

From Communism to Nationalism? The Trajectory of “Post-Communist” Ideology in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Afghanistan had an ostensibly “communist” party of government between 1978 and 1992. *Hezb-e Demokratik-e Khalq-e Afghanistan* (The People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan – PDPA) was quasi-Stalinist in organisation and based many of its policies on a crude interpretation of Marxist thought in relation to existing Afghan political structures. During its last years in power the PDPA, under the leadership of President Najibullah from the *Parcham* (Banner) wing of the party, undertook a process of reform of ideology and re-branded the party as the *Hezb-e Watan* (Homeland Party of Afghanistan) that became ostensibly “nationalist”, as opposed to communist or leftist, in character. This was the starting point for a transformation of PDPA successor parties towards a form of Afghan nationalism that is still espoused by Kabul-based political movements. This paper will explore the ideological positions of two post-PDPA successor parties that still revere President Najibullah: *Hezb-e Milli-e Watan-e Afghanistan* (National Homeland Party of Afghanistan) and *Hezb-e Watan-e Demokratik-e Afghanistan* (Democratic Homeland Party of Afghanistan) and will analyse the reasons behind their decision to position themselves away from their left-wing past towards a position they believe is more palatable among the Afghan people. It will examine the stated ideology of these post-1991 formed parties and will present their development as analogous to the development of post-communist parties that has been seen in other parts of world, albeit with distinctly Afghan explanations behind their reforms.

Introduction

Afghanistan has been oft-overlooked when it comes to exploring the organisational and ideological trajectory of left-wing political movements.¹ This is despite the fact that there is a history of left-wing political agitation, however small, stretching back to at least the early 1920s. This paper will examine one particular aspect of this story: the trajectory of the ideology of the governing *Hezb-e Demokratik-e Khalq-e Afghanistan* (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan - PDPA) and two "successor" parties. The paper will show how during the lifespan of the PDPA their main English language propaganda organ *The Kabul Times* (rebranded as the *Kabul New Times* in 1980) attempted to solidify the party's position as nationalist in orientation as opposed to Marxist-Leninist. The paper will then look at the intellectual development of *Hezb-e Milli-e Watan-e Afghanistan* (National Homeland Party of Afghanistan) and *Hezb-e Watan-e Demokratik-e Afghanistan* (Democratic Homeland Party of Afghanistan) and will show how their documents highlight that they have continued on the path towards an ostensible Afghan nationalism.

Before the Saur Revolution

On New Year's Day 1965 in the *Karte Char* district of Kabul, the PDPA was officially formed at the house of its first leader Nur Mohammed Taraki from the *Khalq* (the masses) wing whereas Babrak Karmal was installed as the most important member of the *Parcham* (the banner) wing.² The PDPA is Afghanistan's most important organised political movement with apparently socialist and, ostensibly, Marxist-Leninist ideology. From its humble origins as a radical movement on the campus of Kabul University it eventually went on to become the party of government on the founding of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) on 27th April 1978 after a military coup d'état removed the previous government of President

Mohammad Daud Khan. Immediately after the military coup a civilian leadership, through the guise of a Revolutionary Council headed by Taraki,³ took-over from the military and it appeared that the conditions were in place for the PDPA government to begin a series of reforms that eventually became characterised as the “Saur Revolution”. The coup and revolution turned out to be a false dawn for Leftism in Afghanistan and almost immediately the PDPA came across mass civilian rebellion against its rule, particularly in the countryside. One of the areas that is generally overlooked when it comes to reflecting on the PDPA is its particular ideology and the trajectory of its belief structure. This paper will now briefly reflect on the nature of the PDPA from its early days until the period leading up to the installation of Najibullah as President in 1986.

