



Analysis No. 171, May 2013

STATE-BUILDING AND SUB-NATIONAL TENSIONS IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

Elisa Giunchi

The transition to a democratic system in Afghanistan and Pakistan has not silenced ethnic and religious tensions. The paper argues that sub-national identities in both countries have been politicized as a result of the unequal access to political power and economic resources and of foreign interference. While attempts to foster national cohesion by reference to a common religion may backfire, as the Pakistani case illustrates, more needs to be done to involve all elements of civil society, irrespective of their sub-national belonging, in the state-building process, to promote freedom of expression and purge textbooks from ethno- or religious-centric narratives.

Elisa Giunchi is a professor of History and institutions of Islamic countries at the Università degli studi di Milano and is senior research fellow at ISPI.

Introduction

Although there is an ample literature on post-conflict reconstruction in ethnically diverse countries, it mostly refers to state building – that is, the construction of official institutions – rather than nation-building – the crafting of an all-encompassing sense of identity through political, cultural and educational policies. This is in part due to the assumption, based on the European experience, that an overarching sense of belonging and solidarity is already in place and that, if not, it will automatically follow the building of national institutions.

Perhaps as a consequence of this assumption, what was initially written about the post-Taliban reconstruction in Afghanistan was fairly optimistic: in 2001-2002, many observers took for granted that the democratic transition would result in a nation-building process that would ultimately submerge sub-national identities. Being able to express their grievances and see them redressed within a democratic framework, Afghan citizens would presumably relegate particularistic identities to the private realm. The underlying assumption was that sub-national identities were a relic of the past that were bound to be swept away as modernization, and its political component – democracy – advanced.

And yet, to this day ethnic and religious identities remain politically relevant in Afghanistan, as in many countries in Asia and Africa, irrespective of regime type. Afghan political parties are divided along ethnic and religious lines, clientelistic policies are intertwined with ethnic fragmentation and feed into it, and ethnic disaffection towards the government is a relevant political and security issue. Another example is that of Pakistan. The return to democracy, in 1988 and more recently in 2008 gave rise to the expectation that internal religious strife and ethnic disaffection would subside as Pakistanis were allowed to express their grievances through the ballot. This, however, has not been the case so far. Religious violence has become endemic, and ethnic strife is simmering below the surface, occasionally erupting in violent confrontations.

In the following pages we will briefly see how politicization of sub-national identities has occurred in these two countries and provide some policy-oriented suggestions.

The politicization of ethnic identity in Afghanistan

Since antiquity, what is now Afghanistan has been traversed by traders, pilgrims and soldiers mostly originating from Central Asia. As a

Afghan political parties are divided along ethnic and religious lines, clientelistic policies are intertwined with ethnic fragmentation and feed into it, and ethnic disaffection towards the government is a relevant political and security issue.

consequence of these movements, this country is today heterogeneous in ethno-linguistic and religious terms¹. It is only quite recently, though, that these differences have become politically relevant.

The main ethnic group since the formation of the state in the 18th century has been the Pashtuns, who originated from the Suleiman range and gradually moved west. Political power long rested in their hands, and it was only in the late 19th century that the construction of a modern Afghan state under Abdur Rahman on the basis of Pashtun identity was challenged by ethnic minorities. This was made possible by changing demography, which was to a great extent imposed by external powers – mainly Britain and Russia who were at the time entangled in the Great Game. As the *amir* lost part of its Pashtun population in the south to the British Raj following the Durand line agreement in 1893, and consolidated its conquests to the north, absorbing with British aid areas that were inhabited by other ethnic groups, the kingdom became more diverse. Ethnic minorities, which for the first time were numerically relevant, started demanding more political inclusion, influenced by European ideas of the modern state. Their demands were easily resisted, and did not constitute a problem for a while, as ethnic minorities lacked serious external supporters and could not successfully challenge the coercive power of the central state. Who ruled in Kabul was in any case of limited importance, as chieftains and warlords de facto ruled over vast portions of the territory and the authority of the central power rested on granting great autonomy to these local power brokers.

