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Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction in Afghanistan

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1. Introduction

When it comes to the meaning of ethnicity concerning the current Afghan War different opinions collide. On one hand, there are numerous journalists (e.g. RASHID 2000) and researchers (e.g. RIECK 1997) as well as policy-makers such as Colin Powell or Joschka Fischer who categorise the Afghan conflict as an ethnic one. On the other hand, the majority of Afghan politicians – in spite or just because of their different ethnic backgrounds – deny the importance of ethnicity in public. Against this background I intend to discuss in this paper the perception of ethnic groups by the Afghan people as well as the significance of ethnic groups regarding the design of a future government in Afghanistan.

Deriving from the perception that ethnicity is the predominant argument in the Afghan War, the peace process that was initiated at the Petersberg Conference near Bonn end of November 2001 is based on an ethnic representative government. Thus in consequence it is nowadays nearly impossible to fade out the ethnic affiliation of any political actors. In full contrast to this approach I highly suggest that the rebuilding of political institutions should endeavor to diminish the influence of ethnicity in the political sphere. The implementation of an ethno-federalism as well as the introduction of an ethnic quota system would rather intensify the highly fragile conflict situation rather than contribute to a stable peace. My central argument is that ethnic groups can not be considered as the predominant references of solidarity in Afghanistan. It has to be kept in mind that an ethnicization of the Afghan War occurred, but an ethnicization of the masses failed. The still not domineering importance that ethnicity has among the Afghan populace should be harnessed for political reconstruction, rather than being enforced by an ‘ethnic solution’.

2. The chimera of ethnic groups

The dilemma with including ethnicity into a peace approach begins with the question of what constitutes an ethnic group. Already the controversy about the definition of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic groups’ in the academic world is extremely intense. Regarding Afghanistan most researchers have the view that ethnic groups have existed since time immemorial. They assume that ethnic groups are solid cultural units which are divided by obvious boundaries and have engaged in conflict for hundreds of years (e.g. SHAHRANI 1986: 26-29). Set against

this opinion, this paper argues that most of those ethnic groups in Afghanistan were shaped or even ‘created’ in the course of the 20th century and are still not the main references of identity in Afghanistan itself.

2.1 Fuzziness of ethnic groups

Reviewing the literature and reports of British agents, soldiers and explorers it is worth noting that the term ‘ethnic group’ was completely unknown in the 19th century and many authors used different categories and references in their endeavors to describe and define the population of Afghanistan. A good example of this fuzziness is Henry BELLEW’S report “The races of Afghanistan; being a brief account of the principal nations inhabiting the country”. Already in the title BELLEW equated ‘races’ and ‘nations’. Moreover he divided the inhabitants of Afghanistan into eight major groups, the Pathans [Pashtuns], Yusufzai, Afridi, Khattak, Daticae, Ghilji, Tajik and Hazara; most of these categories are today subsumed under the label of “Pashtuns”.

Not until the mid-20th century did foreign academics and the government start to divide Afghan society systematically into ethnic categories by differences in language, sectarianism, culture etc. The French anthropologist DOLLOT (1937: 47) was the first researcher, who used the term *groupe ethnique* for Afghanistan and categorized the Afghan people in several ethnic units. WILBER (1956/1962) introduced the ethnic taxonomy of the Afghan people into the Anglophone literature in the mid-50s. Driven by the academic intention to eliminate the hybrid transition between once established ethnic groups by the creation of new groups according to cultural customs, anthropologists invented an entire series of ethnic groups: Nuristani, Pashai, Aimaq, Tajik, Mountain-Tajik or Farsiwan. Probably, the best example for the construction of these so-called ethnic groups is the creation of the Tajiks. The term Tajik, which was used in social interactions only in a negative sense for somebody who did not belong to any other social category (e.g. not a Pashtun, not a Hazara), implied an anti-ethnic notion in general. The ethnic category Tajiks applied to the residual group of all Sunnite Persian-speaking villagers or urban dwellers without tribal background, which meant to all those without a genealogical knowledge, and finally without a shared history. The lack of a belief in a shared past turned out to be the major obstacle concerning political attempts to establish a consciousness of being a Tajik and to create a real ethnic group of “Tajiks” again and again. Against this background the main difficulties of fixing ethnic groups in Afghanistan are still:

- The segments of the populace for whom ethnic categories were invented are often even today not even familiar with such ethnic labels, much less aware of any common identity. Ismail Khan, one of the most important regional leaders, is sometimes considered to be a Tajik, a Pashtun or a Farsiwan. He himself steadily refuses to be assigned to a certain ethnic group.
- The criteria, which have been set by anthropologists, do not correspond with the reality of social behavior. For example, those who maintain that Pashtuns speak Pashtu and are Sunni Muslims are in serious error, since there are also Shiite Pashtuns

in the Qandahar region and Pashtuns from Kabul who often do not speak a word of Pashtu. A good example of the aforementioned is the former king Zahir Shah.

- The difficulties with differentiating are being aggravated by the fact that many Afghans – if they are mastering the cultural patterns – in different situations claim to be of different ethnicity. The former Afghan president Babrak Karmal used to emphasize his Pashtun origin, whereas many Afghans considered him to be a Tajik or an immigrated Kashmiri.

Against this background it is impossible to calculate how many ethnic groups exist in Afghanistan and how large they are. Also it has to be considered that the different scientific approaches of researchers result in different ways of ethnic categorizing. A German survey concludes there are about 54 ethnic groups (ORYWAL 1986), while a Soviet study (MASSON & ROMODIN 1964/65) claims there to be 200. Therefore the crucial problem emerges of which ethnic groups and to which scale are to be taken into consideration in an ‘ethnic solution’, as promoted by the United Nations.

2.2 Instrumentalization of ethnicity

The question comes to mind as to why ethnic groups rose to political relevance in Afghanistan. To answer this question one has to look back into history. The Afghan state was created by the rival colonial powers British India and Russia at the end of the 19th century. The ruling family of the Pashtuns, enthroned by British India, favored Pashtun elements in their concept of the nation-state. That is the reason why ‘Afghan’ is the Persian synonym for Pashtun, Pashtu was always the Afghan national language and the Afghan history was written from a Pashtun point of view. The politics of the ruling family employed the ethnic patterns which came into existence in order to regulate access to public goods and offices. Pashtuns were privileged in all areas and dominated the military. Tajiks were left with the economic sector and the educational institutions, whereas the Hazaras were marginalized in general. The different treatment of the people went along with the forming of ethnic stereotypes: Pashtuns were considered ‘bellicose’, Tajiks were said to be ‘thrifty’, Uzbeks were known as ‘brutal’ and the Hazaras as ‘illiterate’ and ‘poor’. Even though the politics of the nation-state thus created an ethnic hierarchy, there were surprisingly few ethnic conflicts. The main reason for this lack of conflicts was the enormous contrast between the rural and urban areas. Politics in the capital Kabul was of little interest for the people in rural Afghanistan. Thus the ethnic groups remained blurred concepts for the Afghan population and were not respected as frameworks for collective actions. Accordingly the ordinary Afghans did not articulate a political will to overcome the ethnic hierarchy stipulated by the state. Furthermore Afghans recognized the nation-state as a hostile factor which intervened by force into their social life and not as a key to the access to resources (such as offices or land rights) which they should take control of (see SCHETTER 2002).

Ethnicity became a political-military force to reckon with when the Afghan war broke out in 1979. Even though the war was dominated by the antagonism of communism *versus* Islam regarding the paradigms of the Cold War, the belligerent parties increasingly enhanced the ethnic momentum to strengthen their positions (ROY 1986). The communist rulers hoped to

tie certain ethnic groups closer to them by raising them to the status of nationalities (PSTRUSINSKA 1990). Even more important was the creation of militias that relied on ethnic affiliation; well-known is the Uzbek militia of Rashid Dostum. Also Pakistan and Iran used the ethnic potential for conflicts. On the grounds of Shiite loyalties Iran established the Hizb-i wahdat, which was strong amongst the Shiite Hazaras. During the 1980s the Jamiat-i islami, the oldest resistance movement, developed into a representation for the Tajiks. Pakistan supported the Taliban which followed a radical Islam but this was also Pashtun-dominated.

