

ON THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

MARIANNA ARUNOVA

Dr Marianna Arunova is a member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, Moscow.

The peculiarities of the current situation in Afghanistan appear to be largely determined by the ethnic and political processes. These gained momentum in the aftermath of the fall of Najibullah's regime, when Mujahidin rule was established under the name of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA) and, later, during the rise of the Taliban movement.

The Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Chaharaymaks and representatives of other ethnic groups populate the country. The Pashtuns were the founders of the Afghan state and they had previously formed the ruling circles and the political and military élite of the country. Non-Pashtuns were highly sensitive to their inequitable status and protested against the Pashtuns' hegemony. Their discontent led to numerous armed uprisings and, since the middle of the twentieth century, this has resulted in the emergence of ethnically based non-Pashtun opposition parties.

The civil war that broke out soon after the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took power, drastically changed the ethnic, demographic and political balance of Afghan society. First, by the time the Najibullah regime collapsed, the Pashtuns, due to massive emigration, no longer constituted the majority of the country's population.¹ Second, during the war, the national self-consciousness of non-Pashtun ethnic groups rose considerably, giving a powerful military and political boost to the non-Pashtun Mujahidin parties and organisations. Within the structures of the Kabul regime, especially in the military, non-Pashtuns gradually gained prominence. Tajiks, for example, prevailed in the state apparatus and in the Ministry of State Security's military units. Determination was growing among the non-Pashtun community to prevent a return of Pashtun domination in Afghanistan. Inter-ethnic rivalries in Kabul and throughout the country came into the open just as Najibullah's social and political base started to erode.

According to the rigid logic of political struggle, revolt against Najibullah spelt an alliance with the Mujahidin for his opponents in the PDPA. With rising acute inter-ethnic contradictions, such an alliance could only be formed on the basis of ethnic loyalties.

Hence, anti-Najibullah (predominantly non-Pashtun) opposition orientated towards an influential Tajik-based Mujahidin party, the Islamic Society of Afghanistan, headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani. The Islamic Society of Afghanistan's most famous field commander was Ahmad Shah Masood.

In March 1992, a conflict between Najibullah and some prominent non-Pashtun military figures hailing from the North of the country, populated mainly by the Tajiks and Uzbeks, triggered an ethnic-political split inside the PDPA regime and soon led to its collapse.

After the victory of the Mujahidin in April 1992, a fragile coalition of Mujahidin tanzims (parties), supported by various ethnic groups, seized power. In the struggle for power in the capital and in the provinces that followed, the ethnic factor played a major role. What was making the situation more complicated was that an outside force supported every party, group or organisation. Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and other countries were competing for influence in Afghanistan and in the whole region.

The collapse of Najibullah's Republic of Afghanistan led to disintegration of the civil administration, which was by no means perfect but in fact quite developed. The authority of ISA bodies was nominal and did not cover all of the country. Also important during the war was that the composition of the local élite had drastically changed. The figure of a field commander emerged backed by military

force and did not necessarily come from the local establishment. Warlords of various ethnic origins and political loyalties but reporting to nobody assumed the leading role.

As administration in the regions was highly fragmented and all but independent of Kabul, and with fratricidal war gaining momentum, the Taliban movement² made its appearance on the Afghan political scene. It was created by Pakistani Intelligence with the active assistance of the radical right-wing Jama'at-i-Islami Party and the comprehensive support of the USA. The Taliban was supposed to secure order in the country and restore the traditional domination of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan. The Taliban was also to guarantee the advent to power in Kabul of a regime, at least friendly if not outright dependent on Islamabad, to provide a kind of 'strategic depth' and geopolitical advantage to Pakistan in the context of its relations with India and Iran. Some other goals were probably pursued including the eventual establishment of an Afghan-Pakistani Confederation, the idea repeatedly discussed both in Islamabad and Washington in the 1950s and '60s.

In the beginning, Taliban military forces were recruited from among Afghan refugees having received religious education and then military training in special camps. Soon, Pakistani Pashtuns joined them. Their equipment included small and heavy arms, planes and helicopters.

It should be noted that the Taliban movement is not homogenous. Besides die-hard Islamists, the so-called intellectuals play an important role. To them Islamic extremism is but an instrument in the struggle for power, a means to reach certain political or economic goals. Among them, there are some prominent figures of the previous regime - from the Khalq faction of the former PDPA.

In 1994, the Taliban crossed the Afghan-Pakistani border, seizing Kandahar and some central and northern areas of the country. It was not before September 1996, though, that they took control of Kabul. In 1998, they captured most of northern Afghanistan.

The Taliban were meeting with armed resistance from the United Front under Ahmad Shah Masood (the Vice-President and Defence Minister of the ISA), joined by the troops of other anti-Taliban parties, including those with Pashtun membership. They were keeping their positions in Badakhshan, Takhar, Kapisa, Parvan, Baghlan, Kunduz and Sar-e Pol provinces. In September 2000, the Taliban, heavily supported by Pakistani military units and the Arab militants of Osama bin Laden, the well-known international terrorist of Saudi origin who found refuge in Afghanistan, dramatically built up military pressure on Masood's forces. The Taliban managed to capture a few important points in Takhar and Badakhshan provinces and reach the Afghan-Tajik border.

The United Front's setbacks were largely due to inside conflicts along ethnic and political lines. The main factor was the divergence - sometimes latent and sometimes in the open - between the Uzbek commanders and the Tajik forces of Masood.

