Conflict or Civil War? Conceptualizing the Conflict in Afghanistan

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"We are concerned that Afghanistan could descend into civil war within a few years."
Defence Committee 2013

The above concern, voiced in a recent report sanctioned by the UK, was one among many which cautioned that the impending international military disengagement could be a prelude to a civil war along an ethnic axis. Several indicators – ranging from a 14 per cent increase in civilian casualties compared to 2012, according to UNAMA (UNAMA 2013); predictions of a further increase in the number of internally displaced persons, currently estimated to be around 600,000 by the UNHCR; Afghanistan continuing to be the largest source of refugees for the last 32 years, producing 2,585,600 refugees (UNHCR 2013); plummeting economic growth, from a high of 14.4 per cent in 2012 to 3.1 per cent in 2013, coupled with a steady fall in revenue collection (World Bank 2013); to a less quantifiable, but perceptible, sense of uncertainty surrounding the political and military transition – have all served to bolster speculations of Afghanistan slipping back into "civil war" of the kind it experienced in the 1990s.

Commentaries speculating on the future and reflecting on the past trajectory of conflicts in Afghanistan have conceptualized these developments through narrow conceptual prisms of "civil war" and ethnicity, understood in a primordial sense. The conflict is talked of in terms of a reignition of an "ethnic conflict", stemming from old ethnic hatreds that came to the fore following the collapse of the Afghan state in the 1990s. Pundits warn of a similar spectre repeating itself post-2014. Further, as a natural corollary to conceptualization of the conflict, it is seen as pitting the Pashtuns (represented predominantly by the Taliban and, to an extent, Hekmatyar) against the non-Pashtuns (most visibly represented by what came to be known as the *Harkat-i-Shamal*, popularly referred to as the Northern Alliance).

Such overtly simplistic analytical frameworks for understanding the conflict in Afghanistan remain deeply problematic on two counts. First, they tend to draw neat parallels between the Soviet withdrawal, completed by 15 February 1989, and the impending US military drawdown, by December 2014. Undoubtedly there exist certain parallels, such as the country's continued dependence on foreign aid to fund the bulk of its national budget; inability to exercise effective governmental writ beyond provincial and district centres; creation and reliance on private militias that eventually became predatory on the local populace; existence of safe havens in Pakistan for armed actors; supply of arms and ammunition by external actors; and Rawalpindi's consistently concerted efforts to mould political contours in Kabul. However, fundamental differences also exist, namely that the Kabul government, no matter how deeply flawed, enjoys much greater international acceptance than that of Dr. Najibullah. Further, while dependent on external assistance, both in economic and military terms, Kabul's vulnerability is relatively pruned-down today, owing to entrenchment of international commitments towards continued economic assistance. And although Kabul is yet to sign on the dotted line of its Bilateral Security Agreement with the US, it has already sealed strategic partnership agreements for military assistance with countries like India and Norway. Finally, on the social front, unlike the 1990s, when the conflict was couched in demands for social recognition and equality through political and military participation, today there is much greater and visible participation of new social groups, primarily the Uzbeks and Hazaras, in the political and military arena. The fight would now not be so much for breaking into the politico-military arena as for protecting, and perhaps expanding, some of the gains made. Clearly, the similarities notwithstanding,

there are other distinct variables at play that may not necessarily take the country down the path of inevitable and bloody conflict. Hence, this article consciously employs the more neutral term “conflict”, as opposed to “civil war”, in the context of Afghanistan.

Further, it has been argued here that the conceptualization of the conflict in Afghanistan as a “civil war”, frozen along a neat ethnic axis, rests on conceptual fogginess concerning the understanding of what constitutes “civil war”, as well as the concept of ethnicity as a lived social and political reality in Afghanistan. This leads to a biased understanding of the conflict, in turn providing a fertile ground for breeding flawed policy prescriptions, ranging from partition of the country along ethnic lines to attempted engineering of a proportional representation at an institutional level, also predicated along ethnic lines. Further, the Correlates of War Project adds that for a conflict to be defined as a “civil war” it should result in a total of at least 1,000 battle deaths during each year of the war (Correlates of War Project n.d.), with at least 100 people killed on both sides (Fearon & Latin 2003).

