

EFFECTIVE STATE INTERVENTION AND ELECTORAL POLITICS: UNDERSTANDING THE DECLINE OF PASHTUNISTAN MOVEMENT IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the birth and decline of the Pashtunistan movement in Pakistan. The core argument of the paper is that the movement lost its appeal among the masses due to the convulsion of three factors: rise of pashtun elites in Pakistan's central administration, huge Influx of the Afghan refugees and their support by Pakistani government, and the subsequent rise of national parties' influence in N.W.F.P. and the corresponding decline in the NDP base.

KEYWORDS: *Movement in Pakistan, Central Administration*

INTRODUCTION

The partition of the Indian subcontinent had a catastrophic impact on the external and internal security of the states of South Asia. Externally the challenges were twofold: The sudden change of boundaries and tensions with the contiguous states and the hostility between the two states that were born out of partition. Pakistan's security was particularly affected by the partition. There were a series of challenges that threatened the national integrity of Pakistan. The most important of these movements included the Pashtunistan movement, the Jeeya Sind movement, and the Baluchistan movement. They were entirely ethnonational and secessionist in character. All the three movements were born before 1950 around the period of Indian independence from British & the subsequent partition of the subcontinent. Except for the Pashtunistan movement, the other two movements turned irredentist immediately after the formation of Pakistan.¹

The origins of these strongsecessionist movements can be partly attributed to the basic anomalies in nature and the dynamics of the Pakistan movement itself. The Pakistan movement was created around the sole legitimacy of Muslim nationalism and did not look deeply into the more pressing issues of regional and ethnic diversity. There were a number of crucial problems associated with this movement. First, was the issue of a lack of consensus on the constitutional and political structure of Pakistan? The second issue related to a complete lack of a proper institutional mechanism to deal with regionalism. The third issue related to the inherent weakness of the organizational structure of the Muslim League as a party.²

¹ Kalim Bahadur, 'Ethnic problems in Pakistan', *World Focus*, vol.XV, no 5 (April-may, 1994)

² Tahir Amin, *Ethno-National movements of Pakistan* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1988), 67-68

The educated sections of the Pakistani society had colossal disagreements on the nature of the state and its core institutional apparatus. The liberal sections of the society wanted Pakistan to become a secular liberal state. The Islamists who formed the largest majority of the population, wanted the creation of a state based on Islam and Sharia rule. The left-leaning intellectuals wanted a socialist state aimed at reducing the poverty and resource disparity created by feudalism. These differences, initially dormant, manifested afterward creating room for dissent & frustration. The lack of an effective mechanism to tackle different issues added to the perplexity of the party. This was evident with the way the party leaders handled the language issue which was raised initially in 1937 Lucknow session of the Muslim League. The language controversy epitomized in the form of the partition of Pakistan in 1971, creating a linguistic Bengali state in its East. Finally, the organizational weakness in the Muslim League proved fatally destructive. The lack of a political organizational structure to mobilize populations, particularly in the culturally distinct provinces like N.W.F.P, Baluchistan & Sind made the party completely dependent on local elites, mostly zamindars and landlords that had their own vested interests embedded in these regions.

If we look at the strength of these movements, the Pashtun movement was the strongest of all. It was far better in organizational capacities, related to a distinct and antique history, and was composed of the ethnically homogenous population. It thus became the most powerful ethnonational movement in the early years of the formation of Pakistan. However, "the most important factor of the movement that irritated the Muslim League was that it was closely allied to Indian National Congress due to its charismatic leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan, popularly known as 'Frontier Gandhi in the rugged Khyber Pass region'."³In fact, after his arrest by the establishment in Pakistan, the Indian National Congress supported him openly in strong terms. Jawaharlal Nehru called him 'one of the bravest and straightest men' and bewailed his imprisonment, saying it was 'a thorn in my heart'.⁴

In 1929, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan founded the Khudai Khidmatgar (servants of God) movement. This movement was designated as the 'Red Shirt' movement by the British government in India. It was essentially a Pashtun social reformist movement that had four distinct yet clearly related aims. These included a staunch focus on Pashtun nationalism as a unifying force, upholding of Islamic values, staunch belief in Non-Violence and a stated goal of incremental reform of the Pashtun society as a whole. This agenda of reform through non-violence was the reason behind its alliance with the Indian National Congress in 1931. This movement started getting increasingly influenced by the nationalist and socialist programme advocated by the core leaders of the Indian National Congress.⁵

