Ethnic Discrimination in Afghanistan

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1. Introduction

Afghanistan is a country with ethnic diversity like other hundred countries in the world. By abusing this diversity, ethnic discrimination has been one of the effective factors of civil wars in Afghanistan. However, a war-exhausted nation confronts a raft of problems; extreme poverty, deprivation and discrimination have reinforced existing fault lines in society. Bridging these gaps requires a long-term investment in physical and social capital and the economy, if the relapse of conflict is to be avoided. History shows that roughly half of all countries that emerge from war lapse back into violence within five years.

2. Ethnic Diversity In Afghanistan: History and Evolution

Afghanistan is a multi ethnicity country and society. Its ethnic groups have lived together for more than 5000 years in this region and they have gathered together many times against The Great Empire of Britain and the Soviet Union and defeated them and have maintained their freedom. Due to Afghanistan’s geo-strategic location, the powerful countries have tried to have a direct or an indirect influence in this country’s political strategy (military, economy, and social affairs). These foreign powers have always created problems among these ethnic groups for getting through their own interests. In this sense, the country’s multi ethnicity has hampered its development as a nation. Today, this discrimination has become like an indirect civil war in this land.

There has never been an accurate population census taken in Afghanistan, but the most common estimate is approximately 26 million. Only one ethnic group has never inhabited Afghanistan. Afghanistan can be considered a country of minorities as there is no group serving as a majority. Rather, Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group followed by Tajiks as the

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1 Diversity is the quality of being diverse or different; difference or variety. Ethnic diversity is a natural phenomenon which exists in each community.
2 Discrimination is the discernment of qualities and recognition of the differences between things
3 Ethnicity is a fundamental factor in human life: it is a phenomenon inherent in human experience and it is a result of interaction, rather than essential qualities of groups. An ethnic group or ethnicity is a group of human beings whose members identify with each other, usually on the basis of a presumed common genealogy or ancestry. Ethnic identity is also marked by the recognition from others of a group’s distinctiveness and by common cultural, linguistic, religious, behavioral or biological traits.
second largest group, and then Hazaras, Uzbeks tied for third, followed by the Aimak, Turkmen, Baluch, Nuristani and other small group

Afghan nation is a combination of several ethnic groups. The brief details are given in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Population</th>
<th>Native Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pashtuns</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>Pashto (Iranian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajiks</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Dari (Iranian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazara</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Dari (Iranian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbek</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Uzbek (Altaic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmen</td>
<td></td>
<td>Turkmen (Altaic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aimak</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Dari (Iranian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baluchi</td>
<td></td>
<td>Baluchi (Iranian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
<td>Variety</td>
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</tbody>
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The Pashtuns, or Pushtuns, constitute an estimated 38% of the population of Afghanistan, and as such are the ethnic majority. They comprise the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and dominated the government for centuries. Ethnic differences are strongest when other significant differences religious, ideological, economic, geographic and linguistic, reinforce distinctions between one ethnic group and another. Although Afghanistan is a complex country in terms of ethnic composition, the importance of ethnicity in explaining conflict has varied significantly throughout its history.

Despite Tajiks are being the indigenous peoples responsible for carrying on civilized society through the centuries, since the Mongol invasion of Central Asia, Tajiks have never ruled the region that is today Afghanistan — with the exception of the Kart dynasty and the short 10-month rule of Habibullah Kalakani in 1929. In modern Afghanistan, Tajiks have been known for being bureaucrats, educators, and especially successful merchants and entrepreneurs.

3. Afghan Civil Wars: An Impact of the Ethnic Discrimination

Today, it is clear that all Afghan civil wars are grown from ethnic discriminations in this country. These discriminations are created by internal and external factors. In fact, these civil wars were created by the competition between the ethnic groups to reach to power and control the country. Ahmad Khaled Dastgir, history teacher at one of the universities in Kabul believes that the main reason of civil wars in Afghanistan is the involvement of external factors in interior affairs. He proclaimed that Afghan people don’t have any problems among them from the point of view of ethnicity and Afghan people have proved many times that they are united and they have defeated their country and combated against the great powers. He said that
during the civil wars, afghan people from different nations were helping each other to stay alive and they have given shelters to the other (from different ethnic groups), in order to save their lives. It means that, they were not ethnic groups fighting with each other; they were leaders which collected and abused the illiterate and poor people as an army to fight against each other.

During the world history, there were always competitions between nations and ethnic groups for reaching to power. In Afghanistan, it’s been the same case like the entire world. When we observe the history of Afghanistan from 250 – 300 years ago up to now, the phenomenon of discrimination commences to exist.

