

## EVOLUTION AND THE DECLINE OF PASHTUNISTAN MOVEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper looks at the birth and decline of the Pashtunistan movement in Pakistan. The core argument of the paper is that the movement lost its appeal among the masses due to the convulsion of three factors: rise of pashtun elites in Pakistan's central administration, huge Influx of the Afghan refugees and their support by Pakistani government, and the subsequent rise of national parties' influence in N.W.F.P. and the corresponding decline in the NDP base.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Pakistani government, the NDP Base*

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### INTRODUCTION

The birth of Pakistan was accompanied by a variety of destabilising events and movements that challenged the basic pillars of the new state bound together by a common religion. The three most important movements that threatened the national integrity of Pakistan included the Pashtunistan movement, the Jeeya Sind movement and the Baluchistan movement. All these movements were ethno-national and secessionist. All the three movements were born before 1950 around the period of Indian independence from British & the subsequent partition of the subcontinent. Except the Pashtunistan movement, the other two movements turned irredentist immediately after the formation of Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

The formation of these irredentist movements can be attributed to the basic anomalies in the Pakistan movement itself. The Pakistan movement led by Muslim league under the leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah was able to win Pakistan on the basis of Muslim nationalism. There were a number of weaknesses in the movement that affected the later developments within Pakistan. The three most significant weaknesses included the lack of consensus on the structure of the new nation; lack of a proper mechanism to deal with regionalism, and the inherent weakness in the organizational structure of the party itself.<sup>2</sup>

The educated Muslim class was deeply divided on the question of the future of Pakistan. The liberals wanted it to be a secular state, the Islamists, represented by Mullahs wanted an Islamic state and the leftists wanted a socialist Pakistan. These differences, initially dormant, manifested afterwards creating room for dissent & frustration. The lack of an effective mechanism to tackle different issues added to the perplexity of the party. This was evident with the way the party leaders handled the language issue which was raised initially in 1937 Lucknow session of the Muslim league. The language controversy epitomized in the form of the partition of

<sup>1</sup> Kalim Bahadur, 'Ethnic problems in Pakistan', *World Focus*, vol.XV, no 5 (April-may, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> Tahir Amin, *Ethno-National movements of Pakistan* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1988), 67-68

Pakistan in 1971, creating a linguistic Bengali state in its East. Finally, the organisational weakness proved fatally destructive. The lack of an organisational structure to garner support, particularly in the culturally distinct provinces like N.W.F.P, Baluchistan & Sind made the Muslim league dependent on local landed elite that had their own ideological & socio-political agenda.

Among the three major provinces, the Pashtunistan movement was the most organised, comparatively antique, and largely homogenous in ethnicity & aspirations and most powerful ethno-national movement in the infantile years of Pakistan. However, the most important factor of the movement that irritated the Muslim league was that it was closely allied to Indian National Congress due to its charismatic leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan, popularly known as 'Frontier Gandhi in the rugged Khyber Pass region'.<sup>3</sup> After his arrest by the Pakistani establishment the Congress came in strong support of Ghaffar Khan. Jawaharlal Nehru called him 'one of the bravest and straightest men' and bewailed his imprisonment, saying it was 'a thorn in my heart'.<sup>4</sup>

Ghaffar Khan founded the Khudai Khidmatgar (servants of God) movement, designated by Britishers as 'Red shirt' movement, in 1929. It was a Pashtun social reformist movement with four major themes: Intense Pashtun nationalism, reform of the Pashtun society, staunch belief in Non-Violence and upholding Islam. In 1931 it allied with All India National Congress and increasingly became influenced by the nationalist socialist programme advocated by INC.<sup>5</sup>

Since its very start, the movement was anti-imperialist and sympathetic towards the Afghans primarily because of the ethnic bonds. During its formative years the movement asked for the provincial autonomy only & not the independent state for Pashtuns. This development took place later. Due to its superb organizational structure and mass following, it won both the provincial elections held in 1937 and 1946. In effect, it became the only Muslim majority province where Muslim League lost in 1946 elections. During the events of partition the British government decided to hold a referendum to determine if the N.W.F.P wanted to join India or Pakistan. The Khudai Khidmatgars boycotted the referendum objecting there the referendum was not needed because they had already won the elections by clear majority and the referendum had no option for independent Pashtunistan or acceding to Afghanistan.

Although 99 percent vote went in favour of Pakistan, the Pashtun nationalists consider it insignificant because a great majority of people supporting the Khudai Khidmatgars boycotted the elections.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore the 'support rendered to the movement by Afghanistan' deepened the crisis for Pakistan. This had its origins in the resentment and objection of general Pashtun public and the Afghan state to the Durand line drawn in 1893 to separate India from Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> Hence the 'creation of Pakistan was opposed by Afghanistan, as well as the Pashtun nationalists who consorted with the Indian National Congress on the issue'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pakistan: The Frontier Gandhi, *Time Magazine*, Monday, Jan. 18, 1954

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Tahir Amin, *Ethno-National movements of Pakistan*, 68

<sup>6</sup> Shaheen Ali & Javaid Rehman, *Indigenous peoples and ethnic Minorities of Pakistan* (Richmond: Curzon press, 2001), 83

<sup>7</sup> Veena Kukreja, *Contemporary Pakistan* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 126

<sup>8</sup> Shaheen Ali & Javaid Rehman, 83

After the formation of Pakistan the pashtun elites were continuously doubted by the state and continuously persecuted the movement. However, after independence the leaders of the movement accepted the establishment of Pakistan as a settled fact and 'confined to demanding for regional autonomy'.<sup>9</sup> In this changed political discourse the Pashtunistan movement continued its influence and maintained its political legitimacy on two grounds: transborder ethnic and cultural contiguity and linkage with pashtuns in Afghanistan and the fear of a socio-economic and cultural subjugation and submergence at the hands of the dominant *Punjabi-Muhajir* elite in the state structure.<sup>10</sup> This fear of the dominance by the non-pashtun elite and the theft of cultural heritage in the guise of Muslim nationalism led the strong provincial autonomy movement to guarantee cultural, social and economic rights.<sup>11</sup>