All four warring factions, which dominated the military and political actions in the last decade, were more or less supported by members of one of the four major ethnic groups. The political movements used ethnicity as main argument for the legitimacy of their political existence, because all other ideologies – Islamic as well as communistic or royalist one – lost ground as a basis for the mobilization of the masses and as instrument of political demands. The leaders of the warring factions made their supporters aware of their social and economic deprivation on the basis of their ethnic belonging in past and present. They claimed at least that the survival of the ‘own ethnic group’ was endangered through the aggressive behavior of ‘other ethnic groups’. Nevertheless, by means of the ethnic moment the warring factions stirred up a collective anxiety as well as hate and jealousy. Also, the parties demanded economic and political resources of the state and society in the name of their ethnic groups. Furthermore all warring factions justified their political demands referring to the size of their ethnic group and their territorial roots. In these efforts they frequently lost their sense of reality. Also all warring factions used ethnicity in their military actions. Ethnic cleansing and ethnocides occurred frequently in Kabul between 1992 and 1994, in the Shomali plains between 1996 and 2001, in the Hazarajat between 1998 and 2001 and in Northern Afghanistan, especially Mazar-i Sharif, since 1997.

2.3 Limitation of ethnic propaganda

However the ethnicization of the conflict was restricted with regard to one important aspect: The ethnic card was never played openly, but remained covert. Thus one can find very little proof of ethnocentrism among any of the political movements involved. No single political movement is linked to a certain ethnic group by its self-description. The published speeches of leaders such as Ahmad Shah Masud, Burhanuddin Rabbani or Mullah Omar, have been imbued with an Islamic rhetoric, but all of them vehemently denied any ethnic dimension of the war. All politicians never tire of declaring their respective parties as being multi-ethnic. The underlying reason is that Afghans refrain from picking ethnicity out as a central theme. Therefore it should be taken into consideration that ethnicity as a potential source of mobilization has been strictly limited. All warring parties used the ethnic moment rather in an undercover and strategic way. The reason is that there are serious barriers for a public emphasis of ethnicity:

- First of all, a major value in Islam is the idea that all believers are part of a united community (*ummah*). The fragmentation of society along ethnic lines contrasts with the concept of *ummah*. That is why ethnocentric slogans are avoided in public and many Afghans consider the accentuation of ethnicity as

un-Islamic. Especially the parties which are rooted in the *mujahidin* movement of the 1970s/1980s strongly rejected any ethnic tensions in public.

- Secondly, due to the resistance against the communist regime and the exile of many Afghans the identification of the Afghans with their country increased in the 1980s. The majority of Afghans support the continuance of the Afghan nation state. Against that, the fragmentation of Afghanistan implies an uncertain future. Through this fact the warring parties avoid questioning the integrity of the Afghan state. This means that their appeal for ethnicity is strategically very limited. There is a wide-ranging consensus amongst Afghans, that to bring forward arguments along ethnic lines will threaten the continued existence of the Afghan nation-state. Whoever claims rights in the name of an ethnic group is quickly considered a traitor.
- Thirdly, the ethnic groups, which are involved in the Afghan struggle for power, are represented in the neighboring countries as well, with the exception of the Hazaras. If the Jamiat-i islami and the Jombish-i milli stress ethnicity, they will run the risk that their separation from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan becomes blurred. Also, these parties are not interested in the unification with these countries, because this could mean a limitation of their political freedom and their access to economic and social resources. The Taliban faced a different situation: Due to the influence of Pakistan on the Taliban, this movement was not able to turn to an obvious Pashtun ethno-nationalism.
- Fourth and last, as long as the parties strive for central power, they had to demonstrate their ability to rule a multi-ethnic Afghanistan.

I have tried to demonstrate that all parties, which have been influential in the last decade, are using ethnicity regarding a specific political demand. But the certain political and cultural situation in Afghanistan regulates and strictly limits the utilization of ethnicity as an instrument for political claims and military mobilization.

2.4 The dominance of clientelism and the absence of a civil society

Taking the limited importance of ethnicity into consideration the question arises as to what are the dominant frameworks of identity and action in Afghan society. In general it can be noted that Afghan society is based on small-scale communities and is characterized by a series of overlapping obligations of solidarity. This means that groups are formed less along interests but more along family and kinship networks. However we have to be aware that the social structures of communities in Afghanistan are extremely heterogeneous, thus social systems are changing from place to place: Village or valley communities, clans, tribes and religiously defined communities (e.g. Sufi orders) form the most important reference points of political identity and action and today constitute the basis for modern forms of clientelism.