In the original state named Afghanistan, dating back to 1747, the Pashtun ethnic group constituted an overwhelming majority. Until the late nineteenth century, Afghanistan was a fragile confederation of Pashtun tribes, and the word "Afghan" was used as a synonym for Pashtun. As part of a nation-building project early in the twentieth century, it increasingly came to imply "citizen of Afghanistan." The borders of the territory that now form Afghanistan were established toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the British and Russian empires were competing for control of the region. The Pashtun population was split, one part living in British India and the Pashtun majority in Afghanistan being reduced to around half the total population.

All through his monarchy, Abdur Rahman Khan (reigned 1880–1901) attempted to build a stronger, more modern state, less dependent on shifting tribal alliances. Trying to establish authority throughout the country, particularly where ethnic minorities were dominant, the king battled several contentious groups, with especially harsh implications for the Hazara and Nuristani peoples. Whereas Afghanistan's majority is Sunni Muslims, the Hazara are Shia, and the Nuristani practice their own religion. Religion was used to legitimize warfare and ethnic persecution. Abdur Rahman Khan also forcibly moved large numbers of noncomplying Pashtuns to minority-dominated areas in the north, thus forming people who were formerly a threat into an effective instrument for strengthening his rule in non-Pashtun areas. Pashtun nomads were granted privileges such as access to pastures in the Hazara-inhabited central region.

Habibullah (reigned 1901–1919) and Amanullah (reigned 1919–1929) introduced constitutional reforms and outlawed slavery and other discriminatory practices that affected primarily minorities. King Amanullah fell in 1929, replaced by the sole non-Pashtun ruler in Afghan history, Bacha-e-Saqao—"son of the water-carrier." A Tajik from the Kohistan region north of Kabul, his position was based less on ethnicity than on support from a religious network.

Nader Shah (reigned 1929–1933) representative of a tribal Pashtun confederation deposed Bacha-e Saqao after only nine months. After Zaher Shah (reigned 1933–1973) inherited the throne, the country was relatively calm for several decades. The ruling family strangled a short era of liberalization in the late 1940s in 1953, when Prince Daud Khan, the king's cousin, became prime minister. Daud Khan was a strong proponent of Pashtun nationalism. He wanted to expand Afghanistan, to include the Pashtun areas and population of Pakistan. This led to tense relations between the two countries and to the eventual ouster of Daud in 1963.

The constitution of 1964 allowed freedom of the press, and political parties were established. The pro-Soviet communist party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), was dominantly Pashtun, but split into the Parcham branch of urban intellectuals with a tendency toward ethnic accommodation and the rural, authoritarian, and nationalist Khalq branch. The major Maoist party, Shula-e Jawid, arose in 1967 from divisions in PDPA. Faced with a variety of parties seeking to place ethnic discrimination squarely on the political agenda, the king responded by unofficially ensuring that minorities were represented in the cabinet, but the basic attitude toward ethnic differences was that economic modernization would lead to their gradual erosion.

Former Prime Minister Daud Khan regained power in 1973; He established an authoritarian rule that was overturned in a PDPA coup in 1978. PDPA immediately announced a Soviet-style nationality policy that addressed four areas: government participation, education, newspapers, and culture. PDPA's credibility was severely undermined by Pashtun dominance of the party and its attempts to foster Pashtun support by launching ethnic appeals.

With the 1978 coup and the Soviet invasion of 1979, Afghani resistance parties were established in Pakistan and Iran. Pashtuns with the exception of Jamat-i Islami, dominated the Pakistan-based parties, and all had some form of Sunni Islamic orientation. Iran became the major backer of the groups’ active among the Hazara. The resistance based its legitimacy on various forms of politicized Islam, and ethnicity was low on the political agenda of the exiled parties in the early 1980s. Nonetheless, the fact that the resistance leadership was overwhelmingly Pashtun was problematic from the perspective of the non-Pashtun population. Resistance-based shadow cabinets were notoriously weak and fragmented, mainly because the resistance leaders could not accommodate Afghanistan’s ethnic variety.

Once in power, the PDPA went on to announce a Soviet-style nationality policy. In practice, the will to implement such reforms was limited, and PDPA's credibility was severely undermined by its Pashtun dominance. When President Najib took power in 1986, there was a change of approach. First, Najib's government was designed as a massive project in political accommodation. Second, the government realized that Soviet military presence in Afghanistan was on the wane, and ethnic and tribal loyalties were exploited to establish local militias to fill the gap. The so-called Uzbek militia of General Dostum and the Ismaili militia of Sayyed Mansoor developed into major military units. Ethnicity, for many, became an avenue to privileges. Military groups of different origins opposed or supported one another, as when Uzbek militias were used to reinforce the defense of threatened government garrisons in the Pashtun south.