The country started being torn along ethnic lines in the late 1970s and 1980s, when *mujaheddin* groups coalesced around ethnic and religious identities, with foreign countries supporting one or the other out of geostrategic concerns. Ethnic fissures deepened after the Soviet withdrawal. In 1992, a coalition of non-Pashtun *mujaheddin* headed by Tagiks conquered Kabul, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Pashtun head of the *Hezb-e-Islami* who was supported by Pakistan, bombed the city to dislodge its Tagik lords. The country precipitated into a full-fledged civil war, with the Taliban, who expressed Pashtun interests and ethos, emerging in 1994 in the southern belt and sweeping in a few years most of the country. While the Taliban received support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia the UAE, plus informal channels, drug trafficking and, after 1996, al-Qaeda, ethnic minorities resisted in the north and in isolated pockets in the west and centre, supported by India, Iran, China and some Central Asian republics, all fearful of the spread of Sunni extremism in the region

it was only in the late 19th century that the construction of a modern Afghan state under Abdur Rahman on the basis of Pashtun identity was challenged by ethnic minorities.

While the Taliban received support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia the UAE, plus informal channels, drug trafficking and, after 1996, al-Qaeda, ethnic minorities, coalesced under the Northern Alliance, resisted in the north and in isolated pockets in the west and centre

¹ The Pashtuns are approximately 42% of the total population. Next are the Tajiks with 27%. The Uzbeks and Hazaras constitute approximately 9% each. The remaining 13% is made of smaller communities. Afghanistan is homogeneous along religious lines: 99% of the population is Muslim, 80% of whom are Sunnis. Most Shias live in the central Hazarajat and in the western regions of the country, close to the Iranian border.

and wary of the designs of the Taliban's mentors.

The Bonn Accords of December 2001 set out a transition process to democracy, and intermediate steps were scheduled to be completed in 2004 with the introduction of a new constitution and the holding of national elections. The introduction of a democratic system allowed all ethnic and religious groups to be represented politically and opened up the institutions, at least on paper, to merit, irrespective to one's background and belonging. There were debates in the constitution making process on whether to formally recognize 'ethnicity' within state institutions. Some argued that it may increase awareness of difference and thus hinder integration, while others held that an official recognition would promote a sense of security among minority groups thus preventing any further politicization of ethnic difference².

The issue of federalism was the object of heated discussions that reflected conflicting interests: demands for a parliamentary federation were made especially by the Uzbeks and the Hazaras, who are territorially concentrated. In contrast, Pashtuns, who mostly live in the southern part of the country, but also in other provinces, argued against a federation, fearing it would fragment their community and advantage the Tagiks. The latter are less territorially concentrated than the Uzbeks and the Hazaras, and thus focused on power sharing in the central state rather than on territorial autonomy³. The 'centralizers' eventually had it their way, and the ineffectiveness of provincial councils has since then further promoted the centralization of the state, though a de facto large degree of autonomy is accorded to warlords in some parts of the country. The discussion of a parliamentary vs. presidential system followed similar patterns. Most Pashtuns wanted a presidential system, while Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras feared that a strong presidency would exclude them from power⁴.

The Constitution approved in 2004 was a compromise: a presidential system was adopted though the powers of the presidency were tempered in some respects. The text provided for the protections for ethnic minorities, but rejected formal ethnic representation in state institutions and prohibited the "[f]ormation and operation of a party on the basis of tribalism, parochialism, language, as well as religious sectarianism". While retaining Pashto and Dari as the official languages the Constitution provided that "[i]n areas where the majority of the people speak in any one

The introduction of a democratic system allowed all ethnic and religious groups to be represented politically and opened up the institutions, at least on paper, to merit, irrespective to one's background and belonging.

² K. ADENEY, *Constitutional Design and the Political Salience of "Community" Identity in Afghanistan: Prospects for the Emergence of Ethnic Conflicts in the Post-Taliban Era*, in «Asian Survey», vol. 48, no. 4, 2008, pp. 539-40.

³ B.R. RUBIN, *Crafting a Constitution for Afghanistan*, in «Journal of Democracy», vol. 15, no. 3, 2004, p. 11.

⁴ K. ADENEY, *op. cit.*, p. 546.

of Uzbeki, Turkmani, Pachaie, Nuristani, Baluchi, or Pamiri [...] any of the afore-mentioned languages, in addition to Pashto and Dari, shall be the third official language, the usage of which shall be regulated by law". It was also provided that "the state shall [...] design and apply effective programs to foster and develop all languages of Afghanistan"⁵.

