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New Statesman

Fault lines in the sand

By Michael Semple

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One of the best lessons I ever had in Afghan politics was a conversation overheard on a bus. Two decades ago, in the chaos following the collapse of the communist regime, I had to travel from the mountains of Hazarajat in central Afghanistan back to the capital, Kabul. To do this, I had to cross the fault lines of ethnicity, language and religion and the front lines between the armed factions.



Siahkhak, straddling government and opposition territory, was the last post controlled by Hezb-e-Wahdat, the main Shia party in Afghanistan, which draws its support from the ethnic Hazara minority. The local commander arranged a meeting with his Sunni-Pashtun counterpart in Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's faction of Hezb-e-Islami, and handed me over for escort to the town of Maidan Shahr. The two parties had recently formed an opposition alliance in the power struggle that followed the fall of the communist government. As we raced through the lush apple orchards of the Maidan valley, my escorts were preoccupied with avoiding the other local Pashtun faction, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's Ittehad-e-Islami, which had sided with another alliance that was in control of central Kabul. I struggled to keep up with the ethno-political geography.

In Maidan Shahr, I was able to pick up a bus and continue unescorted to the front lines of west Kabul. The old man seated in front of me on the bus asked his companion: "Why has Hekmatyar taken these infernal Hazaras into his lap? They are more murderous than the Soviets." The companion reassured him: "Do not worry, brother, I am sure it is a stratagem. It will not last." The journey reminded me that the conflict in the early 1990s was a civil war - and a complex one at that. Almost 20 years later, many of the fault lines remain.



In early June this year, I talked to a Hazara friend about the prospects for the latest political alliance. The most prominent figures from the days of the resistance struggle against the Taliban were again poised to position themselves as the main constitutional opposition. As ever, we speculated on who would join and who would sit on the fence.

While we talked, my friend received several phone calls from Bamiyan, the largest town in the region of Hazarajat. Pashtun Taliban had thrown up checkpoints on an alternative route between Hazarajat and Kabul, which I had used on occasion in the 1990s. Now gunmen were checking the identity of travellers, ostensibly looking for those linked to the government. They had just stopped the car of the chairman of Bamiyan Provincial Council, Jawad Zahhak, a Hazara, and my friend and I feared that his prospects were bleak. His decapitated body was found dumped a few days later.

The Taliban are careful to market their military campaign as anything but a civil war. A wild commander in the south of the country recently remarked how thankful he was for the presence of US troops. His reasoning was that, as long as the Americans were there, the Taliban could focus on fighting them and win support for resisting the infidel. If the Americans and British left, the Taliban would be obliged to restart their war against the Northern Alliance, which had formed in opposition to their rule in the late 1990s. This would involve Muslims killing Muslims and both sides would become munafiq, religious hypocrites. It was only partly a joke.

The Taliban like to portray themselves as a religious national liberation movement. Their government up to 2001 was called the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Officials today claim to work for the same entity, even though it has no capital and little firm hold on any territory, and the same title still appears on the letterhead used by Taliban commanders. The idea of the Islamic Emirate allows fighters to claim legitimacy. Taliban supporters imagine it as the embodiment of Islamic virtue and justice, a stark contrast to the perception of the Kabul regime.

Dozens of recently composed Pashto-language ballads in praise of the Taliban tell of hillsides white with the bones of previous conquerors and assert the historical inevitability of their lashkar (militia) triumphing over the infidel occupiers. There is no doubt that many Taliban fighters believe they are doing God's work: "I am tired of this world, I desire martyrdom," they say. But the movement is engaged in a power struggle with fellow Afghans, seeking to define the identity of the Afghan state and redress perceived power imbalances within it. I suspect the clichés of historical inevitability in the ballads have little resonance in the north of the country. Even when targeting foreigners, the propaganda is in effect mobilising for the civil war.

As a political officer for the UN, I was part of the team charged with implementing the Bonn Agreement, a plan for Afghanistan that was drawn up following the west's invasion in 2001. As Taliban power crumbled, Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN secretary general's special representative, shepherded leaders of the main armed alliance and an array of émigré politicians towards agreeing a framework for government.

