TRIBES AND Tribulations

The West expected that the fall of the Najibullah regime would bring peace to Afghanistan. It did nothing of the sort: the country is still in turmoil. Mihail Konarovovsky examines the complex ethnic roots of the continuing conflict.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in late 1991, the unresolved problems and ambitions of its constituent republics have posed ever more complicated challenges to the emerging multipolar world order.

The newly independent Central Asian states, which have close ethnic, cultural, and religious ties with neighbouring Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan (as well as, to some extent, with Pakistan), have embarked on active foreign policy aimed at establishing comprehensive contacts with the region, against the background of growing Turkish and Islamic sentiment. Clearly, the decline of the USSR has exerted a crucial influence on developments in Afghanistan in particular.

The withdrawal of Soviet troops by March 1989, and the 1991 understanding with Washington to stop supplying arms to rival parties, marked the end of Soviet support for the Najibullah regime—and this, in turn, determined the fate of his government. In late April 1992 it fell, and the country was proclaimed an Islamic republic. But the question of whether the long period of instability and intolerance has really come to an end remains open. Indeed, the ambiguous and controversial developments there since the mujahideen seized power could be seen as indicating merely that the country has entered a new power struggle, this time among the mujahideen themselves.

The first step taken by the new regime was the comprehensive Islamicisation of the country’s political, social, and cultural life. Such a policy seems to be logical since the ‘holy war’ against the ‘infidel’ marxist regime and the Soviet occupation was the main political and ideological core of the mujahideen struggle which kept the otherwise separate and unco-ordinated groups together.

Today’s leaders in Kabul are likely to continue regarding comprehensive Islamicisation as the basis of political con-
solidation while they attempt to solve the urgent economic and social problems which might prevent the country becoming involved in regional integration. Ties with neighbouring Pakistan, as well as Iran and rich Arab nations (especially Saudi Arabia)—the countries which had supported the mujahideen movement over more than a decade—are considered to be the most important factor in overcoming the bitter consequences of civil war.

At the same time, the country’s history indicates that Islam, while an important element, may not be the crucial one in determining further developments there. Rather, the interrelationship of the various ethnic groups in the country is likely to be the main factor influencing the future alignment of the various political forces.

The pillars of mujahideen unity over the last 14 years crumbled swiftly after the 1988 Geneva accords which laid down the schedule for withdrawal of the Soviet troops. After the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan in February 1989, the rebels’ mutual suspicion and distrust turned into open hostility. Bloody clashes broke out among various factions, principally between supporters of Ahmad Shah Masoud (who was identified with the minorities’ movement) and G Hekmatyar (the most powerful and irreconcilable leader of the militant Pushtun majority) despite the enormous efforts of Pakistan and Iran to unify them. That fact largely secured the survival of the Najibullah government over the last three years despite the gradual decrease in Soviet support. With the downfall of the regime, however, the last strand of mujahideen unity disappeared.
Although submerged by the war against the Soviets, confrontation between the Pushtun (Afghan) majority (about 6.5 million strong, with traditional roots in the south and south-west), and the Tajik (3.5 million) and Uzbek (about one million) minorities of the North, as well as Hazara (about one million) Shiite muslims in the western and central parts have, over decades, been at the core of the country’s domestic problems. The political map of Afghanistan has been shaped by the territorial expansion of the Pushtuns from the south and south-east to the north. It was their tribes which laid the cornerstone of the first centralised Afghan state in the mid-18th century, and which (in 1919) proclaimed the restoration of the country’s independence from British rule. That fact traditionally ensured the Pushtun’s key positions in the country’s political and military hierarchy. Migration to the northern and central areas was aimed at enhancing their political and economic influence.

But, against that background, the Tajiks, Uzbeks and, to some extent, Hazaras remained ascendant in economic and cultural spheres bolstered by massive flows of ethnically kindred refugees from Russian Turkistan and the Bokhara Emirate in the 1920s and 1930s. The Tajiks are heirs to centuries-old Iranian material culture, such as settled farming, trade and handicrafts as well as classic literature and fine arts. Experience has urged the Pushtuns towards assimilation with them, resulting in the gradual emergence of the Pushtun-Tajik ‘marriage of convenience’. The Pushtuns saw this as a way of obtaining a more advanced economic position, while the Tajiks sought to bring into reality long-standing ambitions to increase the extent of their role in the country’s politics. However, the process failed to lead to the emergence of any kind of unified national state.

