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The Building of the Afghan State: Upon Whose Bones?

Before modern nation-states took over as the most prevalent state form, humanity went through different kinds of states, including city-states and empires to manage the population and provide security. The coexistence of the nation and the state is a recent phenomenon, with nationalism serving to support the authority of the state in areas with rather homogeneous populations. The American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, and later the decolonization process are considered important points in history that led to the conscious creation of nation-states in the modern age (see Wimmer and Feinstein, 2010; Roeder, 2007). The outcome of the rise of the nation-state, however, has not been the same for all communities. The emergence of nation-states, particularly those that replaced the fallen empires or were a fraction of a fallen empire came with huge consequences for many ethnic and religious groups around the world as the transition from empire to nation-state led to the homogenization of the population in fragments of the collapsed empires (Getachew, 2019), which in some cases included religion and sometimes ethnicity and language as elements of national identity and a force of power legitimation.

Tilly (1997) contends that the birth of the nation-state was a direct result of the fall of empires, implying that consolidated states established as a result of an upsurge in nationalism that replaced the former imperial entities only two centuries ago became the dominant state form, primarily in Europe and later by colonization and emulation throughout the world. The transition from the empire state to the nation-state has had far-reaching consequences. Several empires, in different circumstances, adhered to tolerance and accepted the multiplicity of peoples and their varied traditions, including religion, as a commonplace occurrence as uniformity and homogeneity were not the goals

for empires (Barkey, 2014). The nation-state, however, is based on the concept of a single people with a wide array of shared characteristics, leading to the homogenization of populations in some parts of the world (Hobsbawm, 1997).

Afghanistan, which nowadays easily qualifies as a portion of hell on earth under the Taliban regime, especially for women and children, is an example where several mass killings and at least one genocide took place amidst the rise of its “modern state” in the late twentieth century. After the fall of the Durrani empire, the “modern” Afghan state was created primarily as a buffer state in the late 19th century between the territories of the British and Russian empires after the failure of the British attempts to integrate Afghanistan into colonial India (see Rasanayagam, 2003; Maley, 2010). In the new Afghan state, Amir Abdur Rahman (1880–1901), who is described by some historians as “the Iron Amir” reached the throne with British support. The Amir also received a huge annual subsidy from the British in return for handing control of the foreign affairs of the country to the British. The British subsidy and access to the international arms market enabled him to start the forceful unification of the country, which came with huge consequences for several communities.

Scholars studying Afghanistan agree, to a great extent, that Afghan nationalism is not an all-encompassing identity, but constructed exclusively around Pashtun ethnic identity and Sunni Islam. Mousavi (1998), argues that Afghan nationalism is, in fact, “Pashtunism” that has sought marginalization of the majority non-Pashtun population and has contributed to the national crisis following the “Afghanization” of the country. Similarly, Afghan nationalism, Hyman (2002) describes, is an “internal colonialism” imposed by the Pashtun ruling class over the non-Pashtun population of Afghanistan. Sadr (2020) concludes that Afghan nationalism is an ideology constructed through a selective narration of history and culture that builds the “Afghan nation” as a “political construct” and under Abdur Rahman, it sought to homogenize all groups into a Pashtun identity, employing violence and Islam to justify state authority.

Naturally, there have been ethnic and religious groups who do not fall into the category of the “Afghan nation” and become the “other”. With regards to the “other”, or the non-Pashtun groups, Abdurrahman primarily adopted exclusion towards them as a

mechanism for nation-building, engaging in an extreme form of autocratic nation-building, and coercively eradicating certain groups. The ethnic group that paid the highest price was the Hazaras. The reason why Hazaras were targeted was that they were the most different group to the then politically dominant Pashtun group. The Hazaras look different, Speak Persian, practice Shia Islam, and most importantly, the Hazaras had long preserved their autonomy and possessed some of the most fertile pieces of land in today's Helmand, Kandahar, and Urozgan provinces. They did not meet the conditions of an ethnically Pashtun and religiously Sunni Islam-dominated "Afghan nation". Then the solution Abdur Rahman came up with was to completely eradicate them, launching huge campaigns against the Hazaras.

According to Ibrahimi (2017), the mobilization of Pashtun tribes against the Hazaras was the largest of the time and was motivated, in part, by religious leaders leading Friday prayers who received communications, but more importantly, economic incentives to describe the Hazaras as "Kafirs" (infidels) and portray "jihad" (holy war) against them as a religious obligation. After the war imposed on the Hazaras, Abdur Rahman primarily undertook policies that destroyed the "national pattern" of the Hazaras, followed by depopulation, forced displacement, and destruction of the Hazaras' entire economic, social, and political structure. "In its ferocity and extent, it [the Hazaras genocide] is comparable only to genocides such as the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the Rwandan genocide of 1994" (Ibrahimi, 2017, p. 80). While the main reason for the mass killings of the Hazaras was economic, Islam and Pashtun ethnic identity, as two of the main elements of Afghan nationalism did play a part in the mobilization of Pashtun tribes against the Hazaras as it also was part of the Amir's policy of homogenization of Afghanistan: "As part of this policy, the Amir ordered several Hanafi Sunni mosques to be built among the Hazaras of Day Kundi, which were led by Sunni mullahs whose job it was to convert people to Sunni Islam," (Ibrahimi, 2017, p. 84).

The Afghan state had been built on the bones of the Hazaras. Afghan monarchs, presidents, and Amirs, and their governments not only never recognized the genocide of Hazaras but kept persecuting the community one way or the other for several decades, making the group one of the most persecuted groups in the world, and of course Afghanistan a true portion of hell on earth for all its residents.

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