The movement was, from its very inception anti-imperialist in ideology and was highly sympathetic to Pashtuns across the border living in Afghanistan. During its formative years, the movement was aimed at securing provincial autonomy from the Centre only and were not concerned with a separatist state. The secessionist tendencies in this movement started much later. It was due to its appealing ideology and its superb organizational capacities and mass following among the Pashtun community, it won both the provincial elections held in 1937 and 1946. This was the reason behind Muslim League's defeat in Pashtun areas in 1946 elections. When the Partition was happening, the British

³ Pakistan: The Frontier Gandhi, *Time Magazine*, Monday, Jan. 18, 1954

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Amin (1988), 68

government decided to hold a referendum to determine the final status of the North Western Frontier Province wanted to join India or Pakistan. This infuriated the Khudai Khidmatgars who boycotted the referendum. Their argument was that the referendum was futile because it did not contain the option for an independent Pashtun state or accession to Afghanistan. They further argued that they had already won the election in 1946 by a decisive majority and did not require a referendum to declare their allegiance.⁶

The inclusion of Afghanistan as a party in the conflict and the resulting support rendered to the movement by Afghanistan further deepened the crisis for Pakistan. This had its origins in the resentment and objection of general pashtun public and the Afghan state to the Durand line drawn in 1893 to separate India from Afghanistan.⁷ Hence the “creation of Pakistan was opposed by Afghanistan, as well as the Pakhtun nationalists who consorted with the Indian national congress on the issue”.⁸

After the formation of Pakistan the government did not completely trust the pashtun elites and continuously persecuted the movement and its leaders. However, the fact remains that after independence the leaders of the movement changed their political posture and started campaigning for regional autonomy and dropped ideas of secession and separation.⁹ Once the terms of political discourse changed due to the establishment of Pakistan as a separate state for Muslims, the Pastunistan movement continued to have its mass base and influence of two grounds. The first round was the transborder ethnic and cultural contiguity and linkages with the Pashtun community-based in Afganistan that nurtured the dream of a united pashtun nation. The second round was the shared fear of cultural dominance and socio-economic subjugation by the dominant Punjabi-Muhajir elite that formed the bulk of state structure.¹⁰ This fear of dominance by the non-pashtun elite and the theft of “cultural heritage in the guise of Muslim nationalism led the strong provincial autonomy movement to guarantee cultural, social and economic rights”.¹¹

However, this fear was not unique to the Pashtun community but was shared by all the major provinces of Pakistan. After some negotiations, this led to the amalgamation of all the ethnocultural movements in different regions that finally led to the formation of National Awami Party of Pakistan (NAP) in 1957. It was formed by the combination of the major political forces from the regions that included East Pakistan, Sind, N.W.F.P and Baluchistan. NAP was strictly anti-imperialist in orientation and demanded regional autonomy to all the major provinces of Pakistan. However, from the very beginning, the Central government was skeptical of the party and banned it in 1975 alleging that it was working against the

⁶ Shaheen Ali & Javaid Rehman, *Indigenous peoples and ethnic Minorities of Pakistan* (Richmond: Curzon press, 2001), 83

⁷ Veena kukreja, *Contemporary Pakistan* (New Delhi: Sage Publications,2003), 126

⁸ Ali &Rehman (2001), 83

⁹ Kukreja (2003),126

¹⁰Ibid. P.127

¹¹ Amin (1988), 86-91

integrity of the country by ‘preaching a four-nation theory’,¹² “proclaiming that four provinces in Pakistan were actually four nations and had a right to self-determination.”

Soon after, the senior leaders of the party were banned from public life. This included the arrest of NAP’s chief pashtun leader, Wali Khan, son of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. After the ban on the NAP, the pashtun leaders formed the National Democratic Party (NDP) in 1976. The leaders initially maintained that the question of autonomy was a settled matter in the 1973 constitution and there was little room for reopening the issue. But they remained ambivalent throughout till the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent war that severely damaged their credibility and social base.

Decline

The serious decline of the Pustunistan movement started in the 1980s with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that started in 1979. This soviet intervention knelt a fatal blow to the movement due to which it lost its momentum and social energy. In the early phase of the invasion of Afghanistan, the NDP leaders took a pro-soviet stand and the installation of the Babrak Karmal regime in Afghanistan in 1979.¹³ This led to a moral weakness in their stand for ‘Godless communists’ in the eyes of Muslim pashtuns which was not a good sign for the health of the movement. However, the mass base of the movement actually weakened and finally collapsed due to a mixture of three core reasons. The first concerned the rise of pashtun elites in Pakistan’s central administration and its influence on local politics. The second related to the tremendous Influx of the Afghan refugees after the soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The third factor was the support given by the by the Pakistani government to the Afghan refugees that led to the rise of national parties’ influence in NWFP and the corresponding decline in the support base of NDP.