Ethnic suspicions have also consistently hampered the development of any nationwide political movements. The official 1960s doctrine of Afghaniyat (a united and indivisible Afghan nation) was the basic model for President Daud’s Party of National Revolution. But its slogans failed to unite the country, not so much because of anxiety about the growth of strong political associations, but more as the result of strong opposition from minorities. The inability of the leftwing Watan party (which split into two main Pushtun and Tajik factions) to overcome nationalistic prejudices, bedevilled it from the moment of its formation in the mid-1960s. None of the factions could overcome ethnic differences even after they overthrew Daud in April 1978.

The growing role of ethnic minorities in Afghanistan’s politics after 1978 paralleled the revival of Islam as a reaction to the pro-communist coup. The new constitution drawn up after 1978 proclaimed for the first time the proportional ethnic representation in the legislature. An ethnic identity had a direct impact on developments in the central and western provinces.

The rise of minority consciousness was also inevitably influenced by the dramatic changes in the world and in the region after the end of the Cold War—including, of course, the unprecedented eruption of nationalist movements. The emergence of independent nation states from the former Soviet republics on the other side of Afghanistan’s northern borders, and the revival of their historical, religious and ethnic identity had a direct impact on developments in Afghanistan. At the same time, mujahideen from the country’s northern provinces have attempted to exert their own influence on the unfolding events in Central Asia. Openly inciting the revival of radical Islam there, Afghanistan’s mujahideen have established direct ties with new Islamic movements in neighbouring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

If ethnic confrontation worsens in post-Najibullah Afghanistan, the country is unlikely not only to be able to restore peace, but even to maintain its unified nationhood in the long run. But it is quite obvious that the Tajiks, Uzbeks and other minorities will not abandon their aim of maintaining strong positions in the north and west in order to bargain with Kabul for a new status for their region, more independent of any central power than in the past.

The objectives of the Pushtuns’ shaky alliances are more complicated. While they hope to regain their traditional predominance both in the Afghan state and, as far as possible, over the whole country, such goals are unattainable at present. Sooner or later they will be forced to accept a new alignment of forces in the country and will have to make concessions. Whatever those concessions are, they have to be reciprocated. Today’s rivals must meet each other halfway in order to prevent a territorial split which would inevitably have a serious impact on regional stability.

For the foreseeable future, Afghanistan is unlikely to have a nationwide leader who could consolidate all ethnic groups and resolve differences between them. Instead, the situation seems to be moving to the brink of a crisis. The most probable future scenario for the country will be the coexistence of a reasonably weak central power with the broad influence of local leaders in their respective provinces. The main task of the central government in this situation would be the prevention of the physical disintegration of the country, an event which would be extremely unwelcome for Afghanistan’s immediate neighbours, but which cannot be ruled out. The wisest course of action for the mujahideen would be to form a compromise central government, which might control finance, defence and foreign relations, but to devolve broad economic and cultural powers to provinces or national enclaves. Following the Lebanese experiment, power-sharing might allow for a Pushtun president and a Tajik prime minister, with proportional ethnic representation in the legislature.
Foreign influences will clearly have a major say in whether such a desirable situation comes about. During the war, the main outside players were, on the one hand, the USSR and, on the other, Pakistan, the USA, Iran and Saudi Arabia. But in the new regional and global circumstances, neither Washington nor Moscow is likely to play a critical role in Afghanistan. The United States lost interest after the Soviet withdrawal, and returned to its traditional view on Afghanistan as a nation of little political and economic significance, and certainly not one of vital interest. Instead, Washington ‘discovered’ Central Asia for the first time.

At the same time, Russia, which has inherited the bulk of what remains of the former USSR’s foreign policy, is now preoccupied with its own enormous economic and social problems, and with clearing up its relations with its new neighbours, including those in Central Asia. The long-term policy toward Kabul will most probably be determined by Russia’s relations with the Central Asian nations, as well as with Iran and Pakistan. Moscow is now politically as well as both geographically distant from Afghanistan.