In the early stages of the process, there seemed to be viable hope that this international intervention might offer Afghans an opportunity to escape from their civil war. But fundamental mistakes were made. First, the organisers felt compelled to sign over control of the army, police and intelligence services to the Northern Alliance, to ensure its support for the agreement; now, backed by the US, it had just occupied Kabul in breach of a promise to stay out. Second, the Taliban were left out of the process altogether.

At that moment, the Taliban stood defeated militarily, but the people they had mobilised - networks of traditional Pashtun clerics - had played an important role in the conflict since the coup in 1978 and were likely to do so in future. Nothing in the Bonn Process gave them a stake in the new system.

I recall, the day after the agreement was signed, asking an old arbab, one of the low-level brokers of Afghan politics, what he thought. He said it was the happiest day of his life, just as if one of his children had got married. I asked him what he thought. He told me how, that morning, he had witnessed an armed man whipping street traders on the pretext of keeping order. The arbab and

the armed man had both concluded that the Bonn Agreement was an international endorsement of the victory of one side in the Afghan civil war.

The mistakes were made worse. The coalition troops deployed to Afghanistan after the collapse of the Taliban immersed themselves in a new preoccupation: the "war on terror". Meanwhile, a motley assortment of Afghan commanders were recognised as local administrators and police chiefs. In the Pashtun areas, they started taking revenge on the Taliban by denouncing them as terrorists to the newly arrived American forces. There were multiple cases during 2002 where senior Taliban figures attempted to pledge loyalty to the new order, but were hunted down. The US sent to Guantanamo Bay many people who could have been far more useful if they had been given a chance to participate.

Perhaps most unforgivably, Hamid Karzai, appointed as chairman of the interim administration, neglected to conclude a proper surrender agreement with the Taliban. Arrogance had become carelessness. The Taliban leader Mullah Omar sent a delegation to Karzai at the gates of Kandahar, the Taliban's last remaining stronghold, with authority to hand over the city and agree terms. They parted with little more than vague assurances. No one engaged in the politics necessary to bring the Taliban into the new order. Barely noticed, the former commanders and officials who had evaded arrest slipped across the border to Pakistan.

In 2002, Karzai announced that he was moving decisively against the criminal commanders in the administration. When I checked the list of people sacked in the province for which I was responsible, they turned out to be the more effective and amenable officials. It was a warning of the approach that Karzai would take to the electoral process.

The presidential election of 2004, postponed twice, eventually passed without major controversy. By the time of the parliamentary election the following year, however, the process was visibly worse. I witnessed the aftermath of voting in the Pashtun province of Paktika, which had been shambolic. Fraudulent votes outnumbered genuine ballots and the final outcome was more to do with someone picking deserving winners than counting ballots. Yet there was no appetite for a rerun, in either the Karzai government or the UN. The problem reached a climax in the much-publicised elections of 2009 and 2010, when there was widespread rigging, including cheating on behalf of the president.

The tragedy is that the elections offered perhaps the best opportunity for moving beyond civil war. Because Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, the Pashtun people, comprise roughly 40 per cent of the population, it is not enough for those seeking a majority to mobilise a single ethnic group; they have to build an alliance. But politics has failed to deliver such pluralism and, consequently, the withdrawal of US troops risks opening the way for a return to outright civil war.

Aside from the military disasters, the international community has other lessons to learn. We should have pre-empted a new round of fighting by dealing with the Taliban politically at the start of the Bonn Process. We needed to be more effective in our support of the mechanics of the electoral process. We needed a more serious strategy to cope with the vagaries of the Afghan government.

Now, as concerned Afghan friends call me for advice, I try to reassure them that there will be some level of ongoing international engagement even after the US soldiers leave. But they sound unconvinced. They are preparing to survive a further, intensified round of civil war that, if we had been cleverer at the start, we might have prevented.