Having seized most of Afghanistan, the Taliban failed to stabilise the military-political situation in the country. In fact, it was aggravated. Contradictions between various ethnic groups were further galvanised. Religious and political intolerance of the Taliban leaders, Pashtun chauvinism and extremism were translated into notorious acts. Among these were the killing of Hazara Shiahs and other non-Pashtuns, the execution of dissidents without trial, flagrant violations of humanitarian law, in particular regarding women and girls, the execution of Najibullah, the murdering of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif, and pogroms at the UN offices. All that provoked a distinctly negative reaction throughout the world.

Granting asylum to bin Laden, turning Afghan territory into a stronghold of international terrorism, Islamic extremism and illegal drug trafficking³ make the Taliban movement a serious threat to regional and international peace and security. The Taliban persistently refuse to change their political behaviour and refrain from constructive talks with the ISA government. They reject proposals put forward by the UN, OIC and 'the Group of Neighbours and Friends of Afghanistan' (the '6+2 Group')⁴ as well as other mediators for a political settlement through the establishment of a

broad-based multiethnic government. Therefore, the international community had to take adequate measures against the Taliban. On 14 November 1999, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1267 demanding extradition of Osama bin Laden and introducing sanctions that included banning international flights of Ariana, the Afghan airline, and freezing funds and other financial resources of the Taliban (except for cases of humanitarian need).

In late November 1999, in his Report to the Security Council and General Assembly on the situation in Afghanistan, the UN Secretary-General stressed that the Afghan conflict had reached the point where its regional and international implications could not be ignored. Indeed, the political extremism and religious intolerance displayed by the Taliban, who advocate aggressive Wahhabism and practice drug trafficking, have been gaining trans-border dimensions.

Taliban leaders not only set up training camps for international terrorists (Afghans as well as citizens of Arab and Central Asian countries), but also maintain contacts and co-ordinate their actions with the Chechen bandits, the radical wing of the Tajik opposition and Islamic extremist groups operating in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. There are indications of Taliban ties with Xinjiang extremists in China.

The Taliban spare no effort to gain international recognition but, so far, they have failed to dispel their unfavourable image. Besides Pakistan, only Saudi Arabia and the UAE recognise the Taliban movement as a state authority of Afghanistan.

Further developments in Afghanistan are very difficult to predict. They can follow various scenarios. Hypothetically, the Taliban could 'terminate' the United Front and establish its control over the northern provinces, including Badakhshan. In that case, however, the Masood troops would retreat into the hardly accessible Panjshir valley and resort to guerrilla tactics. Isolated centres of anti-Taliban resistance would remain in some Hazara, Uzbek and Turkmen-populated regions, as well as in some areas of the Pashtun tribal zone. This could go on for years.

Protracted low-level war in several regions of the country would surely undermine the Taliban's already low resources. Islamabad is unlikely to withstand such pressure without running the risk of a growing internal political and economic crisis.

One cannot exclude the possibility of the ISA government forces stopping the Taliban advance and, taking advantage of the coming winter, managing to re-capture and consolidate their positions in northern Afghanistan. If this happens and the military confrontation comes to a deadlock, the country might split into the Pashtun South and the non-Pashtun North, or, as contradictions within the anti-Taliban alliance grow, even become another Lebanon.

Such developments might unleash a geopolitical chain reaction with unpredictable results. For instance, the Afghan North's relations with adjacent states could follow quite a range of patterns. The emergence of a Pashtun South might revive the concept of Great Pashtunistan, encompassing Pashtun-populated territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This would certainly cause rising tensions in inter-ethnic relations inside Pakistan and make the socio-political situation in that country explode. India is unlikely to remain indifferent to such changes. In this case, Iran would certainly take advantage of the situation to consolidate its influence among the Hazara Shiah of Afghanistan.

All this would no doubt lead to a further escalation of tension in Central and South Asia and in the Middle East.

Therefore, any possible scenario involving attempts to settle the Afghan conflict by force poses a threat to regional and global stability and security.

In this context, it is particularly important for the international community to increase its efforts under UN auspices with a view to persuading the belligerents in Afghanistan, primarily the Taliban, to stop the bloodshed and resume direct constructive dialogue. These efforts should be aimed at

reaching compromise agreements on a future coalition government. Such a government would ensure respect for the rights and interests of all political, religious and ethnic segments of society. It would also put an end to the civil war and, with the international community's support, it would preserve the independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Afghanistan, making sure it lives in peace with its neighbours.

1 Along with the general, relative and absolute decrease in the number of Pashtuns in the country, there was a drastic shift in the balance between the two traditional rival Pashtun groups - the Duranis and the Ghilzais, the former being the tribe to which the Afghan Royal House belonged. As a result of the April 1978 coup, the predominantly Ghilzai leaders of the Khalk faction of the PDPA captured the state machinery. The Duranis never recovered their traditional privileged status and political domination among the Pashtuns.

2 'Taliban' is plural for Talib, a student of religious school. Literally: 'striving for knowledge'.

3 According to the UN experts, in 1999 production of raw opium in Afghanistan reached 4.6 thousand tons (i.e. 75 percent of world production) with 70 percent of this amount exported to Europe.

4 The '6+2 Group' consists of the states adjacent to Afghanistan - Iran, Pakistan, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan - as well as Russia and the USA. It was formed in 1997 at the initiative of the UN Secretary-General's special envoy, L. Brahimi. This group worked out a concerted approach to the inter-Afghan conflict, and these were reflected in the Declaration on the main principles of a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan, adopted in June 1999 at the Group's session in Tashkent. The document provides for settling the conflict through peace talks and creating a broad-based, multiethnic and representative government. It was agreed not to provide military support to any of the Afghan belligerents. The document also called on the international community to take adequate measures to prevent arms supplies reaching Afghanistan.