

Ethnic Factor in Soviet Policies in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan, with a population of 26 million is a 'home' of diverse ethnic groups.¹ The Russians tried their best to exploit this ethnic diversity within Afghanistan. The purpose behind this concerted effort was to weaken the traditional socio-political *asbiyah* and to also create a new and favourable socio-political set-up to strengthen their position.

The aim of this article is to analyse the Soviet efforts in the above direction during their invasion. An understanding of these efforts will reveal to us the reasons behind the tribal fights after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first part an endeavour has been made to analyse the demographic and geographic layout of various ethnic groups living in Afghanistan, and their trans-border affinities. Second part deals with the Russian policies to exploit the factor of ethnic heterogeneity in Afghanistan to fulfil their interests.

Afghanistan is not a 'self-contained' and 'homogeneous' ethnic unit. Among its populace, Pashtuns, Tajiks and Nuristanis are members of white race, the Hazaras, Uzbeks, Aimaqs are basically Mongoloid, while Turkmens and Kirghiz have Turkish origin.

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¹ Broadly speaking the country's largest ethnic groups, 38% of the Afghan population, is Pashtun. They speak Pashto and are dominated by the Durani and Ghazi tribes. The other groups are, Tajik 25%; Hazara 19%; Uzbek 6%.

Culturally, Afghanistan does not have a uniform national culture. Cultural diversity is accentuated by the fact that the various clusters of population speak different languages and dialects. They have different physical features and practice different customs. The Pashtuns are the leading nationality both in numbers and political influence but all Pashtuns cannot be entitled as citizens of Afghanistan only; a sizeable number of them live in Pakistan. Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens and Kirghiz have autonomous republics contiguous to Afghan border, namely, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kirghistan, respectively.

Linguistically, most of the Afghans speak Iranian variants of the Indo-European language family. Pashtuns speak Pashto, Tajiks speak Tajiki and Baluchis speak Baluchi. Nuristani, Pashai, Omuri, Parachi, Gowarbari, Ningalani, Jati, Gujuri, Uzbeki, Turkomani, Afshari, Brahvi, Dehghanis and several other relatively isolated groups in Afghanistan speak distinct dardic dialect of Indo-European language family. Turkic dialects are being spoken mainly in the northern Afghanistan by Uzbeks, Turkmens and Kirghiz.

Under the aegis of the Khalq Party during the spring 1979, Kabul conducted its first census and an ethnic question on the mother tongue was asked. According to the census there are 23 ethnic groups, who speak 32 odd languages. These ethnic groups are further divided into 63 tribes. The detailed composition of all the ethnic groups other than Pashtuns residing in Afghanistan and across the border in former Soviet Central Asian Republics (in millions) is as under:

Ethnic Groups	Afghanistan	Central Asian Republics
Uzbeks	1.000	12.500
Tajiks	3.500	05.500
Turkmen	0.250	04.000
Kirgiz	0.075	03.500
Baluchis	0.100	00.013
Hazaras	1.500	Nil
Nuristanis	0.100	----
Qizilbashis	0.073	----
Badivs	0.038	----

Farsiwan	0.650	----
Chahar Amiq	NA	----
Feroz Flokies	0.640	----
Jamshedies	NA	----
Taimuries	NA	----
Pamiries	NA	----
Kohistanies	0.265	----
Gujar/Jat Guji	NA	----
Jews	NA	----
Hindus	0.200	----
Sikh	NA	----
Brahvis	NA	----

Source: Louis Dupree (1980) and Alexander Bennigsen & Marie Broxup (1983).

The geographic or physical settlement of some important ethnic groups shows that the larger and politically dominant ethnic group — the Pashtun — is residing in the areas along the ‘Durand Line’ on Pak-Afghan border and in southern areas of Afghanistan. Baloch are residing in the extreme southern areas of Afghanistan contiguous to Balochistan province of Pakistan and in the southwest along with the Iranian borders. The Baloch, Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen and Kirghiz inhabit in the northern area of Afghanistan, adjacent to Central Asian Republics — Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kirghistan, respectively.

The Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen and Kirghiz are those who had settled in northern Afghanistan after fleeing from the former Soviet Union after the ‘Bolshevik Revolution.’² Thus they have deep-rooted sense of cultural and religious belonging with the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmens and Kirghiz living in the Central Asian Republics. The ethnic groups of these Central Asian Republics often have an exaggerated estimate of their co-ethnic inhabitants across the border in Afghanistan. They believe that their number in neighbouring country is purposely diminished in an effort to maximise the dominant cultural group—the Pashtun. For example, well-educated Uzbek nationals believe that there are five million

2. H.W. Bellow, *The Races of Afghanistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1979), p.90.

Uzbeks living in Afghanistan (actually there are only one million). They blame that the lower figures in Afghan demographic estimates are 'monarchists, fabrication.'³ Similar is the case with Turkmen and Tajiks of Central Asia.