Explaining the nature of the ideology of the PDPA is problematic for a number of reasons. As a result of the particular historical epoch in which it came to prominence, and the eventual direct involvement of the Soviet Union in its affairs, it is sometimes commonly understood that the PDPA was a traditional or “orthodox” Marxist-Leninist political party which presented an analysis that would have been welcomed by Krushchev or Brezhnev.⁴ Writing in 1983, Anthony Arnold noted how the confusion over the ideological agenda of the PDPA led to some western analysts mistakenly claiming that the party was ‘leftist-nationalist’ in orientation as opposed to being a ‘pro-Soviet party’ and that this view ignored the true intentions of the PDPA as seen through their 1965 constitution.⁵ There is little doubt that by the end of its term in power the PDPA essentially renounced any sense of being a social or political movement outside of the control and domination of the Soviet Union. However, it is not explained by Arnold why the PDPA’s eventual submission to direct control from Moscow necessarily proves that the PDPA had no roots in ‘leftist-nationalism’ or why the apparently

Marxist-Leninist first constitution of the PDPA also meant that it should only be seen as 'pro-Soviet' in organisation.

Two Afghan specialists from very different political backgrounds contradicted the views of Arnold in their views regarding the ideological position of the PDPA and its roots in history. Louis Dupree, no natural supporter of leftist causes in Afghanistan, wrote that the press had 'erroneously portrayed the leaders of the coup as members of an illegal underground Communist Party'.⁶ Fred Halliday, a somewhat more sympathetic analyst of Leftist organisation in Afghanistan, noted how because the Bolsheviks and Afghanistan shared the same enemies (the British, errant-Central Asian Emirs and the pan-Turkic *Bashmachi* movement) there was never any move to establish an official Afghan Communist Party as in the other states bordering the Soviet Union.⁷ Halliday also notes how, 'If there was an external party influence, it came more probably from the Communist Party of India...than from the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]'.⁸ As both Dupree and Halliday rightly argued, there has never been any tangible evidence that the PDPA was anything other than an Afghan leftist-nationalist political movement that included individual members committed to Marxism-Leninism who, while having attachment to the ideals of the October Revolution and connections with Soviet advisors and politics, were not directly controlled by the Soviet Union until after 1979. Indeed, the evidence that has come out from the Soviet archives suggests that the decision to invade Afghanistan was not taken as a matter of a Soviet policy to impose an Afghan revolution, but was due to many difficult and counterproductive geo-political and internal considerations.⁹

The Rhetoric of PDPA Ideology

The PDPA was not, at the point of the coup of 27th April 1978, a fully-fledged “Communist Party” in any manner beyond the dreams of the most visceral anti-leftist analysts.¹⁰ And yet, it’s clear that the PDPA’s political trajectory changed and developed over its lifespan. Through undertaking a review of the PDPA’s English language organ *The Kabul Times* from 1978 onwards it is possible to track the development of the PDPA from the perspective of its own propaganda. This is not to suggest that the PDPA moved from a communist to leftist-nationalist ideology or moved from being leftist nationalist to an orthodox Marxist-Leninist party while in government. In fact, it is the contention of this paper that the evidence of *The Kabul Times* shows that the PDPA moved from a leftist-nationalist position in its earliest incarnation to one of Afghan nationalism by its end.

The headline on May 4th 1978, the first after the April 27th coup, declared ‘Remnants of the monarchy wiped’ and in the article referred to the fact the ‘For the first time in the history of Afghanistan the last remnants of the monarchy, tyranny and power of the dynasty of the tyrant Nader Khan has ended and all powers of the state are in the hands of the people of Afghanistan’.¹¹ Moving from this, and throughout 1978, *The Kabul Times* led with headlines, such as on May 6th, ‘7 more nations recognise Democratic Republic of Afghanistan’,¹² and May 9th, which led with ‘Poverty, illiteracy souvenirs of Naderi dynasty, says Anahita’.¹³ It took until May 10th for the paper to report the ‘Basic lines of revolutionary duties of govt. of Democratic Republic of Afghanistan’, in which the article begins by reciting ‘In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate’.¹⁴ Throughout the whole on 1978 *The Kabul Times* did not lead on any story that suggested a clear communist agenda or that the machinations of the PDPA were conducted at the behest of instigating a Bolshevik-style revolution. Indeed, the headlines and the stories from this organ of the PDPA provide ample

evidence that, at least in public ideology, the PDPA was aware that it needed to make sure it was still seen as “Muslim” and “Afghan” and not an atheist revolution led by communists.

