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Jawan Shir Rasikh
James Madison University

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Nationalism in Afghanistan: A Descriptive Analysis

Introduction:

This paper's argument is that nationalism existed in Afghanistan between the years 1901-1929. In modernizing Afghanistan and building a nationality during the first three decades of the 20th century, Afghan nationalists tried to create an Afghan national identity. This identity was the idea that Afghans were one people, had their own history and culture, and their own *watan*-homeland. *Eein watan-e aziz Afghanistan or this dear homeland of Afghanistan*, wrote *Kabul*,¹ "has been neither the land of Persians, nor Turks, nor Indians, and nor Chinese."² The Afghan *watan* was Afghanistan, and in the past large part of modern Pakistan and parts of Iran and Central Asia also belonged to 'Afghans.' Although this new national idea was propagated by the Afghan nationalists as the foundation for national identity, and to reform Afghanistan,³ it did not have anything to do with ordinary Afghans because nationalism in the early 20th century Afghanistan was an elitist-Kabul centric idea for the elites in Kabul. The nationalists represented a small group of Afghans who were primarily patronized by the state in Kabul.

A number of internal and external events played important role in the development of consciousness among Afghan nationalists at this period. First, despite being a patronized state of the British Empire, Afghanistan was nominally an independent state, which allowed Afghan nationalists to talk without restrictions about the state of affairs of Afghanistan and other countries in their nationalistic newspapers such as *Siraj al-Akhbar*. Second, when emir Abdur Rahman Khan (r. 1880-1901) died in 1901, several world events such as the outbreak of World

¹ *Kabul* was the literary magazine of Anjuman-e Adabi Kabul, the Kabul Literary Society that was established in 1931. *Kabul magazine* and *Salnamah-e Kabul*, Kabul Annual, the two Persian publications of Anjuman-e Adabi Kabul, were established to "reform and consolidate the methodologies and forms of literature" in Afghanistan and "write" the history of the historical poets of Afghan nation. See Anjuman-e Adabi Kabul's *Salnamah-e Kabul* (1932) 109.

² Ghulam Jilani Khan Azimi, "Nazar-e ba Jughrafya-ye Watan: An Opinion about Geography of the Homeland," *Mujala-e Kabul*, (1932-33), 42.

³ Ghobar (1987), 794.

War One, Bolsheviks Revolution, and the emergence of nationalism movements in South-Central Asia and Middle East broadened Afghan nationalists' awareness. In following these events,⁴ the Afghan nationalists themselves waged a war of independence against the British in 1919 that led to the recognition of Afghanistan as a sovereign country. In order to perpetuate and legitimize their appeal in the eyes of Afghan people, Habibullah Khan (r. 1901-1919) and Amanullah Khan (r. 1919-1929) sponsored Afghan elites to propagate Afghanistan in the new educational system, and other state's hegemonic institutions like the army. After the war of independence, Amanullah Khan was to expand his father's reform programs and intensify the modernization of Afghanistan.

State & Elites

Popular studies on nationalism in Afghanistan, such as Dupree 1964, Gregorian 1967, 1969, Schinasi 1974, and Nawid 2009, have two characteristics. One is that they assign the founding of nationalism in Afghanistan to certain identified individuals such as Mahmud Tarzi. The other is that they equate nationalism in Afghanistan with modernization reforms of the state. However, such a monolithic and state-centric description of nationalism in Afghanistan lacks to ask whether or not all people of Afghanistan had the same level of consciousness as the small elite class in Kabul. Noting this question, the following discussion will approach nationalism in Afghanistan in the context of Afghan elites and their relationships with the state and the print between 1901 and 1929.

State-Elite Interaction

When in 1901 Habibullah Khan ascended to the throne, Afghanistan lacked a colonially formative intelligentsia class like India. Since he undertook a number of reforming measures, Mahmud Tarzi and his associates who formed the small educated class of Afghanistan in Kabul

⁴ Gregorian (1969) pages 210-220.

cheered for and facilitated the reforms. Returned back from exile in Ottoman Empire, Tarzi praised and advocated further the reforms. He argued that the monarchy, patriotism, and religion are one institution.⁵ Therefore, if people of Afghanistan could become agents of the state by taking part and not opposing the reforms of the state, they were not only fulfilling God's command on earth by serving the emir and the state. But, they also were serving the fatherland that needed modernization.