By exaggerating their numbers, maintaining a high rate of growth and by perpetuation of their culture, ethnic minorities fight extinction. This ethnic/cultural politics has provided basis for the creation of Central Asian nationalities and it has served as a tool in the Russians policies in Afghanistan as well.⁴ Moscow has been attempting to foster groups that would have future political impacts in this region. For example, the Russian involvement with Kurdish and Azeri ethnic groups in Iran of the 1940s and the Russian action between Turkic and Iranian shared ethnic groups in Afghanistan in 1978.

This tool can be used in future to feed ethnic demands by Afghanistan in neighbouring countries — Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey — where a vacuum exist regarding ethnic convergence.

On the basis of the above discussion, the main components of Afghan nationality situation based on demographic and geographic layout and trans-border affinities can be summarised as under:

- The boundaries of Afghanistan are not natural but artificially created by imperialist's powers and are existing in defiance of any ethnic, linguistic or cultural logic.
- No ethnic group in Afghanistan inhabits the country exclusively and hence, Afghanistan epitomises a thoroughly multi-ethnic mosaic.
- No ethnic group can claim Afghanistan as primary and chief area of its inhabitation with the only exception of the Pashtuns.
- Major ethnic groups in Afghanistan have co-ethnic living across the borders contiguous to the Afghan territory, who could therefore be considered trans-nationals. Uzbeks, Turkmen and Kirghiz — all living in the region north of the Hindu Kush — speak Dari (Persian) language. Thus Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen

3. *New York Times*, December 23, 1979, p.24.

4. Eden Naby, *The Iranian Frontier Nationalities* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979), p.99.

and Kirghiz have co-ethnic living in the Central Asian Republics. They are more in numbers and are still referred to by the Russian as the 'Basmachis' — refugees from the former Soviet Union.⁵

- Trans-border affinities are not only due to similarities of culture but the major factor which binds them with their counterparts in the Central Asia is common Islamic traditions — an important factor in the over all equation.
- The Russians have exaggerated estimates about their co-ethnic living in Afghanistan. Keeping in view the Russian invasion in Afghanistan in 1979 one can say that the Russians had political intentions in this region and they have tried for the fulfilment of these objectives during their presence in Afghanistan. But the argument needs a detailed analysis of the policies pursued by the former Soviet Union.

There are many speculations about the intentions of Russians in Afghanistan. Certain insights are futile because they are difficult to substantiate, creating more heat than light. I would like to concentrate on the actual behaviour in the policies that the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, as advised by its 'mentor' — the former Soviet Union — has enunciated and implemented in Afghanistan.

There are many areas — economic, military, education, socio-cultural and political — in which the Republic of Afghanistan has initiated new policies. Though unable to achieve complete success, it has still made some 'radical' departures from its feudal past.

One area of policy making can be usefully explored is the nationality situation in Afghanistan and what Kabul regime has been doing in this regard. So far as the public 'espousal' of the nationality policy in Afghanistan is concerned, for the first time the statements on this were made by Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin.⁶

5. Alexander Bennigson, "Soviet Muslims and the World of Islam", *Problems of Communism*, No. V, (March-April 1980).

6. Among statements broadcast and published on International Kushan Conference, held in Kabul in November 1978, two were as under: 1) The revision of the existing pattern of Pashtun dominance and Pashto-Dari (Persian) — 'Two Languages Formula' which has been established by the 1964 constitution as the country's

They drew people's attention to their commitment to the promotion of minority languages and culture in contrast to the treatment of the minorities by Iran and Pakistan. On June 14, 1979 Hafizullah Amin told a 'group of elders' from the province of Badakhshan that the oppression of Abdur-Rahman (responsible more than any other for the repression of non-Pashtun minorities) was a thing of the past, and that "no such tyranny can occur here."⁷

Nur Muhammad Taraki, after coming into power, had introduced the 'Afghan Nationality Policy' under a slogan to uplift oppressed ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. Scheme was based on the Soviet Nationality Policy model enforced in early 1920's in the Muslim colonies of the Central Asia. Analysts believe that Nur Muhammad Taraki was enforcing this policy to make Afghanistan a Russian satellite similar to Mongolia. The policy proved one of the successful tools to defuse ethnic unrest in non-Pashtun areas of Afghanistan.⁸ The greater unity among the non-Pashtun ethnic groups became obvious with the formation of Northern Alliance soon after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, one of the main causes of outbreak of civil war in Afghanistan.