Midway through the PDPA’s term of government in 1984, things had changed. Taraki and Amin were dead, many others were in prison or in exile or had rebelled and the Soviet Union was deep in the mire of war and was wrestling with the beginnings of major political turmoil at home. Babrak Karmal was now the PDPA leader and the reformulated *Kabul New Times* (KNT) led with numerous stories that appeared to play down the fighting taking place across the country, although there are references and long speeches from Karmal about ‘counter-revolution’.¹⁵ During this year the KNT had very little, if any reference, to Marxism or communism, but it did contain a number of articles explaining decrees as well as covering stories about working masses including headlines such as ‘Jirgah of the Cotton Growers Held’,¹⁶ ‘Session on Land, Water Reforms’,¹⁷ and ‘Consistent, Steady and Step-by-Step Solution of Land-Peasant Question’.¹⁸ The main development from the early years of the DRA was the occasional reference to Soviet politics, such as the headline from February 13th which led on Karmal attending the Embassy of the USSR to sign the book of condolence for Yuri Androv who had recently died.¹⁹

By 1986 Najibullah had become President and the DRA and the language of the party had moved towards a series of policies entitled “National Reconciliation”. According to Kalinovsky ‘the Policy of National Reconciliation (PNR) was planned and written by Soviet advisors, with representatives of the military, the foreign ministries, and the KGB all taking part’.²⁰ As far as Moscow was concerned the policy was a key component of being able to withdraw from Afghanistan while leaving in power, or at least close to power, leaders with pro-Moscow sympathies. Najibullah gave a speech at the founding session for national reconciliation in which this policy had lost its roots in Moscow and had become reimagined

as a policy of Afghan nationalism. Najibullah stated that, 'We are proposing cease-fire! We are proposing truce; We are proposing peace' (sic).²¹ The document then sets out the declarations of this founding session in which the DRA proposes numerous policies such as ending of mining of roads, as well as other less defined issues such as preventing illegal journalists from entering the country and calling for the immediate end to terrorism.²² Perhaps the most striking aspect of the national reconciliation documents is Najibullah's numerous referrals to Allah and to the need for brotherhood among Afghans, although even this appears to have been based on Soviet policy suggestions from Gorbachev from at least 1985.²³ If Kalinovsky is correct, and the policy of national reconciliation was a Soviet plan to enable the withdraw troops, then it appears that national reconciliation is a debatable concept with regards to its status by ex-PDPA members as an Afghan solution to the civil unrest that has taken place across the country since the coup of April 27th 1978. .

PDPA successor parties after 1992

The PDPA eventually reformed and became known as *Hezb-e Watan-e Afghanistan* (The Homeland Party of Afghanistan) in 1987. Najibullah was ousted as President in 1992 and spent his remaining days in essential exile in the Kabul offices of the UN until his eventual execution once the Taleban took Kabul in 1996.²⁴ This paper will now examine two parties that come from the *Parcham* tradition and have direct lineage to the PDPA shown through their continued reverence for President Najabullah. It will show how these parties have continued the movement towards an ostensible Afghan nationalism despite the fact that they have spent most time in exile or in political obscurity in the post-9/11 Afghan political structure.

The first party to be examined can lay some claim to being the direct successor to the PDPA in that it continues with the name *Hezb-e Watan*, although it appears to mainly exist as a party of exile in Sweden and Germany.²⁵ The document under review is written by one of *Hezb-e Watan's* intellectuals, Sayed Hamidullah Rogh, and seeks to highlight the linkages and differences between the PDPA and *Hezb-e Watan* as well as enunciating exactly what they understand “National Reconciliation” to mean.²⁶ As seen in the above section, Russian language experts appear to claim the policy of national reconciliation as a method to enable withdraw of forces from Afghanistan. PDPA successors, taking the lead from Najibullah himself, appear to either reject this belief or feel it's unimportant. For Rogh, national reconciliation is ‘the most significant product of the Afghan modern political thought’ and was a political idea that was based around Najibullah’s desire to “rescue the homeland”.²⁷ Within this construct the idea of National Reconciliation is saved from being a policy of Moscow and becomes reimagined as a process through which the PDPA, Najibullah and his successors realise that the goals of the Saur Revolution were flawed and the new goal is to reject the PDPA’s original guise as a revolutionary party in order to promote nationalist policies of ‘national harmony, democratic pluralism, elections, the representative government and “peacefull gradual revolution” (sic).²⁸