Afghanistan’s immediate neighbours such as Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will play more significant roles. None of them is likely to be interested in exacerbating ethnic friction in the country. An increase in separatist sentiments in the north will inevitably result in a turbulent upsurge of Pushtun nationalism all over Afghanistan and demands for revenge. Against that background, old demands to create a ‘united Pushtunistan’ on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border might appear on the agenda again. This traditional source of conflict between the two countries, despite having been significantly decreased over years of war in Afghanistan, nevertheless remains a latent cause of tension between Kabul and Islamabad.

If such sentiments deepen, the situation in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province would be seriously aggravated, causing general instability throughout the country. Islamabad does not need to be reminded of its own bitter experience in dealing with Peshawar-based Pushtun mujahideen and three million refugees from Afghanistan. With Pakistan increasingly preoccupied with its own policy towards Central Asia—aimed, among other things, at strengthening its political credibility in regional competition with India—any new imbalances on the western flanks would be regarded as unacceptable in Islamabad. On the other hand, to forestall events Pakistan might reanimate the four-decade old doctrine of confederation with Afghanistan, but now attempting to embrace only that country’s Pushtun areas. But in the long run such an attempt seems certain to put a new time-bomb under Pakistani domestic stability.

Neither is Iran likely to be interested in becoming enmbedded in impending ethnic quarrels in Afghanistan either. Nevertheless, to ensure its political presence there, Tehran will strongly insist that the Hazara Shia minority of the central and western regions be incorporated into governmental structures. If ethnic intolerance gains momentum, Tehran, which traditionally considers these parts of Afghanistan to be within its sphere of influence, might not be able to avoid the temptation of strengthening its ties with Shiite Muslim parties which have been fostered and fed by Iran over more than a decade. The predominance of Tajiks who are culturally close to Iran in the north, and Hazaras (who are close to Tehran religiously) in the central and western parts, might in the long run fuse together Iranian political ambitions both in Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Uzbekistan (the largest and potentially the most powerful of Afghanistan’s neighbours to the north) as well as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan—all with populations kindred to those in the north of Afghanistan—are preoccupied in dealing with economic crises, maintaining their own domestic harmony, and deepening newly established relations with Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. Their governments’ grave concern over the possible disintegration of Afghanistan is evident. But if a split did seem to be on the cards, Central Asia would necessarily be involved in the process as well, however reluctantly. Nationalistic and religious factions in the republics may voice support for such movements so as to strengthen their own positions at home.

Uncertainties in Afghanistan might simultaneously aggravate interregional relations in Central Asia as a whole. Tajiks in Afghanistan will inevitably continue to keep an eye on Tajikistan as a potential ally both for enhancing their traditional ambitions in Afghanistan, and in case of worsening relations with the country’s Turkic Uzbek and Turkmen populations. For its part, Uzbekistan, with a larger population (17 million) than Afghanistan’s (15 million) is unlikely to refrain from backing its ethnic brothers in an emergency. Pan-Turkic ideals, which have deep roots in Afghanistan as well, will only exacerbate this process. Hence, the new challenges in Afghanistan will become the first test for Central Asian republics in dealing with regional affairs.

To prevent such bitter scenarios being played out in post-Najibullah Afghanistan and its neighbours, all the regional players need to demonstrate maximum discretion and cooperation in their actions. Economic and financial assistance might be the main leverage for them in Afghanistan’s affairs. That country’s future admission to regional economic associations would certainly help. But the country is unlikely to be restored without massive international aid. Any such assistance should be administered only by the central government, so that it may be effectively monitored by the UN. Neither the USA nor Russia, despite the heavy burden of its transition towards a market economy, can afford to stand aside from such a process.

These two policy streams—domestic and regional—might together promote a peaceful outcome of the impending crises in Afghanistan. If they are not successfully implemented, however, the future Afghanistan could easily become the detonator in a deteriorating situation in post-Cold War Asia.

MIHAEL KONAROVSKY, a former Soviet diplomat, is a fellow at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.