Revolution and revolt in Afghanistan*

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The coup of 27 April 1978 (7 Saur) which brought the Khalq (Masses) party into power has profoundly and permanently changed the course of Afghanistan's history. Two centuries of rule by the Muhammadzai dynasty have been brought to a definitive end. Afghanistan's role as an international crossroads has been exchanged for exclusive identification with the Soviet bloc. Yet, mounting evidence of resistance to Khalq's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan leaves the future of the country very much in doubt. This article examines how Khalq seized power and the implications of the possibility that it may lose it.

Khalq's coup generated little immediate resentment. After nearly five years the Daoud regime was unpopular. The leftists who had helped Daoud come to power in 1973 had been forced out of the government; religious conservatives had been alienated, persecuted and forced to flee the country; moderates had been politically ignored. This loss of support from articulate or organized groups was not offset by effective alliances with traditional leaders in the countryside. Khans and other rural notables resented the posting of tactless and doctrinaire leftists to provincial governorships. In foreign affairs, Daoud's moves to conciliate Iran and Pakistan and to attract economic assistance from Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states gave the Russians little reason to restrain their Marxist protégés inside Afghanistan from attempting to bring down his Republic. Isolated politically, Daoud's regime had become almost exclusively dependent upon its military and security forces. Their subversion would make it possible to bring the Republic to a swift and total end.

The suddenness of Khalq's success appears to have astonished the coup makers themselves. Their subsequent propaganda has repeatedly

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* Preparation of this article would have been impossible without the help of informants whose personal knowledge of recent events in Afghanistan far exceeds mine. They do not wish to be identified. I take full responsibility for any errors of fact and interpretation that have crept into this account despite their counsel.


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described the feat. These accounts also throw considerable light on to the difficulties they have faced in retaining popular support. Khalk's dilemma is epitomized in its insistence that it did not come to power through a clever coup, but as the result of a sweeping social revolution. The absence of labour and agricultural groups from any part in the coup belies this claim.

It was repression of Afghan Marxists by the Daoud government which triggered the coup. In retaliation they stepped up efforts to subvert the armed forces. The coup was initiated when Daoud's security police began an assault upon leading Marxists. The precipitating event was the assassination of Ali Akbar Khiabar, a leader of the leftist Parcham (Banner) party. Accusing the government of the murder, Marxists staged protest demonstrations. The government replied by arresting their leaders. These arrests set in motion a pre-arranged plan for a coup.

The plan called for armoured units stationed in Kabul's suburbs to seize strategic installations including the national radio while blocking the entry of loyal units into the city. It succeeded when a joint air and armoured attack on the presidential palace destroyed the resistance of the presidential guards. Many military units continued fighting, but lack of co-ordination and sorties by the Khalk-controlled air force brought significant resistance to an end within 24 hours. Desperate and bloody fighting had occurred. Estimates of the dead in and near Kabul range from 2,000 to 10,000.

Perplexing questions are raised by the success of the coup. Despite the Daoud government's awareness of the immediate possibility of a coup—the armed forces were placed on alert at the time of the arrests—it apparently failed to detect a conspiracy involving large numbers of air force and army officers which had been developing for more than two years. The police failed to intercept detailed instructions for launching the coup sent by its key organizer, Hafizullah Amin—now the leader of the Khalk government—while he was under house arrest. His guards permitted his children to carry messages to his confederates waiting outside his house. This incompetence was matched by the failure of the government to execute the arrested Marxists once it knew that a coup had begun. Thus both brilliant tactics and the weaknesses of its opponents propelled a group into power whose character and goals were little known at the time.

The rise of Afghan Marxism

Marxism made little impact on Afghanistan prior to the founding of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in January 1965. Its history is
closely associated with the career of Nur Muhammad Taraki, the first President of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Born a Ghilzai Pushtun near Ghazni in 1917 and largely self-educated, Taraki devoted his career to the destruction of the Afghan monarchy. The method was to evolve over two decades of writing and preaching resistance or rebellion. By the late 1950s it had been distilled into what Taraki called the 'scientific revolution of Marxism'.