Since this fear was almost common in all the major provinces, this led to the amalgamation of all the ethno-cultural movements in 1957 with the formation of National Awami Party of Pakistan (NAP). It was formed of the regional parties from East Pakistan, Sind, N.W.F.P and Baluchistan. Its programme was strictly anti-imperialist and demanded autonomy to all the major provinces. But the NAP was banned by the centre in 1975 alleging that it was working against the integrity of the country by 'preaching a four nation theory',<sup>12</sup> proclaiming that four provinces in Pakistan were actually for nations and had a right to self determination.

Soon after its senior leaders were banned including the arrest of its chief pashtun leader, Wali Khan, son of Ghaffar Khan. After the ban on NAP, the pashtun leaders formed the National Democratic Party (NDP) in 1976. The leaders initially maintained that the question of autonomy was a settled matter in the 1973 constitution and there was little room for reopening the issue. But they remained ambivalent throughout till the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent war that severely damaged their credibility and social base.

### Decline

The decade of 1980s was most crucial for Pashtunistan movement. It knelt a fatal blow to the movement due to which it lost its momentum and social energy. The NDP leaders took a pro-soviet stand in the wake of the soviet military intervention in Afghanistan and the installation of the Babrak Karmal regime in Afghanistan in 1979.<sup>13</sup> This led to a moral weakness in their stand for 'Godless communists' in the eyes of Muslim pashtuns. The social mass base of the Pashtunistan movement broadly collapsed due to three reasons: rise of pashtun elites in Pakistan's central administration, huge Influx of the Afghan refugees, largely pashtuns, and their support by Pakistani government, and that led to the rise of national parties' influence in N.W.F.P. and the corresponding decline in the NDP base.

The prime reason for the decline of the movement was the ascendancy of the pashtun military-bureaucratic elite into the power structure at the centre which came from same districts-Peshawar, Bannu, Kohat, Mardan, which were the main support base of the movement. This culminated in the Ayub era, when the President himself and the three successive

<sup>9</sup> Veena kukreja,126

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 127

<sup>11</sup> Tahir Amin, *Ethno-National movements of Pakistan, 86-91*

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 138

<sup>13</sup> S.M Qureshi, 'Pakhtunistan: the frontier dispute between Afghanistan & Pakistan', *Pacific affairs*, vol XXXIX, No 1( spring 1966)

Commander-in-chiefs of the military were all pashtuns. This led to a psychological defeat of the movement. It was hard to convince the young and educated pashtuns that they were ruled and dominated by other ethnic groups. This frustrated the pashtun leaders and they even protested against it. In a written statement to the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Wali Khan, head of NDP, protested that pashtuns were disproportionately over-represented in the armed forces and civil services.<sup>14</sup>

The second important reason for the decline of the movement was the rise in the political support for rival national parties to NDP like the Muslim League, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Jammāt-i-Islami. The trend already visible since the 1970 general elections picked up the pace in 1980's. This was because of the Afghan crisis of 1979 that gave huge leverage to the national parties of Pakistan. The gain was substantial especially for Jammāt-i-Islami which heavily capitalized on the Afghan situation by using the rhetoric of threat to Islam by 'Godless communism' and the support to ethnic brethren of pashtuns across the border. The 1985 elections clearly showed the strength of Jammāt-i-Islami and other national parties notably the PPP and Muslim League and the perpetual and corresponding decline in the NDP support base.

The third important factor that sealed the decline of NDP was the influx of about three million refugees from Afghanistan into Pakistan. Out of these three million refugees, more than two million (close to 75 percent) refugees sheltered in NWFP. Out of all these refugees eighty percent were pashtuns. There was a massive support and sympathy for these refugees both at the national level and the provincial level. This was in sharp contrast to the NDP leaders' pro-Soviet stand and their hostile attitude towards the Afghan refugees. The other political parties labelled the NDP as traitors and capitalized on the issue to demonise the NDP leaders. With the public & state support swinging in the favour of Afghan refugees, the NDP stand alienated them and led to a fatal erosion of their mass base in the province. This led to a near total collapse of the movement.

There were also other factors that led to the decline of the movement. The most notable of these are the international factors. These factors-transnational influences, activities of coethnics and policies of the foreign states- usually play a secondary but important role in reinforcing the trends generated by the domestic factors. They have the power and potential to act as decisive factors that can affect the course of these movements. The foreign states whose domestic politics and foreign policy directly affected the Pashtunistan movement include Afghanistan, Iran, USSR and USA. The intervention of Soviets directly affected the movement due to the out-flux of millions of Afghans into from Afghanistan into Pakistan. Due to the support for its fight against Soviets, the Afghan nation stopped its claims and support for Pashtunistan. Iran also became involved in helping mediate the Pashtunistan dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan and militarily collaborated with the Bhutto regime in suppressing the irredentist movements, especially in Baluchistan.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 coinciding with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan gave further impetus to the Islamisation of Pakistan and led to a significant gain in the mass base of Islamist political parties like the Jammāt-i-Islami.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 187

<sup>15</sup> Tahir Amin, *Ethno-National movements of Pakistan*, 236

## CONCLUSIONS

Finally, the vast economic and military support by the Americans to the Afghans led to a further decline in NDP anti-American rhetoric as they were seen as friends and not enemies of Afghanistan and the pashtuns living therein. All these factors, although secondary to the domestic ones decimated the Pashtunistan movement.

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