With the implementation of the Nationality Policy, beside some other areas, many steps were taken in the education and socio-cultural fields. In the field of education the inter-ethnic language issue became crucial when Kabul regime adopted the most ambitious phase of the Nationality Policy — teaching each child in his/her own mother tongue. The creation of ethnic language schools became critical because in addition to Persian and Pashto, Uzbeki, Turkmani, Balochi and Nuristani became recognised languages with the facilities of propagation. Among these four new (except Persian and Pashto) languages Uzbeki was the natural choice due to its common Turkic dialect. Since then, these ethnic groups have been growing integrated nationalities in

official languages. 2) Creation of a Progressive national Culture System and in the first step ensuring of conditions essential for evaluation of art and literature, education and publications in the mother tongue of the tribes and nationalities resident in Afghanistan.

7. Beverly Male, *Revolution in Afghanistan: A Reappraisal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), pp.177-187.

8. Eden Naby, *Asian Survey*, vol. XX, No. 3 (March 1980), p.242.

Afghan area contiguous to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Moreover, by the 'indoctrination programme,' the Russian preferences have gone especially to the younger generation. Great emphasis was laid on introducing ideological changes. And the educational syllabus was prepared mainly focusing on socialist thinking. The learning of Russian language was made compulsory on all levels. Confirmed communist teachers were being appointed intentionally from areas of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.⁹

To construct an ideological firm base of cadres the Russians have facilitated academic grants to educational institutions and scholarships offered to students pursuing studies in the former USSR and Eastern Europe. According to the western estimates till February 1988 more than 50,000 Afghan students had gone to former USSR for training and higher studies. According to estimates by some independent scholars and writers the number of students sent abroad was about 28,000 and majority of them belonged to northern Afghanistan.¹⁰

Western books were removed from bookstores and Russian books were made available in abundance on nominal prices. Many other measures for the teaching of Communism were being taken through TV feature films, daily documentary programmes and through Radio programmes about Communist revolutionary history. But the language policy was not implemented uniformly in all areas of each ethnic living.¹¹ Thus in addition to Pashto and Persian, Uzbeki, Tajiki, Turkmani, Nuristani and Balochi were the only recognised languages being taught in educational institutions. From these languages Uzbeki was the natural choice because of common familiar dialect.

To promote Central Asian Culture in Afghanistan and to promote revolutionary message, Kabul regime launched weekly newspapers in Uzbeki, Turkmani and Balochi languages. The Uzbek weekly magazine *Uldus* (Star) was being issued regularly since early 1980s, carrying material from Uzbek newspaper

9. Kumar Satish, *CIA and the Third World* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p.39.

10. *The Pakistan Times* (Islamabad), "Soviet wipe-out Afghan Education System," February 4, 1988.

11. *Ibid.*

Uzbekistan-Madaniyati (culture of Uzbekistan). Turkmen weekly *Gurash* (Struggle) both started their publication in spring 1979. Balochi weekly *Soub* started its publication in 1982. Further efforts to promote Russian culture in Afghanistan included the occasional publication of Uzbek history, culture, songs, and dancing clubs. Focus was to attract the youth to participate in the new social programmes of the Kabul Government.¹²

The high level activity by the Russian advisors among Afghan Uzbeks was particularly worth noticing, as they have made public statements about the lack of national consciousness, unlike Pakistan and Iran. They also requested the Russian Uzbeks to “help the oppressed Uzbek brothers in Afghanistan.”¹³ The Uzbeks reacted positively aside from any ideological intentions under the wish to bring the Uzbek of Afghanistan at par with their own cultural level.

The direct involvement of former Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics in Afghanistan’s internal affairs started in April 1979 “in order to provide help to the friendly socialist regime” and then moved by the urgent need to prevent the total collapse of the state administration in Afghanistan. The Russians decided to send large number of Central Asians, namely Uzbeks and Tajiks to act as administrators and technical cadres, because Russian lacked sufficient knowledge of local conditions and language. When they were invited to support the Kabul regime these Russian Muslim cadres established contacts with native Muslim population. It is quite likely that some of these Central Asian cadres may have realised the dream of the Muslim National Communist of 1920’s, to export Communism to a neighbouring Muslim country, with whose population they practically share a common ethnic and linguistic background.