Taraki was active in the vaguely Marxist reform movement of the late 1940s. When the monarchy suppressed it, he allowed himself to be co-opted by the government and was assigned in 1953 as embassy press attaché at Washington, D.C. In that capacity he issued a denunciation of his own government as corrupt and oppressive. A month later Taraki appears to have recanted, claiming that press reports of the denunciation were 'baseless'. This change came after he had abandoned his plan to seek asylum in Britain and was about to re-enter Afghanistan. His statements and actions at the time indicate that his views were far from being completely Marxist. His critique of the Afghan government was coupled with an appeal to 'the American people' to help change the situation, hardly a position to be taken by a Marxist at the peak of the Cold War. The decision of the government not to arrest Taraki upon his return to Afghanistan, while it imprisoned a number of moderate critics, suggests his radicalism was not feared.

Taraki has since been lionized as the founder and oracle of Afghan Marxism. He emerged from a long period of agitation as a visionary with a romantic sense of his revolutionary role. His official biography reveals more about him than perhaps intended in reporting that Taraki telephoned Prime Minister Daoud after his return to Kabul in 1953 to say, 'I am Nur Muhammad Taraki. I have just arrived. Shall I go home or to the prison?'. It appears that if he could not make a revolution, Taraki wanted at least to make an impression.

The practical work of organization was left to others. Much of the credit for this is attributed to Hafizullah Amin, who is also a Pushtun of rural background (from near Paghman). Trained as a school teacher, his talent for administration was recognized and he was sent for graduate study in education to Columbia University in 1957. He returned with an M.A. to join Kabul University and was later appointed as principal of the Kabul Teacher Training High School. Returning in 1962 to Columbia to continue his studies, he became deeply involved in the affairs of the Afghanistan Students’ Association, being elected its president in 1963. He returned home in 1965 and plunged into revolutionary politics as a member of the PDP. He ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the newly formed

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Kabul Times, 30 October 1978.
popular national assembly in 1965, but was elected in 1969 and served as an active, articulate member.

Members of the PDP can be characterized as frustrated beneficiaries of the opportunities that became available to educated Afghans after 1950. They appear to have been brought together by the bonds of ambition, energy, anger and expectations which the cautious governments under Zahir Shah could neither harness not satisfy. Many of the Khalq leaders have academic backgrounds, eight of the 18-member Cabinet serving in April 1979 having taught at the university. The party’s Politburo at the time, Taraki, Amin, Shah Wali and Saleh M. Zeray—both physicians, and Dashtagir Panjshiri and Mahmud Sooma—both former university professors, reflects the burgeoning of education.

The cadre of the party is the product of the recruitment of university, professional and secondary school students, Amin proved to be a persuasive recruiter, particularly of those who attended the schools where he was principal. From this process Taraki’s followers grew into a cohesive, conspiratorial organization. Its members were drawn from rural areas, although initiation took place in the classrooms, dormitories and meeting places of Kabul. Many of them were Pushtons due to Amin’s crucial role as recruiter.

The founding of the PDP brought together Taraki’s and Amin’s followers with others in Afghanistan’s first avowed Marxist organization. The party was to follow a generally Soviet ideological line, but ideology appears to have little to do with issues that tormented it and split it into several factions. Two of these have since dominated Marxist politics in Afghanistan, and their rivalry has run deep enough to justify classifying them as separate parties: Khalq led by Taraki, and Parcham by Babrak Karmal. Much of the rivalry has been personal. Following government suppression of Khalq’s newspaper in 1966, Taraki bridled when Babrak’s followers were able to publish Parcham. Mutual recriminations tore the PDP apart. It did not unite until goaded by Daoud’s repression and encouraged by the Russians in 1977.

Their personal rivalries appear to be reinforced by cultural and ethnic differences. Pushto is the preferred language among Khalqis while the Parchamis are identified with Dari and significant participation by Tajiks. The rustic sensitivity of the Khalqis is suggested by their claims that Babrak had Muhammadzai connexions.