These goodwill gestures to ethnic minorities were seen with some trepidation by Pashtuns, who already felt marginalized by the Bonn process. The Bonn Conference held in November 2001 had excluded the Taliban and those Pashtun groups who were reluctant to support Karzai or the political system envisaged by the international donors. Pashtun alienation was fed by the fact that the Tajiks were at first overrepresented in state institutions. The Northern Alliance (NA), which was dominated by the Tajiks of the Panjsheri *Shura-yi Nezar*, until 2004 controlled the bureaucracy, army and police⁶. In the provisional government Tajiks also took a majority of government positions, including most of the important ministries. Pashtuns, Hazaras and Uzbeks, on the contrary, suffered under-representation. This situation was later corrected by Karzai: the NA Tajik elite was to a great extent replaced by predominantly south and southeastern Pashtun and Western-educated technocrats in the ministries. But mutual suspicions lingered on: Pashtuns continued to feel marginalized by the transition process, while Hamid Karzai was accused of being biased in favour of them.

Ethnic divisions were evident at times of elections, particularly presidential ones, with the vote turning into an ethnic census: Karzai, a Pushtun, who won in 2004 and 2009, did best among Pashtuns, while the other major candidates were supported by their own ethnic strongholds. Thus, for example, in 2004 the Tajik Yunus Qanooni led primarily in the northeastern Tajik region; Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq led in two Hazara-dominated provinces and among Afghan refugees in Iran, while the Uzbek war-lord Dostum attracted votes mainly from the north-central Uzbek part of the country. Subsequent elections confirmed this trend, though some mild change was visible in urban areas, where the ethnic vote broke down to make space for ideas and programmes.

Some authors have held that the post-Bonn state building process has exacerbated pre-existing ethnic tensions⁷. Some of the reasons for this are

rejected formal ethnic representation in state institutions and prohibited the "[f]ormation and operation of a party on the basis of tribalism, parochialism, language, as well as religious sectarianism"

Ethnic divisions were evident at times of elections, particularly presidential ones, with the vote turning into an ethnic census

⁵ For the text of the 2004 Constitution see:

http://www.afghan-web.com/politics/current_constitution.html.

⁶ A. JALALI, *Afghanistan in 2002: The Struggle to Win the Peace*, in «Asian Survey», vol. 43, no. 1, 2003, p. 175.

⁷ M. BHATIA, *Afghanistan, Armed Groups, Disarmament and Security in a Post-War Society*, London 2007; A. WIMMER and C. SCHETTER, *Putting state-formation first: some recommendations for reconstruction and peace-making in Afghanistan*, in

internal: ethnic differences may have been magnified, as Shahrān convincingly holds, by Karzai's policy of accommodating the interests of different networks, following an established pattern of patron-client relations⁸. Throughout the history of the country state elites have, in fact, coopted periphery forces, thus yielding to elements who are resistant to the project of building a nation-state. External powers have contributed to the exacerbation of ethnic tensions: the Bonn process has not, as we have seen, included most Pashtuns in the government, and regional powers have continued to support one faction or another. In addition, drug-traffickers, who have a vested interest in the persistence of a weak centre and a fragmented state, have allied with insurgents who oppose the consolidation of the state, further hindering the emergence of a national identity.

The initial marginalization of Pashtuns and the exclusion of the Taliban from the democratic transition has been a cause of worry for Pakistan, which has based its Afghan policies since the 1970s on creating a Pashtun 'client' that would pursue Islamabad's interests. Iran apparently retains its links with Dari-speaking Tajiks and with Afghan Shias, while cultivating cordial relationships with Karzai's government, despite accusations by the US that it has lent support to the Taliban. As Saudis also meddle in favour of the Pashtuns, and Central Asian republics view with sympathy their fellow ethnic groups in Afghanistan, the political stalemate remains characterized by the politicization of ethnic identity.

Religious and ethnic strife in Pakistan

Throughout the last ten years, nation-building in Afghanistan has centered around the idea that democracy and Islam would serve as aggregating forces hindering fissiparous tendencies. The 2004 constitution is an example of how these two elements stand side by side in an uneasy and ambiguous relationship. Reference to Islam is not a problem per se. The problem is rather that Islam in the country is controlled by traditionalist interpretations; the ministry of justice and the judiciary in particular are dominated by ultra-conservatives who do not interpret Islam in a way that is consonant to the democratic principles and institutions introduced in the post-Taliban political structure.