Moreover, in December 1979, on the invitation of Kabul regime, Central Asian soldiers formed 30 to 40 per cent of the total

12. Naseem Rizvi, “Sovietization of Afghanistan,” *Strategic Studies*, vol. XI, No. 4 (Summer 1989), p.40.

13. *Pravda*, December 31, 1979, p.4. Translated in FBB report (Soviet Union), January 3, 1980, p.D5.

deployed Russian troops for the purpose.¹⁴ Whatever was the reason (the Soviets called it a routine work), by the late February 1980 these Central Asian soldiers were systematically replaced by the Russians. Question arises here what reasons forced the Soviet authorities to sacrifice the benefits of using their Muslim citizens in Afghanistan? Answer is very simple. There were many benefits both, before and after invasion. The Central Asians served as interpreters for the Russian armed forces, they helped the Afghan administration to function during the occupation and their presence, tended to give to this Russian intervention in a foreign country the appearance of an inter-Islamic affair.

Other measures also strengthen this view as Babrik Karmal adopted religious policies, taking the name of Allah in all official functions, forming a Supreme Council of the Islamic Affairs with Dr. Sayed Afghani as president.¹⁵ Dr Afghani enunciated his organisation's policy in these words:

We will propagate; inculcate the spirit and teaching of Islam, void of superstitions, without deviation and misuse.... We consider the mentality of saving the toiling people and ensuring of social justice compatible with the spirit of Islam.¹⁶

In addition to that funds were also showered on the reconstitution of mosques, shrines and Muslim educational institutions.¹⁷

The above-mentioned facts may have been the original intention of the Russian leaders, but friendly contacts were established far too fast with the local population. Widespread fraternisation took place between the Central Asian and the local population and even with the Afghan 'resistance groups.'¹⁸ In some places 'black markets' in Qumran were organised. Russian

14. Alexander Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p.113.

15. Eden Naby, "A New Flag for the Republic," *Afghanistan Council Newsletter* IX, No. 3 (June 1981), pp.8-9.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Alexander Bennigsen, "Soviet Union and Muslim Guerrilla Wars," *Conflict*, vol.4, No. 2, 3, 4, p.301.

18. *Ibid.*

Muslims underwent religious ‘intoxication’ at the hands of the Afghans.¹⁹ Although the majority of the Russian Muslims engaged in one way or another in the ‘Afghanistan operation’ remained obedient to Russian orders, the authorities in Moscow came to question their reliability as a fighting force against their similar ethnic groups of Afghan Muslims—Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmens and Kirghiz. Thus Moscow realised that the rapid development to put Afghanistan’s socio-political system in line with former Soviet Socialist Central Asian Republics was difficult. Here came a shift in Karmal policies toward Afghanistan and he adopted long-term policies.

Karmal initiated separate development programmes for ethno-linguistic communities in Afghanistan. Under the new system five more ethnic minorities — Amiqs, Qizalbashis, Badavis, Farsiwan and Feroz Flokies — have been brought on record. They were in addition to existing eight nationalities. In this way the neglected ethnic groups in Afghanistan became prominent and strong supporters of their creators.²⁰

On June 11, 1981 the Afghan government announced the establishment of the Ministry of Tribes and Nationalities to replace the Ministry of Frontiers. This new organisation was a replica of the Russian Commissariat of the Nationalities in the sense that its administrative and functional structure was constructed on the administrative and functional structure of the former Soviet Central Asian Republics with slight changes, according to the prevailing conditions in Afghanistan.²¹

Measures have been taken to convince the ethnic minorities that Zahir Shah and Daud had launched the Pashtunistan movement with a determination to liquidate the racial identity of the ethnic groups and their valuable traditions, using a single term

19. *Ibid.*

20. Muhammad Anwar, “Sovietization Prospects of Afghanistan,” in Muhammad Shamsuddin Siddiqui, *Afghanistan Today*, Area Study Centre (Central Asia), University of Peshawar, p.113.

21. Azmat Hayat Khan, “Soviet Strategy in Afghanistan,” Central Asia, Peshawar University, p.171.

‘Afghan’ for all nationalities without accepting their separate identity.²²

The ‘Saur’ revolution has put an end to this liquidation process and other ‘racial abuses.’ Well before the Soviets withdrawn from Afghanistan the Uzbeks, Turkmens, Tajiks, Kirghis and others had their own separate culture and national identity, with complete facilities of teaching their children in their own mother tongue and all official transactions were being done in respective language of each important ethnic group.²³