Education was one important arena in which the state brought reforms. Habibullah Khan established a modern college, Habibiya in 1904. Habibiya became a nationalist institution for state-elite production. Gregorian (1969) writes that by the time Amanullah Khan became the emir in 1919, there were two goals that Amanullah and his father-in law, Mahmud Tarzi, followed. One was "to cultivate an enlightened intellectual class in Afghanistan [and another was] to provide a group of able administrators for the monarchy."⁶ The state supported Habibiya in material forms such as paying the salaries of the teachers, provision of textbooks, and recruitment of foreign teachers from India, Turkey, and Europe. In return, the graduates of Habibiya were legitimizing the states' acts, expanding its authority upon the mass populace, and providing bureaucratic services. For instance, Habibiya graduates provided the main body of Afghan civil administrators in the World War One period and were in effect in charge of the political machinery of the government.⁷ In less than one generation from 1904-1919, Habibiya College turned into a state-elite forum where the state's reforms were not only discussed and taught, but also a new Afghan elite class was produced by *Habiya*.

Mir Ghulam Mohammad Ghoobar, who grew up during this period though did not attend Habibiya himself, calls this new elite-class of Habibiya and the Afghan state *roshanfekran* or the

⁵ Gregorian, page 182.

⁶ Gregorian, page 240.

⁷ Gregorian (1969) page 248.

enlightened personalities. The *roshanfekran* class, according to Ghobar, composed of three kinds of people: the liberals, the young Afghans, and individual *roshanfeker* or elite. The first two groups were connected directly with the royal court where they were advocating for reforms within the state. However, the difference between the liberals and the young Afghans, the first two groups, was that the latter wanted to change the absolute monarchical regime into a constitutionalist monarchy. The third group of *roshanfekran* who were outside the state had independent personal relationships among themselves such as sharing information about the state of affairs of Afghanistan and the world.⁸ What becomes interesting to note here about the emergence of the *roshanfekran* class is that these elites had increasing interaction with the state and in state institutions, which was formative for the subsequent development of patronage and relationships between the Afghan-state and Afghan elites.

Printing:

In addition to Habibiya's vital role in the production of the new Afghan elite class, print capitalism⁹ in the early twentieth century Afghanistan played crucial role as well. The Kabul elites being led by Mahmud Tarzi began to have the support of the emir in the publication of Afghanistan's first modern newspaper, *Siraj al-Akhbar*, The support of the emir and publication of *Siraj al-Akhbar* did not only allow the *roshanfekran* class to access new information. But, it also created a forum for them where they expressed their reflections on Afghanistan's history, identity, progress, backwardness, religion, and other political and cultural issues. *Siraj al-Akhbar-e Afghaniyad* or the torch of Afghan news began its publication in 1911. Mahmud Tarzi,

⁸ See Ghobar (1987), especially pages 716-727 where he talks more in detail about these groups of Afghan *roshanfekran*.

⁹ Print capitalism is from Benedict Anderson's argument that publishing and printing in forms of books and newspapers can establish a spatial ground for interaction among natives of a country that can then make those people feel pride, loyal, and united. Pages 44-45. See Gregorian (1967) page 345, and Gregorian (1969) pages 244-246, for printing or print capitalism's argument in relation to state-elite relationship in Afghanistan.

who was educated in Ottoman Empire, became the chief editor. It became the first major print platform for the elites to foster a sense of national identity and modernization.¹⁰

