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AFGHANISTAN'S GROWING ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC DIVIDES: TIME TO ADDRESS THEM

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KEY POINTS

- The Afghan government should acknowledge the fact that there are deep ethnic and linguistic differences among its citizens. So far, the government has consistently ignored this pressing fact. As long as the government fails to acknowledge these cleavages, it cannot come up with an acceptable solution to all Afghans. Having acknowledged the existence of the aforementioned prejudices, the government should address them in a timely manner.
- Given that Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country, its national identity, which has stark ethnic and linguistic dimensions, should be inclusive and representative of all its citizens: the more diverse the Afghan culture, the more politically and socially stable the country. Afghanistan can follow the examples of India and Switzerland in embracing a pluralistic culture, whereby differences can be tolerated. Imposing one self-proclaimed national identity on all ethnic groups can have serious ramifications for the stability of the country.
- More specifically, the government should allow speakers of all languages in the country to speak their native language free from government bullying or media propaganda. The government should understand that the pre-2001 status quo has long lost its relevance. In contrast to article 16 of the constitution, there is no such thing as “national, academic, and administrative terminology” in Afghanistan. Neither has the terminology been codified, nor has it been defined by any agency or institution, such as the Afghanistan Academy of Sciences.
- Finally, all ethnic groups’ identity should be legally recognized. It is difficult to change Afghanistan’s

name now that it has been established for so long in the international community. But there are other ways through which the government can address the concerns of dissatisfied Afghans. The new electronic tazkiras (ID cards) should either include every Afghan's respective ethnicity. By so doing, Afghanistan's culture will look more diverse and all ethnic groups will feel at home, which in turn will encourage them to remain committed to safeguarding Afghanistan's national interest and preserving its territorial integrity. However, it has to be taken into account that a somewhat similar "ethnicization" of society in Yugoslavia in the 1980s was a contributing factor of the disastrous series of civil wars that followed, so any such measure should be accompanied by an explanation from the government that the policy is acknowledging group identities and diversity rather than stressing differences.



INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is comprised of about 15 to 20 different ethnic groups. Fourteen of these ethnic groups—“Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, Baluch, Pachaie [Pasha’ee], Nuristani, Aymaq, Arab, Qirghiz [Kyrgyz], Qizilbash [Kizilbash], Gujur, Brahwui”—are named in the Afghan constitution¹. A few others, Pamiri; Sikhs; and Hindus, for instance, have been left out of the constitution. Some of these ethnic groups speak the same language; Tajiks, Hazaras, and Aimaq speak Dari. Others, for example Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Nuristanis, and Pasha’ees speak Pashto, Uzbek, Nuristani, and Pasha’ee respectively. Despite being a diverse country, no government in Afghanistan’s history has ever conducted a nation-wide census to accurately determine the population and percentage of each ethnic and linguistic group. Therefore, any claims to declare any ethnic group a majority is flawed; as they are based on an incomplete and partial census conducted in 1979².

The multiplicity of ethnic groups and languages should have played a positive role in Afghanistan’s history by bringing in different, but complementary perspectives to social and political processes. However, in practice, not only all ethnic and linguistic groups have not been able to contribute their rich culture to public life, but their very existence has led to ethnic and linguistic tensions.

Since 2001, the government has paid little attention to promoting cultural diversity. Nevertheless, the relative freedom

1 Constitution of Afghanistan, Chapter one, article four, 2004, <http://www.afghanembassy.com.pl/afg/images/pliki/TheConstitution.pdf>.

2 Dilawar Sherzai, “Population Census and Afghanistan,” Outlook Afghanistan, March 06, 2013, accessed November 02, 2014, http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=6782.

of expression in the post-Taliban era has allowed people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to freely display their opinions and beliefs—unlike during any other time in Afghanistan’s history³. Unsurprisingly, not all elements in society see this change from a positive perspective. Consequently, some Afghans have cited unwarranted concerns that the relative openness of Afghan society is backfiring in the sense that the Afghan culture is being undermined⁴. But these concerned Afghans fail to ignore the fact that the so-called Afghan culture is not inclusive in nature, and does not represent every Afghan properly.