Another key party from the tradition of the PDPA is *Hezb-e Milli-e Watan-e Afghanistan* (National Homeland Party of Afghanistan). They also still revere President Najibullah and their governing council is in charge of the Najibullah foundation that focuses on non-political concerns. *Hezb-e Milli* are a group still operating in Afghanistan and have a manifesto that enables them to be registered as a political party and allowed them to openly support President Ghani in the most recent elections of 2014. According to their manifesto its primary objectives include: defending ‘Islamic values’, supporting ‘freedom of non-Islamic

religions’, ‘maintaining peace, stability and national security’ and ‘Establishing a...developed society with national sovereignty’.²⁹ There are no references to anything resembling socialism or leftist political thought. Whereas *Hezb-e Watan* at least referenced the notions of ‘gradual revolution’ there is no sense within *Hezb-e-Milli’s* documents that they would support this limited political goal. This is, however, almost certainly a pragmatic decision taking by the leaders of *Hezb-e Milli* as they are operational in Kabul and would find their licenses and influence quickly curtailed should they show any support for revolutionary activity.³⁰ *Hezb-e Milli*, as a movement, has taken the decision to continue to engage in Afghan politics from pragmatic and non-leftist perspective. They are no longer socialists and are remarkably different to the parties that still operate on the radical left in Afghanistan.³¹

Conclusion: From Leftist-Nationalism to Nationalism

Explaining the trajectory of “post-communist” successor parties in Afghanistan has been one area of political history that has lacked much analysis or focus. This paper has aimed to provide a small amount of coverage to show the historical antecedents of post-communist ideological reform. It shows how there has never been a clear understanding of the exact ideological trajectory of the PDPA from its initial inception. While there were communists and socialists within the party, and they adopted policies with notable similarities to other left-wing movements, there is little evidence that the PDPA was anything resembling an orthodox Communist Party. Once in power its ideological organs were always careful of preserving an Afghan component and the language used was one of leftist nationalism, not of radical communist revolution. Once in power the language continued to develop and by the late 1980s the PDPA had all but lost any connection to its history as a socialist inspired revolutionary force. By the time Najibullah had become President in 1986, the PDPA appeared

to be become inspired by policies emanating from Moscow around the language of “National Reconciliation”. The parties that take direct lineage from the *Parcham* faction of the PDPA have continued this journey and have now removed almost all references to socialism or Marxism from their documentation and in its place they appear to have adopted and continued with the presentation of their political objectives as nothing more than a devout sense of Afghan nationalism rooted to Islamic ideals and values.

Notes

¹ A few notable exceptions include: Giustozzi, A. (2013) ‘March towards democracy? The development of political movements in Afghanistan’. *Central Asian Survey*. 32:3, pp. 318-33 / Ibrahimi, N. (2012). ‘Ideology without Leadership: The Rise and Decline of Maoism in Afghanistan’. August 2012. *Afghanistan Analysts Network Occasional Paper*. Kabul, Afghanistan. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/09/Nibr-Maoists-final.pdf> / Bezhan, F. (2012). ‘Ethno-religious dynamics and the emergence of the Hezbe Seri Itehad (Secret Unity Party) in Afghanistan in the late 1940s’. *Central Asian Survey*, 31:4, pp. 445-464 / Ruttig, T. (2006). ‘Islamists, Leftists - and a Void in the Center. Afghanistan's Political Parties and where they come from 1902-2006’. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. [Online]. Available from: http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_9674-1522-2-30.pdf?061129052553 / Emadi, H. (2001). ‘Radical Political Movements of Afghanistan and Their Politics of People’. *Central Asian Survey*, 20:4, p427-450.