The core reason for the fatal weakening of the movement related to the effective intervention by the Central government. The government actively recruited from the core Pashtun provinces and the ascendancy of the pashtun military-bureaucratic elite into the power structure at the center which came from the same districts-Peshawar, Bannu, Kohat, Mardan, that constituted the main support base of the movement. This culminated in the Ayub era, when the President himself and the three successive Commanderinchiefs of the military were all pashtuns. This led to a psychological defeat of the movement. It was increasingly difficult to convince the ethnic pashtuns that they would be dominated by Punjabis and Muhajirs in Pakistan. This sometimes frustrated the pashtun leaders and they even lodged formal protests against it. In a written statement to the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Wali khan, head of NDP, protested that pashtuns were disproportionately over-represented in the armed forces and civil services.¹⁴

The second important reason for the decline of the movement was the rise in the political support for rival national parties to NDP like the Muslim League, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and the Jammata-i-Islami. The trend already visible since the 1970 general elections picked up the pace in the 1980’s. This was because of the Afghan crisis of 1979 that gave huge leverage to the national parties of Pakistan. The gain was substantial especially for Jammata-i-Islami which

¹² Ibid, 138

¹³S.M Qureshi, ‘Pakhtunistan: the frontier dispute between Afghanistan & Pakistan’, *Pacific affairs*, vol XXXIX, No 1(spring 1966)

¹⁴Qureshi (1966), 187

heavily capitalized on the Afghan situation by using the rhetoric of threat to Islam by 'Godless communism' and the support to ethnic brethren of pashtuns across the border. The 1985 elections clearly showed the strength of Jammāt-i-Islami and other national parties notably the PPP and Muslim League and the perpetual and corresponding decline in the NDP support base.

The third important factor that sealed the decline of NDP was the influx of about three million refugees from Afghanistan into Pakistan. Out of these three million refugees, more than two million (close to 75 percent) refugees sheltered in NWFP. Out of all these refugees, eighty percent were pashtuns. There were a massive support and sympathy for these refugees both at the national level and the provincial level. This was in sharp contrast to the NDP leaders' pro-Soviet stand and their hostile attitude towards the Afghan refugees. The other political parties labeled the NDP as traitors and capitalized on the issue to demonize the NDP leaders. With the public & state support swinging in the favor of Afghan refugees, the NDP stand alienated them and led to a fatal erosion of their mass base in the province. This led to a near total collapse of the movement.

There were also other factors that led to the decline of the movement. The most notable of these are international factors. These factors-transnational influences, activities of coethnics and policies of the foreign states- usually play a secondary but important role in reinforcing the trends generated by the domestic factors. They have the power and potential to act as decisive factors that can affect the course of these movements. The foreign states whose domestic politics and foreign policy directly affected the Pashtunistan movement include Afghanistan, Iran, USSR, and USA. The intervention of Soviets directly affected the movement due to the out-flux of millions of Afghans into from Afghanistan into Pakistan. Due to the support for its fight against soviets the Afghan nation stopped its claims and support for Pashtunistan. Iran also became involved in helping mediate the Pashtunistan dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan and militarily collaborated with the Bhutto regime in suppressing the irredentist movements, especially in Baluchistan.¹⁵

Moreover, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 coinciding with the soviet invasion of Afghanistan gave further impetus to the Islamisation of Pakistan and led to a significant gain in the mass base of Islamist political parties like the Jammāt-i-Islami.

Finally, the vast economic and military support by the Americans to the Afghans led to a further decline in NDP anti-American rhetoric as they were seen as friends and not enemies of Afghanistan and the pashtuns living therein. All these factors, although secondary to the domestic ones decimated the Pashtunistan movement.

CONCLUSIONS

The evolution and decline of Pushtunistan movement in Pakistan prove the importance of accommodating the ethnic elites in the core institutions of the state. This is useful in two ways. First, it weakens the ethnic exclusivist argument offered by the ethnic nationalists that a minority community would not get a fair share of power in the core institutions of the state. The active recruitment of Pashtun youth in military and bureaucracy weakened the 'punjab-takes-all' argument of the NDP. Second, it makes the state look more inclusive and hence increases the legitimacy of the state. In case of ethnic

¹⁵ Amin(1988), 236

conflicts, it is this legitimacy factor that determines the outcome. If a state is seen as legitimate and inclusive, the successionist elites would be unable to mobilize the mass support for their cause and hence would not be able to acquire or keep a mass base. In Pakistan, NDP lost its mass appeal by the mid-80s due to effective state intervention in the post-1979 period. Though other factors played a role in weakening the successionist elements in Pashtun areas of Pakistan, the active involvement of Pashtun elites in state structure was the determining factor in changing the nature of Pashtunistan movement.

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