Because of the dominance of clientelism one of the most crucial problems of the political reconstruction process is that Afghanistan lacks a viable civil society and political parties that can address, in a credible way, matters which concern Afghan people the most. Today,

collective action seems to be short-lived without a long-term orientation. The permanent conditions of war as well as the heightened insecurity emphasized the need to stick together in small communities that can best be described as clientelistic organized ‘survival networks’. The necessity for such ‘survival networks’ grew stronger as the war began to polarize Afghans due to ideological, sectarian and ethnic based recruitment by the political movements and warlords. Distrust grew to an extent that clientelism spread into almost every sphere of Afghan society: politics, economy, education, and even the formation of so-called civil society organizations as NGOs, social and cultural associations and interest groups. This is why ministries, NGOs or political organizations are today usually occupied by one clientelistic group only (AZERBAIJANI-MOGHADDAM et al. 2002). A good example is that the Afghan government is not dominated by the ethnic groups of Tajiks, but by the clientelistic network of the Panjshiris. It is true that this government also has included many non-Panjshiris. But on looking more carefully many of these officials are in one or the other way related by marriage or patronage to the leading Panjshiri network. For example the Pashtun Taj Mohammad Wardak, the Interior Minister until January 2003, is married to a niece of the Panjshiri leader Yunus Qanuni, and the Minister for Culture and Information Sayyed Makhdom Rahin, an Arab by descent, is married to a woman from the Panjshir valley.

3. The ethnic trap

Regarding their endeavor to develop a peace arrangement for Afghanistan, in my opinion, the United Nations are caught in the ‘ethnic trap’. The media and the policy-makers, who have been confronted abruptly with the confusing political and military situation in Afghanistan since September 11, identified the Afghan conflict as an ethnic one and highlighted ethnicity as the most important template to analyze the conflict. Although, as I have indicated, ethnicity turned out to be one of the major guiding lines of the Afghan conflict, the narrowing of the conflict on its ethnic dimension only, excludes the fact that there are several other dimensions to the conflict:

- Firstly, the relevance of ethnicity as a factor of military and political cohesion remained limited in the Afghan war: countless combat units and commanders such as Haji Qadir or Abdul Haq changed their allegiance several times out of political opportunism and economic incentive – independent of their ethnic affiliation.
- Secondly, the mistake commonly made by policy-makers is to understand ethnic groups as uniform, constant bodies acting in accord, and to equate the ethnic group with the political movements, who claim to represent a certain ethnic group. What is ignored in the present debate is the fact that, despite the ethnicization of the war, the ethnicization of the Afghan masses failed.
- Thirdly, policy-makers ignore the abovementioned limitation of utilization of ethnicity in the Afghan context. Ethnicity is rather a hidden driving force of the Afghan conflict, which is only used to a certain extent, than a general argument used in public speeches.

The crucial misunderstandings of the peace process as initiated by the United Nations at the Petersberg Conference were

- that the predominance of clientelism was explained with ethnicity and both terms were equated and;
- that an conflict labeled as an ‘ethnic’ one can be brought to an end by an ‘ethnic solution’.

There is a broad consensus amongst policy-makers that the Afghan government should not only be multi-ethnic. Moreover, it should reflect the ethnic composition of the Afghan society accurately. The power-sharing arrangement compiled at the Petersberg Conference was based on the following quota of ministers: 11 Pashtuns, 8 Tajiks, 5 Hazaras, 3 Uzbeks and 3 not appointed. Although an ‘ethnic solution’ sounds appropriate in recognizing the interests of the various ethnic groups, it offers tremendous obstacles such as which ethnic groups and to what extent should be included. Another risk is that this ethnic solution produces frustrations if the ethnic quota is not recognized accurately. Also this approach ignores the constructive character of ethnicity and assumes that a government in which all ethnic groups are represented would supposedly suffice to reflect all facets of the Afghan population. A good example for this misunderstanding is Hamid Karzai. While the Pashtun affiliation was one of the strongest arguments to appoint Hamid Karzai as the president of the transition government, it has to consider that the elite and political leaders of the Pashtuns did not recognize Karzai as their representative. Thus Karzai obtains no stronghold within the Pashtun population.