In 1973 the Khalqis suffered the humiliation of watching their Parcham rivals take power as allies of Daoud. Before the Parchamis were purged

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11 Personal communication from a graduate of the Kabul Teacher Training High School.
12 Ibid. Before his acceptance of Marxism, Amin preached a doctrine of Pushton dominance to his pupils, including strong support for then Prime Minister Daoud’s belligerent policy on Pushtunistan.
13 Kabul Times, 30 October 1978.
by Daoud, the Khalqis launched an effort to duplicate Parcham's sub-
version of the armed forces. Hence there was ample reason for distrust
between these Marxist rivals when they came to power jointly in April
1978. Parcham with its demonstrated penetration of the armed forces and
the civil administration appeared to present the greatest threat to Daoud.
Thus the shock produced by the 7 Saur coup was compounded by the
emergence of Khalq as the dominant partner.

**Distance between coup and revolution**

The 7 Saur coup was met with acquiescence partly because of initial
uncertainty over the composition of the leadership. Babrak and the
Parchami members of the previous government were better known than
their Khalq counterparts. Khalq was perceived as more nationalist that
Parcham because the latter had demonstrated its close ties with the
Russians after the 1973 coup. Thus, the initial naming of Taraki as Prime
Minister and Chairman of the Revolutionary Council—Babrak was
forced to accept equal status with Amin as Deputy Prime Minister—
suggested that with Khalqi dominance the new government might steer a
nationalist and cautious course. Events were to bring an ironic twist to
such expectations.

Within three months the coalition had broken apart. Babrak and five
other Parchamis were purged from the Cabinet and assigned to East
European capitals as ambassadors. They were later fired and branded as
traitors when they refused to return. In August, General Abdul Qadir,
Minister of Defence and the Air Force hero of the revolution, was accused
of plotting to bring Parcham back to power. Unofficial sources claim that
his fall resulted from his opposition to growing Soviet military influence.
The last three Parchami Cabinet ministers were removed in early 1979.
Meanwhile there had been a continuous purging of Parchamis from the
bureaucracy and the military which may have reached its peak in March
after the regime was badly shaken by a revolt in Herat.\(^{14}\)

Once rid of its Marxist rivals, Khalq embarked on a series of actions
which placed its radicalism and willingness to lean on the Russians beyond
all doubt. In mid-October 1978, it introduced a red revolutionary flag
modelled after those of the Soviet Republics. This was quickly followed
by a 20-year treaty of co-operation with the Soviet Union which bound
these unequal neighbours together economically, politically and mili-
tarily.\(^{15}\) Meanwhile Khalq initiated sweeping changes in land tenure,
education and social relations.

Khalq's reforms appear to be crude applications of Marxist class theory
to a society for which it is ill-fitted. Its land reform policy provides the
most telling example. It prescribes extensive redistribution in favour of

poor or landless peasants. It mistakes what are frequently social relations for economic relations. The principal divisions of Afghan society are horizontally, not vertically, related. Segmental units are the most significant: the household, lineage, clan, tribe, settlement or village and ethnic group.\textsuperscript{16} Variations of property, status, influence and power within such units are commonly offset by scope for individual self-assertion and social mobility. Moreover, Afghans and other local leaders are expected to protect their clients from intrusions by the central government. Hence institutions of land control, tenancy and labour service are often linked to the performance of local leaders in maintaining local autonomy on the basis of consensus within the community.

Hierarchical relations are most evident where one ethnic group dominates others. Within the past century, this has most commonly occurred when Pushtuns have encroached upon Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara communities in northern and central Afghanistan, often with the support of the Pushtun-controlled central government. Equitable land redistribution therefore would require the Pushtun-dominated Khalq government to reverse this process, a task which raises doubts about its understanding or its sincerity about its avowed intentions.

By the spring of 1979, the government had announced the expropriation of 3,000,000 acres to be redistributed among 300,000 farm families.\textsuperscript{17} No indication of which ethnic groups are gaining or losing from such transfers has been given. Indeed, such claims are questionable in view of the lack of records, communications and trained, supervised and motivated personnel for conducting such a complex task within a few months. Those land transfers which have been carried out have produced unwelcome responses. It has proved more difficult to separate khans and landlords from peasants than Marxist analysis had predicted.