However, those, for instance civil society activists and students, who have benefitted most from the post-Taliban era freedoms have resisted the pressure to give up on their demands for proper identity representation. This has led to tensions between different factions in Afghanistan, often of an ethnic and linguistic nature. This paper will touch upon some of the ethnic and linguistic divides that have manifested since the fall of the Taliban regime. In so doing, the paper will first discuss how the ethnic and linguistic divides have deepened. Afterwards, the paper will focus on specific instances of ethnic and linguistic divides.



CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC DIVIDES

Afghanistan had no experience of social and political plural-

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- 3 For example, the presence of tens of TV and radio stations, newspapers, magazines, websites, and the use of social media in Afghanistan has been unprecedented.
 - 4 Abdur Rahman Furqani, “Afghanistan: From Absolute Invasion by Freedom to the Ambiguity of National Treason,” *Tol Afghanistan*, October 22, 2014, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://www.tolafghanistan.com>.

ism before 2001. Toleration of opposition by the government and its supporters was practically non-existent. Also, the government had strict control over the flow of information to the people. Only the government and a handful of its supporters enjoyed freedoms; the rest of the society was largely kept in the dark. For the purpose of this paper, I will call this the pre-2001 status quo.

There are several key factors that have played for the deepening of these divides by raising Afghans' social and political awareness.

First, the fall of the Taliban regime provided Afghans with an opportunity to benefit from relative freedom of expression. The Taliban and its predecessors did not allow free media to operate in Afghanistan. With assistance from the U.N., however, the new Afghan administration supported freedom of expression. Within a few years, tens of TV and radio stations, newspapers, magazines, and websites started to operate in different parts of Afghanistan. As time has gone by, so the number of these outlets has grown. According to the Ministry of Information and Culture, there are 150 radio stations, 52 TV stations, and 177 print outlets in Afghanistan⁵. These media outlets have played a big role in raising awareness and educating people about their rights in different parts of Afghanistan. Radios have been the most effective, especially in rural areas, because listeners do not have to be literate to use them, nor do radio receivers require electricity. The level of freedom in the post-Taliban era is unprecedented in Afghanistan's history.

Second, over the last few years, the number of Afghans who use social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, has

5 Yahya Nabawi, "Karzai's 13 year government: Achievements and Losses Part IV," Rasaana, October 26, 2014, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://rasaana.com/archives/1393/04/2544>.

also grown up rapidly⁶. Among the factors making social media more accessible in present day Afghanistan are the Internet, smartphones, and computers, usage of which has tremendously increased over the last few years. The Internet, especially social media, has made the flow of information much easier, helping to raise awareness and break the state monopoly over the flow of information to Afghans.

Third, the low rate of literacy across Afghanistan tacitly deprived millions of Afghans of the ability to benefit from freedom of speech, since they lacked knowledge of their rights and responsibilities. Under the Taliban “fewer than one million children went to school in Afghanistan;”⁷ however, now there are more than 10 million children in schools across the country.⁸ Going to school is just another means to help raise awareness and educate oneself. This is also true in Afghanistan, where an increase in school-goers has been coupled with an increase in social and political awareness.

Fourth, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “5.7 million Afghans have returned home since 2001...”⁹ The majority of these “5.7 million refugees” returned from countries where the standard of living and social and political awareness were higher than those of Afghanistan. Therefore, the migration of Afghans back to

6 Sabra Ayres, “Afghans tap into Twitter and Facebook as youth find their voice,” *The Guardian*, September 26, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2013/sep/26/afghan-twitter-facebook-youth>.

7 “Afghanistan: Newsline,” United Nation’s Girls’ Education Initiative, accessed November 2, 2014, http://www.ungei.org/news/afghanistan_2343.html.

8 “Are Afghanistan’s Schools Doing As Well As Touted?” *National Public Radio*, October 23, 2013, accessed November 01, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2013/10/24/240482395/are-afghanistans-schools-doing-as-well-as-touted>.

9 “Afghan Solutions Strategy,” UNHCR, accessed November 02, 2014, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4f9016576.html>.

Afghanistan is likely to have played a role in their social and political awakening.