4. Suggestions for the design of a future government

The following suggestions for the design of a future Afghan government strongly reject the politicization of ethnicity in general. While it is, of course, not to promote the idea that a future Afghan government should be mono-ethnic, the crucial problem derives from the fact to impose ethnicity to the fundament of political legitimacy. Thus the raising of ethnic representation will have dire consequences. Afghans will reach political and administrative positions regarding their ethnicity and not their qualifications, and this diametrically opposes the concepts of a civil, democratic society as propagated by the West. Furthermore ethnicity could not be neglected in the political context and would turn into the bedrock of all political action. This will not only stabilize an ethnic suspicion but avert that any political actor will enter the political arena refusing the meaning of ethnicity. Thus I will demonstrate in which way it seems appropriate to cope with ethnicity and what are alternative strategies to design new political institutions.

4.1 General suggestions

To follow my argument to diminish the influence of ethnicity on the political sphere it is important that a new Afghan constitution, which will be elaborated on this year, should

likewise keep clear of ethnic or cultural factors as much as possible. It would be devastating to establish Sunni Islam as the state religion, for that would shut the Shiites, Hindus and Sikhs out. As to language policy, Farsi – Afghanistan's *lingua franca* – and Pashtu should be given coequal status, while such languages such as Uzbeki, Turkmeni or Baluchi could be granted the status of additional provinces' languages. The goal to ensure the right of individual self-expression (sectarian, language etc.) should be aspired to. If everybody in Afghanistan has the right to express him/herself in cultural terms, the need for an ethnicization of politics will decrease.

Of course, it would be a major failure to suppress the question of ethnicity completely. But the politicization of ethnicity will not surmount ethnic tensions in Afghanistan. I plead for an open discussion within the Afghan community about ethnic prejudices and stereotypes. It has to be revealed that ethnicity is created by those in power and is not the basis for dividing the populace in Afghanistan seriously. This discussion should be part of a reconciliation process. It should be enforced to disenchant the myths of ethnic hatred and of ethnic stereotypes. It has to be demonstrated that members of different ethnic groups have lived together peacefully in the past. Also it has made clear that there is nothing wrong in identifying with an ethnic group: It is legitimate to identify oneself as a Pashtun, a Tajik etc. Thus an ethnic reconciliation should not try to diminish or destroy ethnic identities.

4.2 Territorialization of power

The question of how to position the new state on the axis between centralization and decentralization is also of the greatest relevance. The actual fragmentation of Afghanistan in myriads of fiefdoms ruled by various warlords or local leaders makes clear that today's Afghanistan is far from establishing a strong central government. Thus the transitional government can be characterized as the 'city council of Kabul'. It's authority hardly exceeds the boundaries of the capital. Against this background, even if the establishment of a strong central government could be envisaged, it would not only take generations to achieve this goal, but would immediately lead into another round of violent conflicts and might lure the country into endemic chaos. Also it has to be kept in mind that centrifugal forces have always stood in the way of centralizing state-building processes. Even more it can hardly be assumed that a strong central government could cope in a contenting way with the political, social and cultural diversity of the country and that one single homogeneous political and legal system can cover whole Afghanistan.

There has been much discussion of establishing an ethnic federalism as a way of doing justice to ethnic demands. But that approach could prove counterproductive, since no province in Afghanistan is ethnically homogenous and the various population groups are very difficult to site geographically. Often enough there are villages and valleys in which members of different ethnic groups reside. The introduction of an ethno-federalism entails often enough that on the level of the constituent states, the practice of ethnocentric intolerance by representatives of titular ethnic groups quickly becomes rooted. Ideas of ethnic homogenization could easily be projected onto the territory as highlighted by the example of Bosnia-Herzegovina and 'ethnic cleansing' will occur as a political practice. The expulsion

and arbitrary atrocities against Pashtuns in Northern Afghanistan since Winter 2001/2 are alarming signs of an ethnic cleansing process. Another consequence is that for minority elites, either shifting provincial boundaries or founding a new province of their own becomes more attractive. Political instability becomes endemic. Against this background the suggestion to separate Afghanistan into a northern, Tajik-Uzbek zone and a southern Pashtun one or to breakup Afghanistan and to include its regions into the neighboring countries does not only seem naïve but highly dangerous. Furthermore it has to consider that the introduction of ethno-federalism would entail a new gerrymandering of the constituent states. Here with established identities, which could be used for the political reconstruction process would be destroyed. For the ordinary population the provinces, which were established in 1964, have been raised to major references of identity within the last few years. When I visited Kabul 1997 it was usual to identify one's personal origin by stating the name of the province and not by stating the ethnic or tribal origin.