Referring to Islam as a unifying force may also prove counter-productive in religiously divided countries, as the example of Pakistan indicates. When Pakistan was born in 1947, it was a mosaic of ethnic groups; *mohajirs* and Punjabis dominated the institutions of the newly formed

The initial marginalization of Pashtuns and the exclusion of the Taliban from the democratic transition has been a cause of worry for Pakistan, which has based its Afghan policies since the 1970s on creating a Pashtun 'client'

Referring to Islam as a unifying force may also prove counter-productive in religiously divided countries, as the example of Pakistan indicates

«Journal of International Development», vol. 15, no. 5, 2003, pp. 525-39.

⁸ T. SHARAN, *The Dynamics of Elite Networks and Patron-Client Relations in Afghanistan*, in «Europe-Asia Studies», vol. 63, no. 6, 2011, pp. 1109-1127.

state despite constituting a numerical minority; other major ethnic groups protested, and were supported in some cases, or so the Pakistanis have always claimed, by India and Afghanistan. Nationalist movements developed different agendas: Beluchis and Pashtuns, who had a long history of autonomy, wished to retain their customs and power structures with minimal interference from the centre, while Bengalis, who formed the majority of the population, protested against their under-representation at the federal and provincial level and state under-investment in the Eastern wing despite their contributions to the national budget. Sindhis also contested Punjabi over-representation, and increasingly faced within their province a rift with *mohajirs*, who thrived in urban areas, where Sindhis and Pashtuns formed a resentful sub-proletariat competing with each other for jobs and resources⁹.

These fissiparous tensions were accompanied by a growing rift with neighboring India. In the aftermath of independence, Pakistan was entangled in its first war with India over the status of Kashmir. Other wars erupted in 1965 and in 1971, when India's entrance into the civil war allowed the Eastern wing to secede and become Bangladesh. Unwilling to correct the pro-Punjabi bias that characterized its institutions, the state elites, despite their cosmopolitan and modernist outlook, opted to focus on the common Islamic identity. This meant de facto allying with traditional religious forces that had wide following in rural and tribal areas, such as the JUI (Jamat Ulema-e-Islam) and JUP (Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan), and with urban-based Islamist parties such as the JI (Jamaat-e-Islami), at the expense of modernist Islam, which did not enjoy much following and was seen by many as the expression of Westernised elites out of sync with the country. Political rhetoric and school textbooks increasingly focused on Sunni Deobandi Islam as the basis of 'the ideology' of the country, the defense of which justified limitations to human rights and political freedom.¹⁰ The Islamisation of society accelerated under the military regime of Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s, when Pakistan became a conduit of US and Saudi aid to anti-Soviet *mujaheddin*, continued through the judiciary and could not be reversed by subsequent governments.

Reliance on religion by elites, both civil and military, for internal and

Reliance on religion by elites, both civil and military, for internal and foreign policy goals, has contributed to the silencing of progressive voices and fed strife between competing representatives of 'authentic' Islam

⁹ Punjabis are roughly 44%; Pashto and Sindhis account for 15% each, Baluchis 4%; 97% of the population is Muslim and the remaining 3% is mainly Christian and Hindu. There are communities who consider themselves Muslims, such as the Ahmadis, but who are not considered as such by Pakistani law and most fellow Sunnis. Shias make up 15-25% of the population.

¹⁰ E. GIUNCHI, *Rewriting the past: political imperatives and curricular reform in Pakistan*, «Textbooks Controversies in India and Pakistan/Schulbuchkontroversen in Indien und Pakistan (Internationale Schulbuchforschung/International Textbook Research)», vol. 29, no. 4, 2007, pp. 375-388.

foreign policy goals, has contributed to the silencing of progressive voices and fed strife between competing representatives of ‘authentic’ Islam. Religious violence has increased over the decades, becoming an endemic source of instability, pitting Muslims against Ahmadis and Christians, Sunnis against Shias, Barelwis against Deobandis, local traditionalist militias against foreign qaedist groups. At the same time, ethnic tension has continued to simmer, particularly in Sindh, with ethnicity bearing distinct class overtones within urban areas, and in Baluchistan, which has long been the theatre of a low intensity conflict.