The ethnic dimension was brought to the limelight as the resistance took power in Kabul in April 1992. Jamat-i Islami and its key commander, Ahmed Shah Massoud, were a major force, but different groups in the resistance soon split Kabul into separate sections, and the ethnic definition of the conflict gained in prominence. Alliances between resistance groups and sections of the old government army that shared ethnic identity emerged as key forces in the battle for controlling the capital. Alliances rapidly shifted; political and military leaders used ethnic arguments to build support, and common people had little alternative but to seek protection with their own group.
5. Emergence of Taliban - 1994

The Taliban emerged in late 1994 in reaction to the strife in Kabul and the lawlessness in the rest of the country. Based on traditionalist networks of Islamic scholars and village mullahs, the Taliban found supporters mainly in the Pashtun population. At first the organization avoided ethnic rhetoric, but gradually it began using pro-Pashtun as well as anti-Shia arguments. In the aftermath of armed confrontations with other groups, the Taliban often arrested and harassed people only for ethnic reasons. The movement's dominantly Pashtun membership and the frequency of ethnic violence have only contributed to further manifest ethnicity as a central component of the conflict in Afghanistan. It remains to be seen how the Taliban's removal from power in late 2001 will affect the complex ethnic conflicts in the country.

The 1964 Constitution, in effect under the Bonn Agreement, states "The people of Afghanistan, without any discrimination or preference, have equal rights and obligations under the law. The government will include 29 members, must reflect the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan. Tajik members of the Northern Alliance representing northern Afghanistan’s Panjsher Valley will head the most powerful posts in the interim government, the ministries of defense, foreign affairs and interior."

6. Fall of Taliban and Karzai Era

There is a belief between Afghan people that the actual influence and control of the new, democratically elected government of Hamid Karzai extends only weakly beyond the outskirts of Kabul; ethnic fragmentation seems to be on the rise; the country, especially in the east and the south, is racked by an increasingly threatening and sophisticated insurgency and large areas of Afghanistan are still ruled by warlords/druglords. The country has become a narco-state with its opium crop. Aimal Mohamadi, employee in Ministry of foreign affairs believes that Afghanistan has been a victim of foreign powers competing in Central Asia, in order to have effective influence in Asia. These powers have always tried to make and keep Afghanistan instable and supported tribal leaders to get people to stand against other ethnic groups. Each ethnic group was supported by a specific foreign power. In this case, Afghan people have suffered about 30 years of civil war for something like nothing.

7. Rise of Ethnic Conflicts during the Present Regime

After all these conflicts and problems, today people are once more afraid of this phenomenon by the name of ethnic discrimination existing everywhere (parliament, school, university, governmental and non governmental organizations, ministries...). Aimal Mohamadi added that when we work in social level, we can feel better the existence of discriminations and we find out that the rules, justice, payments...differ from one person to another one, due to which ethnic group the person belongs to or to which party the person works for.

As we see that today governmental employees are really dissatisfied about the varieties of the salary amounts in Ministries, in Afghanistan. Two people working in same place and having the same positions, they have different salaries. Roqia Seddiqi, working in a governmental organization critiqued with hopelessness about the government injustice regarding to the salaries diversity. She said that there are lots of problems in governmental offices, one of these problems existing right there,
is the different payments in one organization. There are lots of other employees who have the same academic degree like the ordinary ones and they are the same positions and jobs, but they get twenty or thirty times more amount of salary than the ordinary employees. This is just because they are related to someone working in a high position in government or they are related to a powerful ethnic group or they work for a specific party.

A person with the governmental or ethnic support is the one who has strong influence in society and in his office and beside this; there is no power to rule this person. Youssouf youssoufzad, a young boy who lives in Kabul city, says that the justice is not constant to all, there are the boys who have powerful support and they do lots of illegal behaviors in the society and there is no one to interdict them. This makes other young boys to lose hope and confidence from the government and law.

After fall of Taliban, the new government of Afghanistan was established. Due to Bonn Agreement, the government was in charge to pay attention in involvement of all ethnic groups in all affairs and share the power between them. So Hamed Karzai proposed an ethnic balanced cabinet to get satisfied all ethnic groups. People were happy and they had their representatives in government. After awhile, these representatives started to abuse their political powers for their private relationships and they were not working in a specific coordination with other ethnic groups and government. This is why the Afghan cabinet was not enough succeeded in interim government. Maryam Sadat from the Tajik ethnic group, teacher at a private school in Kabul declared that afghan people should not believe on their ethnic leaders anymore because they are not working to make this nation united with each other, they are creating conflicts among these ethnic groups and the main factor of these civil wars in this poor country.

The governmental resources have always refused these proclamations and say that it is not true, because justice is same for all and there is no exception for anyone. In case of employment, Governmental sources declare that hiring employees are just related to their talents and intelligences, there is no other factor like ethnic relationships. They say that it is not one person’s authority to hire and fire employees; there are the commissions which decide about it. They accept this just propaganda to get people opposite to government; in fact, there is no discrimination in governmental organizations.