Instead of ethno-federalism, discussions concerning the creation of a federal state in Afghanistan, in which the exceptionally strong tradition of local autonomy and self-government can proceed, are very promising. The Indian or Swiss model, where the federal entities are not exclusively or primarily defined in ethnic terms, and where they enjoy strong provincial or local autonomy, might serve as a model. Regarding the case of Afghanistan the once established provinces and districts should remain the territorial basis of the administration of this federal system. Certain of these administrative units could receive autonomy in legal, lingual, religious or cultural spheres. For example local, customary law plays an important role in many parts of the country, as do religious notables in the judiciary process. It would certainly be alienating for large sections of the population if judicial reform were to impose a unified code for the entire country and block access to justice through non-state channels such as religious courts. It is therefore certainly sensible to allow for a certain degree of legal pluralism, perhaps comparable to the practice that has developed in Indonesia. However, it would seriously undermine the project of modern statehood and the establishment of basic principles of equality and protection from arbitrary violence if courts of appeal were not organised on the basis of one and the same legal corpus in the entire country, a corpus that was compatible with *sharia* on the one hand and fundamental human rights on the other hand.

However, any form of federalism in the Afghan context may imply the perpetuation of the rule of regional warlords, who are amongst the very few in the current debate about the future Afghan state who advocate a decentralised mode of government. And indeed, capture of regional state structures by warlords and other regional bosses represents a danger for an integrated Afghan state. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that warlords cannot be transformed into provincial governors, as was the case in other regions of the world, including Europe, in comparable phases of state-building processes.

4.3 Administration

The introduction of a system of ethnic representation, in which fixed quotas determine how many representatives each ethnic group will have at the center of power, could have negative consequences for Afghanistan. Research indicates that such regimes mainly work in a

sustainable fashion in highly developed states with a strong capacity for redistribution, as well as an established political culture of compromise.

An ethno-religious quota system of the sort that many have in mind at the moment would tend rather to increase conflict than to reduce it. Against that background the setting of ethnic quotas for government posts harbors the danger of permanently fixing the importance of ethnicity, thus setting the stage for a juggling of numbers at the filling of every official position. A study recently undertaken by a Pashtun NGO (Wak Foundation for Afghanistan 1999) summarized that 62,63% are Pashtuns. In contrast Abdullah Abdullah, who was appointed as foreign minister of the transition government at the Bonn talks, countered that Pashtuns are only 38% of the Afghan people. The road into a war of numbers is prognosticated. Thus, if a government is based on ethnicity, then criteria on how these ethnic groups in Afghanistan should be shaped, must be fixed. In a second step a census must be carried out to fix the size of the ethnic groups. Afghans who ignore ethnicity are encouraged to affiliate with one of the official recognized ethnic groups. Regarding the fact that often enough the ethnic identity, individuals are choosing, depends on the social context, this quota will be turn out to be unstable. Furthermore this census will face the problem of how to cope with Afghans who belong to non-recognized ethnic groups. Ethnicity will emerge as an insurmountable criterion in Afghan politics.

Furthermore ethnic leaders claim not only a certain share of ministers in the transition government in the name of a certain ethnic group, but also specific core positions. That the core ministries of foreign affairs, interior affairs and defense were all delivered to the Panjshiris on the Petersberg Agreement fostered suspicions. Rashid Dostum claims one of these ministries for the Uzbeks, while many Afghans support the idea that each of the core ministries should be hold by a politician from a certain ethnic group. To balance these ethnic claims seems quite impossible. Lastly, a problem arises from the existence of the bunch of minor ethnic groups. The Aimaq, Qizilbash, Baluchs, Nuristani, Turkmen, Pashai, Sikhs or Hindus are significant ethnic groups in Afghanistan, which while not numerous, are politically and economically influential. In an 'ethnic solution' they will claim a political representation in the central as well as in the provincial governments sooner or later. How should these ethnic demands be satisfied?