Miscalculations based on class analysis have also led to popular resistance to other policies. The greatest resentment have come from tactless attempts to abolish bride price as traditionally negotiated between families and to enforce a minimum age for marriage. Such measures are seen as threatening the integrity of the family at all levels of Afghan society. Resentment has also been intense towards the introduction of blatantly Marxist indoctrination into the school curriculum.

The Khalq government appears to expect that wealth transfers and indoctrination will eventually bring the bulk of the population to its side. Its rhetoric anticipates this, e.g., ‘Our party... is a protector of the interests of 98 per cent of all the people of Afghanistan...’\textsuperscript{18} Yet, what

\textsuperscript{16} A number of anthropologists have stressed this aspect of Afghan society. See, for example, Jon W. Anderson and Richard F. Strand, eds., \textit{Ethnic Processes and Intergroup Relations in Contemporary Afghanistan}. Occasional Paper No. 15, The Afghanistan Council of the Asia Society.


appears to have been intended as the first phase of the revolution has badly miscarried. The masses have not turned upon their 'exploiters' and accepted guidance towards a classless society. Instead Khalq has had to focus all of its energy upon surviving a popular revolt. Its prospects now suffer from two further liabilities: its alleged incompatibility with Islam and its obvious dependence upon the Russians. The identification of Marxism with atheism has been impossible to deny; hatred of the Russians has been underlined by assassinations of Soviet travellers caught unprotected in the countryside and atrocities committed against them when captured by rebels.

Having lost the initial indulgence of the population, Khalq has proved its inability to play a revolutionary vanguard role. It appears to have been trapped by the limitations of its clandestine experience prior to gaining power. While most of its members have rural backgrounds, they appear to have turned to Marxism partially for personal vindication when they failed to realize the modern expectations they discovered in the cities. Their sudden propulsion into power left them with virtually no preparation for wielding it. Khalq's revolutionary fecklessness has been aggravated by the flaws in its leadership. The coup provided ample opportunity for the expression of Taraki's egomania and Amin's megalomania. Taraki assumed the title 'Great Leader', his posters were everywhere and the press worked hard to portray his career as heroic. His qualifications as a revolutionary were those of a romantic dogmatist imprisoned by the adulation of the few malcontents he converted. His assumption of power was mostly the accomplishment of Amin. No ideologue himself, Amin applied Taraki's teachings to the resentments and ambitions of the marginal intellectuals and Soviet-influenced officers he recruited. As a strategist of radical social change, he has little or no experience. Since the coup he has exhibited a ruthless urge for power. Once rid of his Parchami rivals, he manoeuvred Taraki into the partially figurehead role of President of the Republic while he took the posts of Prime Minister and Defence Minister. His dominance over the party and the government produced resentment which appears to have led to an unsuccessful attempt by high-ranking Khalqis to kill him on the weekend of 14–16 September. Taraki was disabled in the course of this struggle and Amin emerged apparently in complete control. The seriousness of the damage done to the unity of the party and the loyalty of previously staunchly loyal army and air force units remain uncertain.

The popular revolt

Resistance has spread from outbreaks in Badakshan and Nuristan in

\[\text{\textsuperscript{10}}\] On 9 October Kabul radio announced the death of Taraki from 'a serious disease' without mentioning the gun battle in mid-September in which he was reported to have been wounded.
the summer of 1978 to a rural uprising involving nearly all of Afghanistan's regions and ethnic groups. Most resistance has resulted from clashes between the government and local communities. Usually these have involved official acts which are seen as intrusions into social practices sanctified by customary interpretations of Islam. Yet, while locally expressed, these spontaneous uprisings share the common national emotions of fear that Islam is in danger and dislike of government intervention. Khalq has failed to win the support of those elements which its reforms are intended to benefit largely because such reforms require a sharply increased presence of government at the local level.

