

The Coup in Afghanistan and its Impact on Pakistan: 1973-1975

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In the middle of 1973, the situation was still in a flux when a *coup d'etat* in Afghanistan changed the whole aspect of the Pak-Afghan relations. On 17 July, while King Zahir Shah was away to Italy for medical treatment, his first cousin, brother-in-law and a former Prime Minister, Muhammad Daud Khan, staged a coup and proclaimed himself as the President of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Apparently, the change seemed to be no more than a change in Pakhtoon aristocracy. In fact it had much deeper meanings and consequences. It was for the first time that the political parties had been involved in the change of the Government. The coup itself was the result of a number of internal and external factors going back to the 1960's. The most important of these was that the nine-year experiment in constitutional democracy in Kabul had not worked successfully. The prevailing tribal system, the high rate of illiteracy (nearly 93 percent) and extreme poverty and backwardness reminiscent of medieval age in certain areas had been the chief impediments.¹ The situation was compounded in the early seventies by the economic difficulties, especially by the amounting debt services, a steady decline in foreign aid and a severe drought in 1969-72. The concentration of power in the hands of the King, who ruled the country for nearly forty years, further caused frustration.

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1. Louis Dupree, "A New Decade of Daud" in *Field Staff Report*, Vol.xvii, No.4, July 1973, 4.

An impression had been created in a section of the Afghan bureaucracy that the King was moving away from the Soviet Union and was getting closer to the United States and as such as deviating from the traditional policy of non-alignment.² He was also trying to diffuse tension with his neighbours, especially Iran and Pakistan. He had almost settled the Halmand river water dispute with Iran and was playing down the Pakhtoonistan dispute with Pakistan in order to increase cooperation between the two countries.³ All this was disapproved by the Soviets. Therefore, it was assumed that the coup had been engineered by the Russians to hinder the Afghan King's tilt towards the West.⁴

The actual planning of the coup came about in the wake of the chaos of the 1969 elections. The irregularities in the conduct of elections must have convinced Daud that the constitutional experiment had failed.⁵ Daud was supported by a large number of the left wing young army, airforce and police officers. They had been trained and instructed under Daud's supervision in the early 1950's when he was the Commander of the Military Academy,⁶ and secondly, they thought that Daud would help to remove their frustrations due to slow promotions and other inequalities.⁷ This was true of officers in the civil services but the special prestige which he had given to the armed forces during his prime ministership and the fact that he had modernized and expanded the army, with the help of the Soviet Union, and endeared him to corps of officers. Moreover, the 'senior' officers were members of the Pakhtoon aristocracy and, therefore, they supported Daud's aggressive policy on Pakhtoonistan.⁸ Among the political parties, the Parcham faction of the People's Democratic Party of

2. Mehrunnisa Ali, "The Attitude of the New Afghan Regime Towards its Neighbours", *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol.xxvi, No.3, 1974, 43.

3. *Ibid.*, 44.

4. Dupree, xviii, No.8, 1974, 3.

5. *Ibid.* 1.

6. *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi: 8 August 1973).

7. *Ibid.*

8. Beverley Male, *Revolutionary Afghanistan* (London: 1982), 52.