In full contrast to the 'ethnic solution' I emphasize that the qualification for a position in the Afghan government should be determined by professional competence and not by ethnic affiliation. Of course it is impossible to exclude ethnicity from the compilation of the government at all. But the significant question is, should ethnicity be installed as the basis of the government or as a criteria of subordinated importance, as favored in this approach? The solution is not a rigid ethnic quota system, but care must be taken to insure ethnic balance in staffing the government at all levels in an informal way.

4.4 Democracy

The establishing of a multi-party system on civil and not on ethnic basis is the most important aim in ensuring an enduring peace in Afghanistan. However the political and social-structural preconditions for democratic development in Afghanistan are rather unfavorable.

Democratization in conditions of weak civil societies and weak institutional capacity for conflict resolution can lead to a sharpening and escalation of conflict. As already mentioned, Afghanistan has no civil society tradition and hardly any experience of democratic control of government. If the center of political power in Kabul is now acquiring importance thanks to international legitimacy and support of it, control of this center will assume existential significance. Elections produce losers and may lead to their permanent exclusion from power if institutional mechanisms for distributing and dissolving power are not established at the same time. The struggle for success at the ballot box becomes a struggle for political and material survival, and means of winning are chosen accordingly.

The fact that democratic government is carried out ‘in the name of the people’ also has the effect of politicizing ethnic differences. Defining the boundaries and character of ‘the people’ becomes increasingly significant, so that the struggle for power is frequently perceived as a conflict between ethno-religiously defined groups, whose leaders are now presenting themselves as the representatives of ‘their people’ in order to seize the greatest possible share of power at the center. The ethnicization of politics may lead to constellations of conflict that are difficult to resolve through negotiation and compromise. Now we can already consider that political actors such as Burhanuddin Rabbani and Abdurrahman Rasul Sayyaf, who have been sidelined in the last two rounds of government formation and who represent extreme political opinions, are the most effective and successful ones in establishing political parties.

In this context it is to suggest that elections in 18 months is too early for establishing a stable democratic system. A democracy can only release the potential for political integration following successful political stabilization and institutional consolidation. To this end, it should proceed within institutional frameworks that are capable of countering the danger of ethno-religious conflicts over distributional issues. In the medium term, more realistic than holding democratic elections would be the institutionalization of the traditional system of consensus-building between notables, bureaucrats and tribal leaders combined with the careful democratization of its principles of recruitment. In this respect the *loya jirga* represents a suitable body, provided that actual power relations are sufficiently taken into account – that is, provided the dominant clientelistic groups are adequately represented, at least in the period of transition. The emergency *loya jirga* that convened in June 2002 endeavored to include elected representatives as well as the ruling clientelistic groups and warlords. Although many Afghans have been disappointed by the proceedings and the results of the *loya jirga*, it at least helped to stabilize the fragile political situation. Thus for Afghanistan, democracy represents a long-term project. As with other processes of political modernization, here too the pulse of the time must be measured in generations, not years.

5. Conclusion

In Afghanistan, the international community is once again faced with the challenge of dealing with a conflict that is interpreted as an ethnic one. The architects of a future Afghanistan would be well advised to work against the ethnic polarization of the country. In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that ethnicity is neither the cause of Afghan conflict nor a natural

constant of human being: Ethnic groups have been created or furnished with cultural substance mainly by Western anthropologists. While ethnicity was not a domineering political factor in pre-war Afghanistan it emerged as a main source of political and military mobilization especially since 1992. Hence acceding to ethnic demands will only strengthen those who – as has happened before on the Balkans – use ethnicity as an instrument for promoting their own interests, but will not contribute toward the resolving of the Afghan conflict. Hence I suggest that the international power brokers in Afghanistan should consider ethnicity merely in an informal way in power-sharing arrangements, and should not stress ethnicity as the fundament of political decision-making processes. The major challenge of a suitable and sound peace process in Afghanistan is the question how to cope with the dominance of clientelistic networks.

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