As a result of these shifts, one could argue that an average Afghan is socially and politically more aware than at any time in Afghanistan's history. Afghans have demonstrated their awareness at different times either by taking to the streets or to social media. As such, there are numerous examples of popular protests, media outrage, and social media activities by Afghans over the last 13 years. For instance, following allegations of widespread vote rigging in the runoff election of June 2014, presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah and 15'000 of his supporters marched peacefully on the President's Office.¹⁰ This had never happened before. But, the relatively free post-Taliban society has created a divide between supporters and opponents of the pre-2001 status quo, mainly on the basis of language and ethnicity.



THE LINGUISTIC DIVIDE

The basis of the linguistic divide is the controversial article 16 of the 2004 constitution, which states that "academic and national administrative terminology and usage in the country shall be preserved."¹¹ Yet, there are two problems with the clause "academic and national administrative terminology." First, no government or non-government agency has ever defined what "academic and national administrative terminology" is. Second, the set of words, which can be considered as "academic and national administrative terminology" are mostly Pashto words, despite the fact that according to an Asia Foundation Report, nearly 80% of the

10 Azam Ahmed, "Afghan Candidate and Thousands of Supporters Continue Protests," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2014, accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/28/world/asia/abdullah-abdullah-and-15000-protesters-gathered-in-kabul.html?_r=0.

11 *Supra* n 1, article 16.

population speaks Dari.¹² Those who disregard the “academic and national administrative terminology,” despite its ambiguous and undefined nature, are discriminated against and even insulted.¹³ This attitude increases the potential for social and political instability.

People forced to use “academic and national administrative terminology” have repeatedly expressed their anger by taking to the streets of Kabul and other cities.¹⁴ These protests may turn violent in the future, triggering unrest in society as a whole. Recently, Herat University students, acting against the wishes of the university, changed the university sign, which displayed the university’s name in Pashto only.¹⁵ The new sign has the university’s name in three languages: Dari, English, and Pashto.¹⁶

The National Assembly (NA) has been another place where linguistic tensions have risen. The NA has yet to ratify the Higher Education Law, sent to it back in 2008.¹⁷ After years of deadlock over the proposed law, in 2013, members of the

12 “Afghanistan in 2013: A Survey of the Afghan People,” The Asia Foundation, 2013, accessed November 04, 2014, <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/2013AfghanSurvey.pdf>. It is worth mentioning that a big number of Pashtuns also speak Dari, which is why nearly 80% of the population in Afghanistan speaks Dari.

13 I have seen numerous instances of insulting behavior by Kabul University professors toward students who used certain vocabulary that did not fall under the so-called “academic and national administrative terminology.”

14 Ramin Anwari, “Kabul University Students’ Protest Continues,” BBC Persian, November 17, 2008, accessed November 03, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/2008/11/081118_ram_kabul_demo_2day.shtml.

15 “Herat University Students Change University Sign,” Jumhoor News, March 18, 2014, accessed November 03, 2014, <http://jomhornews.com/prtaoiny.49n0m15kk4.html>.

16 Ibid.

17 “Tensions Continue Over the Word Danishgah [University],” BBC Persian, August 11, 2008, accessed November 02, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/story/2008/08/080811_ram-farsi-pashtu.shtml.

Lower House (LH) of the NA got into a physical fight over it while talking about the linguistic differences.¹⁸ In 2012, members of the LH had physically assaulted an official of the Ministry of Higher Education over linguistic issues.¹⁹ The official escaped, and was able to avoid serious injury.

Over the last 13 years, tens of TV and radio shows have emerged, covering topics related to language in Afghanistan. These shows have had an impact on the general public in terms of shaping their opinion about the use or non-use of a language, for example Dari. As such, Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's president during this period, several times accused some media outlets of sparking ethnic and linguistic discord.²⁰ President Karzai's reaction reveals that the issue of language is sensitive to the extent that it can draw the attention of the highest authority in the land — the president. For a politically fragile country like Afghanistan, where pluralism was non-existent before 2001 and tolerance of diversity is weak, linguistic tensions are potent source of discord in the society. However, the government has consistently ignored the fact that its citizens are divided over the issue of language. As a whole, the government has also ignored street protests, the media's role in widening the divide, and gridlock in the NA. The linguistic divide also has the potential to draw in other countries to compete for cultural and even political influence in Afghanistan. For instance, Iran can provide enormous backdoor support to Dari speakers with the aim of expanding its own cultural influence in Afghanistan.