Punjabis, and to a lesser extent Mohajirs and Pashtuns, continue to be over-represented in the military, and Punjabis also dominate the higher echelons of the bureaucracy. Ethnic-based parties such as the MQM (Muttahida Quami Movement) have wide following, and even the two major parties, the PPP (Pakistan Peoples Party) and PML-N (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz), continue to have their strongholds respectively in Sindh, where the Bhutto family is from, and Punjab, the home province of the Sharif family. According to an opinion survey conducted in 2013 before the national elections by the Herald in partnership with the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), the highest level of support for the PPP was pledged by Sindhis, followed by Seraiki-speakers. Punjabis and Hindko speakers intended to vote for the PML-N.¹¹

Some policy-oriented suggestions

In Pakistan and Afghanistan, as elsewhere, ethnic and religious strife is not the inevitable product of entrenched, fixed diversities, but the consequence of fairly recent policies by dominant political elites, characterized by forms of unequal political inclusion and an unequal distribution of resources. External interference has contributed to the politicization of identities, while the manipulation of religious sentiments by the elites to counter centrifugal forces has had the effect to fuel communitarian divisions.

Solutions to internal strife are complex and multi-faceted, and involve far-reaching reforms addressing inequities and access to political capital and economic resources. Although a full discussion of the political and institutional measures that may be instrumental in preventing ethnic and religious strife is beyond the scope of this paper, some limited measures can be suggested in the socio-cultural realm, a policy arena often overlooked.

In this respect, it may be useful to:

¹¹ Elections 2013. Survey indicates close contest, 9 February 2013, <http://dawn.com/2013/02/09/elections-2013-survey-indicates-close-contest/>.

The national sense of belonging that exists in both countries can exist alongside ethnic and religious loyalties provided that culture-specific values are not imposed from above and accompanied by blatant asymmetries in the power structures.

- foster freedom of expression so as to allow progressive readings of religion to gain currency and all ethnic groups that feel discriminated to express their grievances and advance proposals to meet them.
- Ensure that contributions of minor ethnic or religious groups are not erased from school texts and thus national memory
- Guarantee that the debates on state-building involve all elements of civil society, including its rural and tribal elements that are often neglected as ‘uncivil’.
- Promote a socio-economic vision from which all citizens would benefit, irrespective to their identity.

These are no easy tasks, as dominant groups – and groups allied to them, such as religious conservative parties - will resist any challenge to their position, and will be apprehensive of an open and critical society. Protecting the cultural identity of ethnic and religious minorities may also seem to run counter the assimilationist or integrationist strategies of dominant elites. However, anthropologists have long ago shown how individuals possess multiple identities and loyalties, which can coexist with each other. The national sense of belonging can exist alongside ethnic and religious loyalties provided that culture-specific values are not imposed from above and accompanied by blatant asymmetries in the power structures. Reciprocal recognition and integration, through legislative, institutional and educational means, rather than top down imposition may be the key to national cohesion.

We should also be aware that by promoting a specific political and economic system the international community may fuel sub-national fissures if that system masks an unequal distribution of power within the state institutions. Clinging on to cultural specificities can be in fact a way of resisting the imposition of political and cultural sameness behind which hide the interests of a dominating group.

Sub-national identities can also be fuelled by the inefficiency and corruption of the state, or by its absence: it is well known that in contexts where courts are perceived as corrupt, distant and costly, litigants tend to refer to unofficial mechanisms of redress thus supporting consolidated power networks. Reinforcing the state apparatus, widening its reach and erasing corruption may therefore be a key to limiting the persistence of parallel systems of governance and justice which embody different sub-national identities and hinder nation-building.

The case of Afghanistan and Pakistan and their problems in establishing a consensus based political system remind us of the challenges faced by many other countries. As Tunisia, Libya and Egypt revise their political and institutional systems after the Arab springs, the issue of tribal

heterogeneity (Libya) and religious discrimination (Egypt) should not be neglected. Clearly, the assumption that the introduction of formal democracy will foster per se internal cohesion and peace, irrespective of how power is distributed and of how national memory is constructed, is flawed.