One of the principal assumptions upon which conflicts are classified as “civil wars” is that such conflicts play out within the territorial borders of the state. Another seminal parameter on which the definition of a “civil war” rests is the involvement of the state (or its claimants) as one of the principal combatants, engaged in conflict with armed opposition groups who aim to take control of the state. Afghanistan for much of the 1990s (1992-1996) was characterised by a collapse of state instrumentalities. Further, the classification of the conflict over the course of the 1990s as a “civil war” obscures international culpability in protracting the armed conflict. The transnational sources of financial, military, and political support for the factions engaged in ferocious combat are all too well known to be repeated here. The transnational dimension remains as sharp as ever even today. Clearly implications flow from adoption of nomenclature to analyze the conflict in Afghanistan.

The other problematic presumption often peddled is the portrayal of the conflict as an “ethnic conflict”, frozen, as it was, along a neat ethnic axis; stemming from centuries of ethnic antagonisms; and pitting the Pashtun majority vis-à-vis the non-Pashtun minorities. Such an understanding appears to treat ethnicity as a fixed and geographically bounded category, something which, one could well argue, is detached from the operational reality of ethnicity in the everyday context of the Afghan society. Certainly there existed discrimination and deprivation, both real and perceived, along ethnic lines, yet, in spite of this, there existed traditions of exogamy that notably declined much later, following the onset of conflict. Similarly, there exist many instances in Afghanistan, both documented and in current social practice – for instance, incorporation of non-Pashtuns into the fold, breaking the idea of patrilineal descent central to the idea of Pashtun identity – that underscore the fluidity of ethnic boundaries that traditionally characterized the Afghan landscape.

Neat ethnic explanations of the conflict neither reflect these social realities in Afghanistan, nor do they help answer the question of why ethnicity did not typically lend itself to political mobilization on a pan-Afghan scale prior to 1992. Or, for that matter, the question of why ethnicities like the Tajiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks do not opt for secession or merger with geographically contigous co-ethnicities in Central Asia. Instead, they continued to look towards Kabul and jockey for its control. Historically speaking, ethno-political assertion was a new development for, on several earlier occassions (except for a brief period in 1929), any challenge to Kabul was traditionally thwarted by joining forces of Kohistani Tajiks from the North and Ghilzai Pashtuns from the East. The two invariably supported a Durrani contender to the throne. This pattern of Durrani dominance over core positions of power – often at the expense of rival Pashtun tribal branches, most notably the Ghilizais – continued until the communist coup d’état of April 1978 (Rubin, B.R. 1992).

Following the communist takeover, the Ghizais almost completely eclipsed the Durranis. Additionally, there was mobilization and institutionalization of ethnic identity on the Soviet nationality model by the Moscow backed PDPA government. Language and nationality policies most visibly embodied this development, along with an opening of the military arena to new social groups. Equally important was the role played by armed opposition to the Kabul government, which mobilized and armed people on a scale like never before. This was particularly true for groups like the Hazaras and Uzbeks, who had long remained on the fringes. Conflict had helped enlarge the field of political and military participation on an unprecedented scale, in turn contributing to undermining the legitimacy of the old social and political order by 1992.

Political voices of Hazaras and Uzbeks were most visibly articulated by the *Hizb-i-Wahadat* and *Junbish-i-Milli*, respectively. Their demands were put forth in explicit ethno-political terms, calling for social recognition and equality as national minorities of Afghanistan. However, the ethno-political salience notwithstanding, there was a frequent alignment and realignment of forces that defied simplistic ethnic logic. Consider, for instance, that from 1992 to late 1995, the predominantly Hazara *Hizb-i-Wahadat* allied with the pre-dominantly Ghilzai-Pashtun *Hizb-i-Islami* (Hekmatyar), and subsequently with the Taliban for a brief period in 1995. Similarly, General Dostum switched allegiances from the *Jamiat-i-Islami* to Hekmatyar in late 1993 and early 1994, before making peace with the *Jamiat* in 1996. While the Nangarhar *shura* allied itself with Ahmad Shah Massoud's forces against the Taliban, they justified their use of violence and frequent political realignments – that often defied neat ethnic logic – as driven by what scholars refer to as 'antagonistic cooperation', a "combination of two persons or groups to satisfy a great common interest while minor antagonisms of interest which exist between them are suppressed" (Coser 1964, p.140).

One's position as an ethnic minority alone has seldom dictated political or military alignments in Afghanistan. This holds true even in times of peace, demonstrated by the cross-ethnic patchwork of alliances stiched-up for the presidential elections in the country. This unsettles many conventional understandings of the dynamics underpinning the trajectory of developments in Afghanistan. However, a recasting of our conceptual frames is important to gain a sound engagement with the complex dynamics at play in Afghanistan and to prevent recourse to the use of narrow conceptual straight jackets to understand the past and project that into the future.

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