18 "Discussion Over Higher Education Law Leads to Fight," Wakht News Agency, May 25, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, <http://wakht.af/index.php>.

19 "Afghan Officials' Quarrel over Danishgah," BBC Persian, September 06, 2012, accessed November 03, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/2012/09/120906_i09_shtml.

20 "Hamid Karzai's Warning to Private Media in Afghanistan," BBC Persian, July 29, 2010, accessed November 01, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/2010/07/100729_i09_karza_press_warning.shtml.

ETHNIC DIVIDE

Surprisingly, one of the most important aspects of the ethnic divide is manifested in the word Afghan. Both Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns unanimously believe that Afghan is synonymous with Pashtun.²¹ Therefore, some non-Pashtuns, whose number is on the rise, have repeatedly questioned the applicability of the word Afghan to all Afghans simply because they are not ethnic Pashtun. Accordingly, tensions around this very word have risen since 2001. In December 2013, hundreds of people took to the streets in Kabul shouting slogans and holding placards saying “I am not Afghan; Afghan means Pashtun.”²² The same issue has been discussed over and over by students in class and by colleagues in the work place, sometimes leading to bitter quarrels.

Recently, members of the Upper House (UH) of the NA got into a fight over whether or not the government should use the word Afghan, or words relating to the various ethnicities in the country in electronic tazkiras (ID cards).²³ This dispute shows that non-Pashtun Afghan citizens want their identity to be recognized by the government. Mr. Younus Fakoor, a prominent Pashtun analyst, believes that non-Pashtuns have a legitimate concern.²⁴ He recommends that non-Pashtun

- 21 See “Afghan means Pashtun...” Youtube, accessed November 01, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izyFbfC8fP4>. And “Afghan means Pashtun...” Youtube, accessed November 01, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYOnjHxu5al>.
- 22 “I am not Afghan: Afghan Means Pashtun, Forging Identity Is Not Allowed,” Kabul Press, December 07, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, <http://kabulpress.org/my/spip.php?article183187>.
- 23 “Senators Fight over Including Nationality and Ethnicity in Electronic Tazkiras,” Tolo News, December 02, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, <http://www.tolonews.com/fa/afghanistan/12939-ethnicity-on-id-cards-debate-sparks-brawl-in-senate>.
- 24 “Afghanistan political analyst Mr Younus Fakoor: Afghan or Awghan is the second name of Pashtuns,” Youtube, December 08, 2013, accessed November 04, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRnuiUwhXDU>.

Afghans should retain their Afghan citizenship but that their ethnicity, such as Tajik or Hazara, should also be recognized.²⁵ Given that Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country, Mr. Fakoor's recommendation seems the best fit in terms of meeting the concerns of both Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns.

In the meantime, last year Wahid Taqqat, an analyst and one of the supporters of applying the "Afghan" label to everyone in Afghanistan, lashed out at his opponents on a TV show, making several controversial points: first, Afghan means Pashtun, and Pashtun means Afghan; second, Afghanistan can also be called Pashtunistan because the majority of its citizens are Pashtuns; third, Afghanistan's identity is Pashtun; fourth, those who do not want to be called Afghan are "bastards" and should go back to their country of origin.²⁶ This implies that Uzbeks should go to Uzbekistan, and Tajiks to Tajikistan, if they are not prepared to be called Afghan.

His remarks sparked fury and drew condemnation in print and electronic media in non-Pashtun parts of the country. Also, Facebook and Twitter users expressed their utmost anger at Taqqat's provocative arguments. These arguments and the subsequent response to them forced President Karzai to react in public.²⁷ Consequently, Taqqat was arrested and Zhwandoon TV, which had hosted Taqqat, was shut down by the government.²⁸ Taqqat's arrest and the shutting down of Zhwandoon sparked protests by supporters of both the

25 Ibid.

26 "General Taqqat: Afghanistan means Pashtunistan and is Pashtuns' Homeland," Youtube, November 29, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7pToNHPC0w>.