Resistance remained localized until late in 1978. By the following spring, attacks upon government installations had spread across the whole country. Kabul's authority in most regions has become nominal, often restricted to daylight hours. Effective control is limited to towns and outposts manned by concentrations of troops. No effective militia forces have been mobilized to give the government a presence in the countryside.

The pattern of the rebellion sets limits on both sides. Co-ordination between rebel groups is difficult. Police and military units are thinly scattered within strong points and increasingly must depend upon air drops for supplies and reinforcements and the shock use of jets, attack helicopters and the deployment of Soviet commando units to break up rebel formations.

By summer 1979, security was uncertain even in the largest cities. Uprisings, mutinies or attacks had occurred at Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Pul-i-Khumri and perhaps at Mazar-i-Sharif. There were street demonstrations in Kabul in June and a short-lived mutiny in August. The dependents of senior government officials were evacuated to the Soviet Union early in the summer; government operations appear to be increasingly restricted to military bases in or near the capital. 20 Resistance within the cities has been suppressed, but at the cost of relying nearly totally upon the logistical and firepower support of the Russians. With Soviet backing the government appears to be able to repulse attacks on the cities, as it did against a large tribal force at Jalalabad in June. 21 Without substantial outside assistance the rebels cannot expect to win such set battles.

Their hope lies in further disintegration of the armed forces from purges, mutinies and desertions. There have also been surrenders of units defeated by rebels, particularly in Nuristan and Kunar. The government has tried to offset such losses by recruiting from the same urban groups that supplied its cadre: university graduates and students and young school teachers. Military units have been stiffened by political indoctrination cells staffed by party members on the Soviet model. This makes

possible the assignment of Soviet military advisers—often Persian
speakers from the central Asian republics—down to the small unit level.
Such measures have been most effective in creating élite units concen-
trated at Kabul. Young urban recruits fight at a serious disadvantage in
the countryside.

The outcome of the struggle will depend largely upon the functional
and ideological cohesion of the rebellion. Thus far it has operated on two
levels: the local uprisings and émigré groups operating from the trans-
Indus region of Pakistan. The groups inside Afghanistan have provided
nearly all the manpower, most of the weapons and on-site leadership. The
outside groups have attempted to provide overall co-ordination, to win
world sympathy and support, and to develop a consensus regarding the
goals of the rebellion.

Every shade of Afghan opinion is represented within the refugee groups.
Their activities are nervously overlooked by the Pakistan government
whose own instability aggravates the embarrassment it feels in trying to
avoid friction with Kabul and the Russians. Eviction of the Afghan rebels
would risk trouble from Pakistan’s Pashtuns.

The character of the refugee leadership is likely to be crucial to the
course of the rebellion. It is riddled with rivalries, vague as to its goals
and closely identified with Islam. The organization with the greatest
international recognition is the Afghan National Liberation Front
(ANLF) led by Sibghatullah Mujadiidi. He is the scholarly scion of the
Mujadidi family which, since its migration from India early in this cen-
tury, has presided over centres of learning and religious charities in
Afghanistan’s major cities. An opponent of Daoud, Mujadidi spent five
years in his prisons. He represents cosmopolitan and moderately re-
formist Islam. Widely respected in the Islamic world, he convened a
meeting to found the ANLF in June 1978 with some assurances of sup-
port from conservative Muslim states.

The ANLF has attempted to be the umbrella organization for the re-
bellion. Last December it invited Afghans of all political persuasions to
unite against Khalq. Its declared aim is to install a government ‘founded
upon Islamic teachings and our own traditions of democracy’. It promises
to oppose one-man or one-party rule and ‘to strive for establishment of
an economic and social order consistent with the Islamic concept of
justice’. It has received the support of most of the émigré rebels, but
rivalries against and within the front have limited progress toward unity.

Mujadidi competes with Sayyid Ahmad Jailani, heir of a distinguished
Sufi family from Baghdad which has served as spiritual mentor to the
Pashtun tribes of Paktiya. Through this connexion Jailani can claim the
loyalty of a larger number of rebels in Afghanistan than can the ANLF.