In addition to these policies Babrik Karmal used the politics of ‘Carrot and Stick.’ He exempted tribal leaders from tax and got drafted laws in exchange for their co-operation. The regime has tried to use nobility to sell their policies in Afghanistan. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the well-known pacifist leader of the Pashtuns of Pakistan, was persuaded to say good things about the regime in the efforts to reach accommodations with the traditional elite. The regime has tried to take advantage of the enmities between Pashtuns and Tajiks, Pashtuns and Uzbeks, and Pashtuns and Hazaras. Slig Harrison writes:

Segments of the Taji, Mangal, Shinwari and Mohmand tribes have agreed to bar resistance activities on their land in return for cash pay-offs [bribes] and exemption from conscription and taxes, and pledges to keep Russian forces out of their territory.²⁴

In February 1988 a Special Commission on Nationalities and Tribal Affairs was appointed by Babrik Karmal. The Commission submitted its report in October 1988 and in the mid-October decision regarding nationalities was implemented. According to this decision the Province of Kapisa was amalgamated with Parwan, Paktika absorbed in Paktia and Kunar in Nangarhar. Parts of Jauzjan and Balkh provinces were merged into new province Sar-i-Pol. A new province Nuristan was formed from parts of Laghman and Kunar provinces.²⁵ Keeping in view demographic

22. Mohammad Anwar, p.172.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Slig Harrison, “Breakthrough in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy* (Summer 1982) p.17.

25. *Dawn*, (editorial) November 26, 1988, “Najib Redrawing Afghan Map”.

and geographic factors, it seems that the purpose of this provincial re-demarcation was to reduce resistance by depriving the Afghan resistance groups from easy access to provincial capital. It was also aimed at getting rid of non-Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kirghies in the northern areas of Afghanistan, contiguous to former Soviet Socialist Republics of Central Asia.

The above discussion provides insight that administrative decentralisation — ‘devolution,’ encouragement of cultural-linguistic ‘particularism;’ and various ‘divide and rule’ policies were the essential ingredients of the Kabul regime’s Nationality Policy, dictated by the former Soviet Union. The administrative integrity of the hitherto United Centralised Afghanistan was systematically assaulted, apparently posing for democratic reasons. The result was the flourishing of the separate ethnic languages, cultures and mosaic of various nationalities in Afghanistan. While demographic reasons undoubtedly played a part in this recasting of the set-up, policies geared to exploiting the transitional, rather traditional, characteristics of some of these principal and strategically placed ethnic communities.

If there was an idea of *sblisheniye* (rapprochement), that was not between ‘all’ the ethnic groups of Afghanistan but among selected ones — on the basis of their demographic importance or just strategic location. And, to spell this out, the inter-ethnic co-operation or rapprochement was between Uzbeks and Turkmens, between Uzbeks and Tajiks, and between Uzbeks and Kirghiz. First, through giving greater importance to language of the Uzbeks, generally in the northern Afghanistan, through the popularisation of the Uzbek culture — their more virile songs and dance and their literary models of Turkic heroes are popularised through the establishment of operas, ensembles, etc.— and through publication of the Uzbek literary models even in national newspapers. It seems that the Uzbeks, their language and culture, are being used as the cutting edge of the Soviet Nationality Policy. There is also a not-so-hidden attempt to foster ethnic integration of young Afghans with the former Soviet Socialist Republics of Central Asia, through introduction of Russian language in Afghanistan.

The Russian pioneers of the Nationality Policy developed a model of nationality policy that is aimed at making the ethnic groups, 'nationalist in form, but socialist in content.' At this juncture in Afghanistan what they have in place was the making of a pattern that 'may be socialist in form but certainly nationalist in content.' But, the ultimate purpose of that was the unmaking of Afghanistan.

It becomes obvious that the ethnic diversities, within Afghan society and trans-border ethnic similarity in former Soviet Socialist Republics, have been exploited by the Russians in an effort to weaken traditional socio-political loyalties apparently to strengthen their position in Afghanistan. Although the Russians could not succeed completely but they have made hectic effort to break young Afghan generation from their age-old loyalties with Iranian, Middle Eastern and Subcontinental civilisation and convincing them that Afghanistan is an inseparable component of Central Asian Culture and society.

The Soviet policies have played dominant role in fuelling hatred and political divide between Pashtuns and non-Pashtun citizens of Afghanistan. The redrawing of provincial boundaries of Afghanistan on cultural basis and formation of new provinces Sar-i-Pol and Nuristan was to get rid of non-Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmens and Nuristanis, in the areas adjacent to former Soviet Socialist Republics of Central Asia. The outbreak of civil war in Afghanistan and formation of Northern Alliance against the Pashtuns was a natural outcome of the Soviet policies that will have a long-lasting impact on the socio-political set-up in Afghanistan.