27 "General Taqqat is Arrested," Arman-e-Millie, accessed November 04, 2014, <http://www.armanemili.af/detail.php?pid=4130>.

28 "General Taqqat is Detained: Why?" Voice of America Dari, December 10, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, <http://www.darivoa.com/content/genenal-taqqat-arrested/1809302.html>.

analyst and the broadcaster.²⁹ Taqat apologized later on in a bid to calm the anger of those whom he had insulted.³⁰ Had he not apologized, the country could easily have witnessed violence.

In addition to contention surrounding Afghanistan's name, many consider that the country's national anthem, which is in Pashto, is not appropriate and representative of all Afghans, bearing a particularly close relationship to the ethnic group that has dominated Afghanistan for the last 267 years.³¹ Obviously, these disputes are heavily politicized, both to those who want to preserve the pre-2001 status quo, and those who want to move further in the direction of genuine political pluralism.

The majority of Pashtuns meanwhile, have exercised restraint in the face of criticism from other groups who feel they are being asked to give up on their identities, although this may not last forever. The government has failed to address the deepening divide between groups because firstly, it lacks any coherent policy for nation-building that might bring Afghans closer to each other; secondly, the government tacitly does not allow all ethnic groups to represent their identities and thirdly, the government fails to acknowledge that its citizens are divided.

With the passage of time, ethnic differences have only

29 "Protestors: Ministry of Culture and Office of the Attorney General Should Apologize," Pajhwak News, December 14, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, <http://www.pajhwok.com>.

30 "General Taqat Apologized to entire Afghan Nation" Youtube, December 05, 2014, accessed November 04, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=id51mzH8jFc>.

31 Darwesh Daryadili, "A Glimpse of a Pashtun Chauvinism: The National Anthem," January 21, 2011, accessed November 03, 2014, http://www.jawedan.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3477:1389-10-02-10-55-39&catid=40:1388-03-11-21-08-00&Itemid=576.

grown wider. This year's presidential election, and the subsequent crisis, brought the country on the brink of a schism along ethnic lines, which is one of the key reasons the two candidates agreed to form a national unity government (NUG). The main fear was that excluding either of the candidates from power could trigger ethnic violence, a sentiment summed up by a statement from Muhammad Muhaqqeq, the second vice-presidential candidate on the Abdullah Abdullah electoral ticket, who warned Afghanistan would be divided if the election result were announced in the midst of crisis.³² An Afghanistan divided along ethnic lines is not in the interests of the citizenry as a whole, however there are some Afghans fed up with the current ethnic prejudices in the country that talk openly of secession.

32 "Afghan talks on unity government collapse; crisis deepens," Reuters, September 01, 2014, accessed November 04, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/01/us-afghanistan-election-idUSKBN0GW2B720140901>.



CONCLUSION

The establishment of the new Afghan government and political system in 2001, relative freedom of speech, and the introduction of the Internet have allowed Afghan citizens to raise their concerns about thorny issues fairly effectively. Offsetting these gains in openness, however, are the growing ethnic and linguistic divides among Afghans. These divides, at times, have brought Afghanistan to the brink of crisis. Despite this, the government by and large still refuses to believe that there are linguistic and ethnic divides among Afghan citizens. It is hard to find a solution to a problem, when that problem's very existence is denied. This approach on the part of the Afghan government is counterproductive and can have serious ramifications for the country.

The Afghan government still has time to address these key issues. If the government continues to ignore them, however, as it has so far, the window of opportunity will finally close and the country will be faced by overwhelming ethnic and linguistic tensions. Instead of standing idly by, Afghanistan can follow the examples of India and Switzerland by allowing citizens to express their identities freely, especially ethnic and linguistic affiliations. In so doing, the government should consider the concerns of both supporters and opponents of the pre-2001 status quo. This effort should take place without any manipulation of fundamental freedoms. Instead, the government should act as a catalyst for institutionalizing pluralism and tolerance in Afghanistan, because the alternative - the further ethnicization of Afghan society - will increase the potential for ethnic violence and potentially pave the way for Afghanistan's territorial disintegration.

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