Take as example the following. In order to emphasize the role of printing and publication in Afghanistan, Tarzi writes in the first issue of *Siraj al-Akhbar* that it is obvious that newspapers have become “the language of nations and peoples, and all nations have newspapers at this time, except the savage tribal nations”.¹¹ It can be noticed that Tarzi’s and his associates’ ambitions for Afghanistan were the influences of his exposure to global, especially European nation building processes. Ghoobar, himself an elite writes later in his famous book *Afghanistan dar masir-e tarikh* or *Afghanistan in the Course of History* that “generally all of the enlightened ones inside the court; were studying foreign published books and magazines and were becoming interested in foreign and domestic social and political issues.”¹² When Amanullah Khan came to power in 1919, the volume and size of the print capitalism expanded and major regional centers such as Qandahar, Mazar-e Sharif, Herat, and Jalalabad each had their own newspaper.¹³

Language:

In the print capitalism and state elite interaction, the role of language is downplayed and treated very scantily by available works on nationalism in Afghanistan. Compare to other institutions of the state in Afghanistan, the major works such as Gregorian (1967 and 1979), Schinasi (1976), and Nawid (2009) treat weakly role of language in relation to the emergence of nationalism in Afghanistan. Institutions such as the army, serving the state, and modern

¹⁰ Gregorian (1967)

¹¹ Tarzi (1911) page 1

¹² Ghoobar, page 716.

¹³ See Gregorian pages 244-246. There, he lists the names of 15 privately or governmentally owned newspapers and magazines from Kabul and countrywide including Aman-e Afghan, new name of *Siraj al-Akhbar* during Amanullah’s reign.

education, for the Kabul based elites, are largely treated.¹⁴ For instance, Gregorian (1969) names four major newspapers in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Herat. Then, he says that “all four of these papers were written in Persian, though they occasionally carried articles and poems in Pashtu.” Considering the dominance of Persian in relation to occasional appearance of Pashtu poses several questions to previously historical assumed thesis in regards to nationalism in Afghanistan and the polity as a general. The thesis is that the Pashtuns have historically dominated Afghanistan.

For instance, Hyman (2002) argues that Pashtuns have dominated Afghanistan historically. He calls this domination “internal colonialism” of other ethnic minorities.¹⁵ Therefore, he concludes that “national idea remained very weak” and this was caused by Pashtuns’ ruling class. In one way, his argument can be challenged because one can question how one people can dominate when they can’t speak their own language.¹⁶ A Pashtun, for example, when decides to do higher education in Kabul, it is obvious that he is required to do it in Persian, called Dari in Afghanistan. Therefore, there is no equal relationship between Pashto language and Persian, which latter has been historically in a dominant position in both high culture and state institutions. In another way Hyman’s argument is true because he makes a difference between a minor Kabul based Pashtuns’ ruling class and the mass of ordinary Pashtuns outside Kabul. These two groups of a Persianized small ruling Pashtun class and a large

¹⁴ See Gregorian (1969) chapter seven (reforms: administrative and military, Royal Military College and Habibya College 1904-6). And pages 183-184 where the reforms are treated in large portion compare to little attention to language’s role in nationalism.

¹⁵Hyman (2002)—page 1-2.

¹⁶Dari, as a “comfortable” language and Pashtu, as an “unpleasant” language as Hyman characterized them, were in different interaction. Pashtu’s occasional appearance versus consistent and periodical appearances of Dari language in newspapers such as Amani-e Afghan or Ittihad-e Mashriqi is a key element to be considered in study of the emergence of nationalism in Afghanistan. This is so because all countries desire to modernize, and economically want to progress, but many of them don’t share language. Therefore, it is important to notice the role of language in a bilingual-multilingual society as such Afghanistan in relation to nationalism.

subaltern Pashtun's population in reality, as one author argued, have had no social, linguistic, and or cultural similarities.¹⁷

A critique:

There are a number of studies that have studied nationalism in Afghanistan, and they have placed prominent emphasis on the role of modernization in the emergence of nationalism in Afghanistan. For instance, some of these studies are from individuals such as Dupree (1964), Gregorian (1967, 1969), Schinasi (1974), and Nawid (2009). These studies share some commonalities in their arguments. One is that they periodize the emergence of nationalism in Afghanistan during the first three decades of the 20th century. This periodization is in contradiction to traditional studies and local narratives that have dated the emergence of modern Afghanistan in 1747, and 1880. Another commonality is that they have used a biographical approach to the study of nationalism in Afghanistan. They almost exclusively have limited their argument around Mahmud Tarzi as the “founder” of nationalism in Afghanistan. A last but not least commonality is that these studies on nationalism in Afghanistan are done in large portion by foreigners not by Afghan individuals, though the latter have adopted them as their own. Although it is nothing write to write about a people's past and identity, the epistemological accounts of a people by foreigners have biases. For instance, people's past and or historical experiences can be misrepresented. In the case of Afghanistan, Schadl—himself a foreigner though—argues that “Western sources relating to Afghanistan between [the years] 1750-1950...misperceive and misrepresent” what and how western scholars observed Afghanistan, its inhabitants, and the events.¹⁸

¹⁷ See page 305 M.J. Hanifi where he writes that the royal lineage had been Persianized who displayed no cultural features of Paxton identity such as the language, Pashtu: they forgot to speak it.

¹⁸ Schadl, pages 89-90

In order to interpret conceptually rather than to translate nationalism during the first three decades of the 20th century, it is significant to distinguish that nationalism in Afghanistan was different in temporality and spatiality from other countries, at least from its two immediate neighbors: India and Persia. During the first three decades of the 20th century, India was still under the colonial rule in both forms, domestic and foreign. But, India unlike Afghanistan experienced an earlier period in the rise of nationalism. Indian Congress Party was already formed in 1885 representing an “educated middle class” composed of merchants and professional men, and latter also intellectuals—students.¹⁹ A similar situation is also true of Persia, modern Iran.²⁰ Spatially, Afghanistan was also different from both Persia and India; for instance Afghanistan was cut off from the Indian Ocean, and had a different kind of topographical landscape than India and Iran. However, a comparative study of nationalism in and of Afghanistan can be fruitful. It cannot only help to enrich the historiography of Afghanistan. But a comparative study of Afghan nationalism to nationalisms in Iran and India is particularly relevant when it comes to modernization, reforms, and languages.²¹

¹⁹ Friedman (1940), page 17. The article discusses Indian nationalism’s relationship to the Far East (especially, Japan and China). Friedman argues that Indian nationalists in the struggle to independence were affected (inspired) by independent Japan’s power and progress in Asia, and they were hoping for a Pan-Asiatic Movement. See page 18-19. It is useful to mention that Afghanistan’s Kabul-based elites and monarchies were also much influenced by Japanese independency from the West and its economic and military advancement. For instance, Gregorian writes that Russo-Japanese War’s books were translated into local language, Persian, in Kabul so that Afghanistan can learn from an Asian nation defeating a European country. See pages 208-210.

²⁰ Abadi (2001) argues that nationalism as an ideological past, in addition to many other concepts such as study of archeology, was “imported” in the 19th century to Iran by those Iranians who were educated in the West. Pages 51-53.

²¹ Afshin Marashi (2008), *Nationalizing Iran: Power, Culture, & The State, 1870-1940*, is a very good read on the role of the state, history, and modernization in nationalism in Iran. It deals with concepts and a period that can be conceptually helpful in addressing the development of nationalism in Afghanistan.

Conclusion:

Early twentieth century was a crucial period in the development of nationalism in Afghanistan. Nationalistic ideas such as nationhood, modernization, patriotism, and allegiance to monarchy were fostered by the small elite class that was produced by Habibiya College, and print capitalism. The *roshanfekran* class or the elites who represented a very tiny portion of Afghan population had close patronized and working relations with the state. However, there are important distinctions to make in regards to understanding nationalism in the first three decades of the 20th century Afghanistan. Apart from other distinctions, the major distinction should be made between the demand and supply of nationalism in regards to Afghanistan: who were nationalists? Who were not nationalists? Whom was nationalism for? Did ordinary Afghans have anything to do with it? Was nationalism limited to Kabul and Mahmud Tarzi? Noting these questions, the study of nationalism in Afghanistan should transcend biographical approach that centers on Mahmud Tarzi, Amanullah Khan, and Daud Khan. Afghan nationalism cannot be 'national' or 'nationalism' unless its discussion is beyond these individuals and boundary of Kabul.

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