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22 Afghan National Liberation Front, “The Communist Regime of Afghanistan
as a Threat to Peace in the Middle East”, Declaration issued in March 1979.
Jalal-i Has remained aloe from the front, although a degree of co-operation has been achieved.

The groups which are affiliated with the ANLF are widely separated by their goals, their connexions with the fighting inside Afghanistan and the ambitions of their leaders. The Jamiat-i-Islami led by Burhanuddin Rabani takes a fundamentalist Islamic view of the state. The Hizb-i-Islami led by Gulbuddin Hikmatyar is more secularly oriented, but is also more conservative than Mujadidi; it has organized effective commandotype units for service inside Afghanistan. On Mujadidi’s left is the Harati-1-Inquilab-i-Islami of Malawi Muhammad Nabi which offers social revolution within the tenets of Islam. In addition, there are regional-ethnic groups represented in the front such as the Hazaras and the Nuristanis, both of whom have attempted to establish governments autonomous from Kabul in their regions.

These organizations have created an information network linking rebel groups within Afghanistan, but they have little capacity to provide supplies or co-ordinate activity. Opportunities to combine attacks with mutinies within the army have thus been lost. Consequently the military potential of the revolt remains far from fully developed.

Without the sudden collapse of the Khalq government or a Soviet decision to withdraw, the rebellion appears likely to settle into a protracted struggle as have rebellions in Eritrea, the Southern Sudan or Vietnam. However, the process in Afghanistan will most probably be different. Khalq is more dependent upon foreign support than were governments in those instances. Should the struggle drag on, it could bring fundamental changes that would leave Afghanistan neither traditional nor Marxist.

In its early phase religious leaders have been most prominent in organizing the external facets of the rebellion. Opposition guided by Islamic saints and scholars has been common in Afghanistan’s recent history, but there is no precedent for rule by Sunni leaders such is now being attempted in Shia Iran. No one Afghan religious leader has come close to embodying the revolt as did the Ayatollah Khomeini. To be ultimately successful the rebellion must be linked to a process which will fill this vacuum.

Khalq’s failures have weakened the central instruments of government created by its predecessors. The armed forces have become the transparent tool of a foreign power, the small, moderate middle class faces near extinction as the government attempts to eliminate its enemies, the royal family has been decimated, exiled and has little declared support from active rebel groups. Thus, should the struggle persist, it is likely to solidify in the hands of traditional, largely rural, leaders who must pick up the pieces and perhaps reach an accommodation with the Soviet Union.
The position of such leaders would be ironic and precarious. Their classic functions have been to resist and attenuate the force of central rule. Carried to a successful or partially successful conclusion the revolt will require some among them to create a new and viable central order. This will be a daunting task regardless of the guidance to be gained from ‘Islamic teachings and our own traditions of democracy’. Little consensus is now apparent beyond revulsion towards the Khaq government. Instead, the centrifugal forces which have remained close to the surface throughout recent Afghan history are at present actively represented by groups waging the revolt. Success in destroying the Khaq government would require building central authority from a new foundation. As forces of region, language and ethnic group reassert themselves and react to the ideological poles of orthodoxy and modernity, the vortex of violent change in Afghanistan seems certain to produce a process which will be long, painful and beyond prediction.

The Soviet Union and the Arabian Peninsula

ALVIN Z. RUBINSTEIN

Opportunism, not ideology, impels Soviet policy, which has taken advantage of, but not determined, the setbacks to Western interests.

The differentiated policy Moscow has pursued in the Third World in the past generation is very much apparent in Soviet attempts to penetrate the Arabian Peninsula, and it clearly shows the adaptability, persistence and pragmatism as well as the opportunism and low-risk character of that policy. Soviet interest in the Arabian Peninsula is natural. A geographically strategic land mass lying to the south of the USSR’s Muslim, non-Slavic union-republics, and flanked by busy sea routes whose choke points at the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Bab al-Mandab expose Western economic vulnerability, the peninsula is an obvious target for US-Soviet rivalry in the Middle East.

The Soviet Union’s interest in the Arabian Peninsula was first manifested in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when Moscow established rela-