² There are many claims made that Khalq were more rural and Pashtun-speakers and Parcham was urban and more Dari-speakers although this seems to be an oversimplification and a rejection of the possibility of ideological division. Eventually Khalqi's saw themselves as revolutionaries who sought revolution instead of slow, incremental reform and were ousted from power by the Soviets because of this.

³ *The Kabul Times*, Vol. XVII, No. 32, Thursday, May 4, 1978, Saur, 14, 1357, M.F.790, Microfilm Collection, British Library Newspaper Archive, British Library, London.

⁴ Arnold, A. (1983). *Afghanistan's Two Party Communism: Khlaq and Parcham*. Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, p. 25.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dupree, L. (1979). ‘The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, 1979. Rhetoric, Repression, Reforms and Revolts’. *American Universities Field Studies Reports*. 1979/No. 32. Asia. LD-1-791, p.1.

⁷ Halliday, F. (1978). ‘Revolution in Afghanistan’. *New Left Review*, Nov-Dec 1978, No. 112, p. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See, for example, the work from Kalinovsky, A. (2011) *The Long Goodbye*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press and Braithwaite, R. (2012) *Afghantsy*. London: Profile Books.

¹⁰ I make the distinction between “communist”, which refers to a political movement or party with Marxist ideology and “Communist”, which refers to a post-WWII “orthodox” Marxist-Leninist movement or party controlled or dominated by Moscow.

¹¹ *The Kabul Times*, Vol. XVII, No. 32, Thursday, May 4, 1978, Saur, 14, 1357, p.1.

¹² *The Kabul Times*, Vol. XVII, No. 33, Saturday, May 6, 1978, Saur 16, 1357, p.1.

¹³ *The Kabul Times*, Vol. XVII, No. 36, Tuesday, May 9, 1978, Saur 19, 1357, p.1.

¹⁴ *The Kabul Times*, Vol. XVII, No. 37, Wednesday, May 10, 1978, Saur 20, 1357, p.1.

¹⁵ *Kabul New Times*, Vol. XXI, No. 284, Sunday, March 4, 1984, Hoot 15, 1362, p.1.

¹⁶ *Kabul New Times*, Vol. XXI, No. 255, Sunday January 29, 1984, Dawl 9, 1362, p.1.

¹⁷ *Kabul New Times*, Vol. XXI, No. 280, Monday February 27,, 1984, Hoot 9, 1362, p.1.

¹⁸ *Kabul New Times*, Vol. XXI, No. 289, Monday March 12, 1984, Hoot 23, 1362, p.1.

¹⁹ *Kabul New Times*, Vol. XXI, No. 266, Saturday, February 11, 1984, Dawl 22, 1362, p.1.

²⁰ Kalinovsky, A., *Op. Cit.* p. 100.

²¹ Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1987) *National Reconciliation Documents*. Kabul: Afghanistan Today Publishers, Library Copy 3733, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Kabul, p.5.

²² *Ibid*, pp. 18-25.

²³ Kalinovsky, A., *Op. Cit.* p. 83.

²⁴ There have been some suggestions that members of Khalq, the opposing faction of his Parcham wing of the PDPA, organised the ritual slaying of Najibullah, although this has never been proved beyond any doubt.

²⁵ Author’s interview with *Hezb-e Watan* informant, August 15, 2013, Berlin, Germany.

²⁶ Rogh, S.H. (2001). ‘What makes Watan party different from PDPA?’ Translated from Persian by A. Peroz. [Online]. Available from: <http://payamewatan.com/english/dr.h.rogh.htm>. [Last accessed on 1 March 2014].

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 1-2.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3.

²⁹ Democratic Homeland Party of Afghanistan [*Hezb-e Milli-e Watan-e Afghanistan*] (2014). ‘Democratic Homeland Party of Afghanistan Manifesto’. Translated from Persian by Mohammad Z. Salehi, p.1.

³⁰ This view was provided by the leaders of the party during an interview with the author that took place in Kabul, Afghanistan on February 20, 2014.

³¹ See: Atkinson, D. (2015) *The Left Radical of Afghanistan (Chap-e Radikal-e Afghanistan): Finding Trotsky after Lenin, Stalin and Mao?* – Under Peer Review.