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Ideology without Leadership

The Rise and Decline of Maoism in Afghanistan

This paper is part of an AAN series that looks at the development of political parties and movements in Afghanistan. The aim of the series is to fill the gaps that exist in the current literature by exploring the role of political parties in the contemporary political system and by documenting the history of political movements that continue to play an important role or have been often overlooked.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 1960s were an important, formative decade in the history of Afghanistan. Following the country's transformation into a constitutional monarchy in 1964, three ideological currents emerged to compete for the loyalty of a growing educated class in Kabul and other urban centres. At the heart of the ideological debates were concerns about the slow pace of socio-economic development and political reforms. These intellectual debates soon linked up with political dynamics at home and abroad, deeply influencing the tumultuous fate of the country through the following decades until the present.

The first to appear was the Hezb-e Dimokratik-e Khalq-e Afghanistan, or People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the main proponent of Soviet-style socialism in Afghanistan, in 1965. The formation of the Maoist Sazman-e Jawanan-e Mutaraqi, or Progressive Youth Organisation (SajaM/PYO) followed in 1966. In 1969 a third current was organised around Jawanan-e Musalman, or the Muslim Youth,¹ inspired by the ideology of the international Muslim Brotherhood. Kabul's university and streets became the scenes of a fierce and at times violent competition between supporters of those different ideological groups.

¹ It is important to note that religiously motivated political activism has a much longer history in the country. Roy suggests that the first Islamic circle of this period was formed around 1958. See Olivier Roy, 'The Origins of the Islamist Movement in Afghanistan', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol 3, no 2, 1984, 117.

The Maoists, that is SaJaM/PYO, became better known in Afghanistan as the Shola'i, after *Shola-ye Jawed* (Eternal Flame),² its first newspaper publication in 1968. An important part of the Maoists' strategy was the denunciation of PDPA's ideology as 'revisionist and [an] extension of [Soviet] social imperialism'. The Maoists argued that Afghanistan bore greater similarities to pre-revolutionary China in its level of socio-economic development than it did to Russia'. Unlike their PDPA rivals, they refused to participate in the country's parliamentary elections and instead stressed the mobilisation of the peasantry as the main revolutionary force on the path to socialism.

In a predominantly rural country where labour hardly existed as a class, a 'protracted war' by revolutionary peasants might have offered greater prospects for a socialist revolution but the challenges of organising a 'people's army' from among the Afghans peasants and launching a communist party were more difficult than it first seemed to the proponents of this theory. In practice, the PDPA's strategy of a 'peaceful transition to socialism' – which did not remain peaceful for long – proved more fruitful. In 1965, four of the party's members were elected to the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of the Afghan parliament) under the new constitutional system; in 1973 it supported Muhammad Daud Khan's military coup d'état that deposed the monarchy, becoming an important player in his government, and in 1978 it seized power through its own coup. By contrast, SaJaM was dissolved in 1972 after intense internal ideological debates failed to produce a common strategy of the movement, setting in motion an endless tendency towards factionalism and fragmentation.

The reasons for the decline of Maoism in Afghanistan are not entirely endogenous. Perhaps, a major cause was the adverse national and international environment in which the Maoist movement developed. During the war between the mujahedin and the Soviet-backed regime in the 1980s, the Afghan Maoist factions found themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation. Following the massive government crackdown in cities in the aftermath of the PDPA's 27 April (7 Saur) 1978 coup, more Maoist groups were forced to move into the countryside. These groups took part in a number of revolts against the regime across the country but soon found themselves in deadly conflicts with local mujahedin organisations, as Islamicisation and local power struggles became important features of the war. Furthermore, both the PDPA and the mujahedin received enormous material and political support from the Soviet Union and Western and Islamic countries respectively. In a situation where outside support became a key determinant of success and survival, the Maoists starved and China, their most likely ally, chose to support the mujahedin. As a strategy of survival, most Maoists were forced to seek the protection of mujahedin organisations, which they joined, often at the cost of abandoning or significantly moderating their ideological aspirations. Independent survival, as the experience of the Nimruz Front shows, was only possible by adopting political pragmatism at the cost of ideological rhetoric.

The tendency towards division and incessant fragmentation among Maoists in Afghanistan may not be an encouraging sign for other ideological movements in the country. However, native movements tend to lose control of their own fate when countries descend into chaos and conflict. The history of the Maoist movement in Afghanistan is a clear example of this phenomenon. Much about the war and conflict in Afghanistan can be attributed to internal controversies, but it is also clear that the native intellectual movements in the country were dominated and overwhelmed by powerful political developments emanating from abroad before they were given the chance to reach maturity.

² Actually, it should be written Sho'la, but for better readability we leave out the ('), which stands for the letter 'ain'. We write 'Shola'i' for the members of the organisation, though, to avoid pronunciation as 'Sholay'.

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