Afghanistan is a country that has just begun to start its new life with lots of challenges and problems, in these recent years. In this case, ethnic issues don’t have any importance to be a centralized subject toward Afghanistan’s rehabilitation. In fact, ethnic discrimination is a burning issue in Afghanistan nowadays. For sweeping these ethnic problems, critiquing on each other does not make sense. That is not a logic way toward the solutions. For example, today, there are problems related to usage of terms for official affairs. Actually, these official terms changed from Dari to Pashto in era of Ahmad Shah Baba. Dari speakers were made to accept it. Dari speakers, especially Tajiks found this as an ethnic discrimination and they always tried to change it.

The discrimination has been brought up to the Kabul University’s environment. Kabul University is the biggest university in Afghanistan and it is used to be called from longtime ago by a Pashto word Da Kabul Pohanton (Kabul University) or Pohanzai for faculty and many more... since two or three years, Tajiks started to use Dari words instead of these terms in their daily conversations and in official places, Daneshgah e
Kabul for Kabul University, Daneshkada for Faculty and etc ... In these recent weeks, there were many notices from Ministry of Information and Culture affairs, regarding to interdiction of these Dari terms in daily conversations and especially in official places. Finally, there were many demonstrations from Tajik ethnic group opposite the government. It has changed in a serious issue in Afghanistan. There were many TV programs concerning like round tables, interviews... literature experts from Pashto and Dari were invited to negotiate about it. After all these, this issue went to Parliament as a focal point and they talked about for several days. The afghan ordinary people feel very nervous about these discriminations and they have lost their hopes and they believed that that was not the way to solve the problems in Afghanistan. Ahmad Zia Bayani, one of the Kabul University students says about which this is for sure, beside this, there are lots of more important issues in this country after years of war and conflicts to be applied in parliament, developing these discriminations are just to keep afghan people busy to do not pay attention in their country’s important issues. He added that these discrimination’s flames are fired by foreign powers, in order to keep Afghanistan instable for their own interests.

Ethnic discrimination is not only found as a serious issue in governmental organizations, but also there is lots of this kind of discriminations in non-governmental organizations. Today afghan people are tired of conflicts and discriminations and they are looking for their leaders to solve the misunderstandings between the ethnic groups even though they have lost the belief that the leaders could help them to make united Afghans. They think that these leaders were never the real ones to work for the stability of Afghanistan and they have proved it before, because these ethnic representatives were competing together to get more advantage from their governmental posts for themselves and in some cases for their related ethnic group without any policy determined by Afghan government. Generally, in start people were hopeful in case of the involvement of their ethnic group leaders in the new government, but after awhile they found that they have mistaken once more by believing on these leaders.

8. Conclusion

Afghan society, at present, has become a typical case of ethnic discrimination and one can find easily these kinds of situations everywhere. For example: In some cases, whenever there is someone who has a powerful post in government, all his employees are from his own ethnic group, from his deputy to his guard. Someone, whose relative is working in a high post somewhere, is the one who can find a good job with a handsome salary. Each year 50 to 60 thousands of students pass a special exam to get admission in universities. Only 10 to 11 thousands of them are accepted in the high education institutions. Nonetheless, there are lots of students with lack of knowledge, who get easily admission in universities by giving bribes or carrying a letter of recommendation of somebody working in a high post in government. There are just few numbers of students who get admission in universities by their own talents and intelligences or by the chance. The talented students are away from improvement and education and there is no one to defeat their rights. Muska Sahak one of the students which didn’t succeed to get admission in university, protests that there were the students accepted in high education institutions with bad marks, because they had recommendation letters or they had enough money to bribe, in order to be passed in exams of entry to university.
At school, university, societies, organizations, everywhere, the one that has the powerful support of his/her ethnic group, will get a scholarship and discounts or will receive financial and other kinds of supports.

In fact, a country with these kinds of situations and discriminations is really going toward a disaster.

Though after the new elected government, His Excellency Hamed Karzai has tried to reduce these discriminations by making a well balanced cabinet from all ethnic groups and in his declarations he persuades people to do not pay attention to discrimination and forget the tribal and ethnic conflicts, but still the discrimination is on rise. The political analysts believe that the government should make a system and a policy to work through, in order to eliminate discriminations from this land.

Today, there are 37 countries, which are working to make Afghanistan stable, and there are millions of dollars sent in this country. These efforts will make no sense, if there is no strategy in case of elimination of discriminations in Afghanistan, especially ethnic discrimination. If it continues more and more like this, there will be once more the possibility of occurrence of civil war and the other catastrophe situations in Afghanistan and this region.

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