revolution of 1841-1842 in Afghanistan*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1964, p. 374.

lished the fatwah that started the jihad. Soon after that, on 27 November, prominent religious figures and leaders of military-political groups of mojahedin (B. Rabbani, S. Mojaddidi, S.A. Gilani, M. Nabi Muhammadi, Y. Khalis, and G. Hekmatyar) met in Peshawar to announce a jihad that led to a fratricidal war and ruin.

Today, Afghanistan is living through another period of hardships: a large foreign military contingent is stationed on its territory, which has naturally stirred up popular discontent; Taliban members have not laid down their arms; ethnic tension has not been alleviated; there is no economic progress; and millions of refugees still remain outside the country, while illegal trafficking in drugs grown in Afghanistan has not abated. Under these conditions, we naturally want to know whether the Muslim clergy has retained its former ability to shape public opinion and to actively interfere in social and political processes. After all, political parties mostly based on shared ideologies or ethnic affiliation are stepping up their activities.

During the war, religion did not lose its influence on the people's minds. Here are the facts. Under the 2004 Constitution, Islam is still "the state religion" and remains unshaken. The same document registered the de facto leading position of Islam and its priority over secular power. Art 3.1 says: "None of the laws of Afghanistan shall contradict the laws and instructions of the holy religion of Islam."¹⁰ Under the new Constitution, the clergy acquired legal power not only over education, but also over the entire ideological sphere, which affects the minds of people, primarily young people. Under Art 17, the state is duty bound to take all the necessary measures "to improve education at all levels, develop religious education, and regulate and improve the situation of the mosques, madrasahs, and religious centers." Art 45 is even more eloquent: "The state elaborates and carries out a single educational program based on the law of the holy religion of Islam and national culture and draws up a program of religious disciplines for schools (maqtab) based on the Islamic persuasion present in Afghanistan." This means that religious disciplines will become the linchpin of teaching both in religious and secular schools (maqtab).

On top of this, under the Constitution, the courts are still staffed with Muslim theologians, all of them with higher educational establishments behind them, and all of them with the Shari'a and the fiqh (Muslim laws) at their fingertips. The new Constitution followed the previous ones by granting the judges the right to apply fiqh under certain conditions. Art 130 allows the judges to use "the laws of fiqh of the Hanafi madhab" to pass "fair and the best possible sentences" if neither the Constitution nor other laws offer corresponding indications.

The new Constitution envisaged a compromise between secular and spiritual power, which could only be expected in a country where the former political-religious mojahedin leaders still carry a lot of weight and still have real power. Today they are known as the "jihad leaders" who headed "national resistance." No wonder the new Constitution established two new official holidays: 28 Asad (18 August)—the day of Afghanistan's restored independence—and 8 Saur (27 April, 1992)—the day when Islamic fundamentalist-mojahedin came to power.

There is another example that sheds light on the role Islam and Islamic clerics play in social life: in September 2005, people elected the parliament and the provincial councils. The election campaign was a very special one for several reasons: first the press, especially newspapers published in the capital, actively supported the clergy under titles such as "The Ulema's Decisive Role in Society, "Religion and Politics Cannot be Separated," etc. Most of the candidates made a special effort to point out that they descended from respected religious families, that they had a religious education and had taken part in the jihad. Others preferred to address the voters in mosques. Those who positioned themselves as democrats and human rights fighters never missed a chance to say that democracy and human rights

¹⁰ Here and hereinafter the reference is to the Constitution of Afghanistan published in Dari in the journal of *Ang-hiza*, No. 3, January-March 2004, pp. 71-98.

should be realized within Islam and according to the Shari'a. The results were obvious: Islamic fundamentalists (mohajedin and pro-Taliban forces) received over half of the seats.¹¹

Nearly all lists of deputies elected from the capital and the provinces contain the names of clerics—mullahs, maulawis, as well as respected Islamic leaders—seyyids, pirs, sheikhs, etc. Here are several examples. Mullah Taj Muhammad Mojahed represents Kabul; Maulawi Abdul Aziz, Badakhshan; Mullah Malang, Badhis; Maulawi Abdulhaqq, Pagman; Maulawi Sheikh Ahmad, Faryab; Maulawi Din Muhammad Azimi, Gur; Maulawi Hanif-Shah al-Hoseyni, Host; Maulawi Seyyid al-Rahman, Lagman; Maulawi Ataulla Lodin, Nangarhar; Maulawi Muhammad Islam Muhammadi, Samangan, etc.

When talking about the religious-political situation in the country, we should pay attention to a new factor. There is a developing confrontation between the conservative and orthodox part of the clergy opposed to the democratic changes and “Westernization” of Afghan society (associated in their minds with foreign military presence) and the reformist religious-political forces eager to use the achievements scored by human civilization to develop local society. They want to “open the doors of ijtiḥad” (which means free and independent interpretations based on the holy texts) as the main road leading to the “renaissance of Islam.” By way of illustration let me quote from two newspapers. The *Payame mojahed* (Message of Mojahed) newspaper, published by the Mojahedin of Afghanistan, condemned the influence of Western lifestyle on Afghan society and asked with a great deal of sarcasm: “Are European dress, amoral films, and co-educational schools symbols of democracy? If this is true, the Muslims do not need such democracy.”¹² Another Kabul newspaper *Mardom* (People), published by the Islamic Movement of the People of Afghanistan Party, called on the clergy “to open the doors of discussion, and not to stop up people’s mouths” in an article called “Criticism is an Indispensable Condition of Religious Renaissance.” The same article said that only the use of all the technical and scientific achievements would open new horizons and “would not allow religion to rot.”¹³

To sum up the above:

- Islam is still a dominant force in Afghanistan and an integral part of the local way of life;
- During the war, the clergy sustained great human—many of its members, especially of the lower ranks, died in battles—and material losses.
- Despite the war (or even thanks to the war waged under the banners of jihad), the clerical elite and friendly political forces strengthened their position in the state power bodies and retained their influence over the larger part of the nation.
- We can expect the traditional trend toward a confrontation between secular and religious power to continue; it will probably assume new forms—opposition within the parliament in view of its present composition—and also appear in the policy pursued by President Karzai’s government.

¹¹ [www.afghanistan.ru], 20 November, 2005.

¹² *Payame mojahed*, 22 August, 2002.

¹³ *Mardom*, 4 September, 2005.