Afghanistan's 'Liberal' History: Back to Year Zero?

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/31/afghanistans-liberal-history-back-to-year-zero/

MARTIN DUFFY, AUG 31 2021

Among Afghan psephologists, a rare and currently highly endangered species, the country's 1949 parliamentary elections are oftentimes regarded as a golden age of electoral freedom. Edwards (2002) explores this post-1949 period through the lives of three giants of Afghanistan's history – Nur Muhammad Taraki, Samiullah Safi, and Qazi Amin Waqad. He shows how the promise of progress and prosperity that animated Afghanistan from the late 1940s, and again in the 1960s crumbled and became the present tragedy of discord, destruction, and despair (Ibid.) The political leaders whom Edwards profiles were engaged in the key struggles of the country's recent history. They hoped to see Afghanistan become a more just and democratic nation. But their visions for their country were radically different, and in the end, all three failed and were killed or exiled. They have inspired a sense of liberal tolerance which occasionally still makes an appearance in the years after 1949. As the recent news from Afghanistan has been so bleak, it is interesting to reflect on an earlier, more liberal, Afghanistan which possessed strong female figures and dynamic student societies in a civil society accustomed to the concept of protest.

In that year (1949) a confident political premier, Shah Mahmud permitted remarkably open polls to the country's national assembly. Consequently, the parliamentary term which resulted under Mahmud (1949–1951) has historically been dubbed the "liberal parliament" (Barfield, 2012.) Barfield succinctly introduces readers to the diversity of tribal and ethnic groups in Afghanistan, explaining what unites them as Afghans despite the regional, cultural, and political differences that divide them. Barfield shows how Afghanistan's armed factions plunged the country into a civil war, giving rise to clerical rule by the Taliban and Afghanistan's isolation from the world. In many ways it is a tragic descent into chaos.

Although neither a peacenik nor a political reformer, Mahmud was tolerant of press and opposition and there are some who look back fondly on his day. It was relatively short-lived. Alas, parliamentary elections in 1952 were considered a backward step. In the interim period the state had already lost its luster of liberalism, institutions had retreated into conservative fundamentalism, and liberalization had been stopped in its tracks. Student unions across the country were abruptly silenced, newspapers had become propagandistic and opposition leaders were mostly behind bars.

Against such a repressive atmosphere, King Mohammed Zahir Shah approved a *Loya jirga* to be held in 1964. In Afghanistan, by tradition, such national meetings drew in the National Assembly, the Senate, and the Supreme Court and its commissions. The object was to create a new Afghan constitution. The King was not unduly worried about traitors as the entire assembly (consisting of 446 men and six women) actively supported him. However, the jirga did incorporate some dissidents among an assembly which eschewed a diversity of social, political, and religious opinion.

Afghanistan's 1965 Election

At the time, the challenges of low voter turnout, lack of political parties, and efforts by government officials to influence the results went un-noticed in the atmosphere of this successful jirga. The parliament it created even boasted some anti-royalists, Pashtun nationalists, business folk, intellectual liberals, and lefties, although overwhelmingly and comfortably pro-royal. 1969 marked another one of Afghanistan's retrospective steps backward. While more non-Pashtuns were elected than in the previous legislature, the urban liberals and female delegates were

decimated. This was a high-water mark that political and civil society tolerance in a future Afghanistan was a quality always under threat.

Whether as a republic or democratic republic things smoldered on as they were until in 1987, the Soviet-backed Afghan communist government introduced a law permitting the formation of other political parties. It also announced that it would share power with opposition groups and welcomed a new bicameral National Assembly (Meli Shura), with a president to be indirectly elected to a seven year term. In November 1987, a Loya jirga unanimously elected Najibullah as President. Evidence of the future political rift was already manifest. The 1988 elections were ominously boycotted by the Mujahideen. Nevertheless, the Afghan government left a guaranteed 50 of the 234 seats in the House of Representatives, and further seats in the Senate, vacant in the hope that the guerrillas would participate (Ibid.) They failed to do so- an ominous foreboding of the lack of inclusiveness which has characterized Afghanistan ever since.

Creation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

With the withdrawal of Soviet troops and demise of communist government in April 1992, an indirect election for president was held in December 1992 ushering in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The foremost study of this period carefully explains how the Taliban came into being, how it is sustained underground terrorism and how Osama bin Laden had risen to such a figure of absolute power (Rashid, 2001.) Rashid clarifies the often confusing racial and religious tensions that dominate this fractious land and how the drug trade exacerbates an already strained situation.

Under the 2001 Bonn Agreement, Afghanistan should have held presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 in lieu of the transitional assembly of American-backed Hamid Karzai (Venning, 2020). Presidential elections were held in 2004, but parliamentary elections were not held until mid-September 2005. Karzai won the election with 55.4% of the votes and three times more votes than any other candidate. That was straightforward enough. However, and predictably, trouble flared with the provincials and parliamentary polls. Afghanistan held parliamentary and provincial council elections on September 18, 2005. The release of official results was delayed by accusations of election fraud, and were finally announced on November 12, 2005. These results were much more problematic.

Former warlords secured most seats in both the lower house and the provincial council. Women won 28% of the seats in the lower house, six more than the 25% guaranteed under the 2004 Constitution. Even by then, psephologists were expressing doubt about the diligence of the Afghan electoral roll. The August 2009 presidential and provincial council elections were stymied by violence, fraud, and intimidation. Over a million votes had to be excluded on grounds of suspected fraud in an electoral exercise borne by the long-suffering international community at a cost of up to $500 million. The UN put voter turnout at around 30%. Under US pressure, Karzai agreed to a run-off vote between himself and his main rival, Dr Abdullah Abdulla. The Afghan election commission and Karzai were lobbied from the United States and its allies to cancel the run-off. They complied and it never happened.

2010 Elections

Afghanistan's next parliamentary elections were held on September 18, 2010. More than 2,600 candidates, including more than 400 women, ran for office. This looked encouraging, at least on the surface. However, the Taliban proved to be active election spoilers. During the run-up to the elections in September 2010, the Taliban intimidated villagers from voting. In such areas, many people would not vote because the Taliban left night letters warning they will cut off the finger of anyone if they find it marked with the indelible ink used to prevent multiple voting. In late November 2010, Afghanistan's election commission disqualified 21 candidates from the September 18 parliamentary elections for alleged fraudulent activities, a spokesperson said. 19 of the candidates were winning or leading their races, according to partial election results, while two others had failed to win seats (Venning, 2020).

A presidential election was held in Afghanistan on 5 April 2014. Incumbent president Hamid Karzai was not eligible to run due to term limits. An initial field of 27 candidates was whittled down to 8. The frontrunners were the veteran politician Abdullah Abdullah and former World Bank official, Ashraf Ghani. Fraud allegations tainting the final result

resulted in a recount of votes at 1,900 of the 23,000 polling stations Ghani was eventually declared the winner in September 2014.

Parliamentary elections were held on 20 October 2018 to elect members of the House of the People. They had originally been scheduled for 15 October 2016, but were postponed to 20 October 2018. Much of the prelude to the elections focused on the debate over reforming the country's electoral laws. The new parliament was later inaugurated on April 26, 2019. Once again, Afghanistan took two steps forward and two steps back – a familiar scene in the story of modern Afghanistan.

Democracy Derailed or Walking Dead

Malala Yousafzai described the impact of extremism and the rise of the Taliban on her native Pakistan (Yousafzai, 2013.) This autobiography details the early life of Yousafzai, her father's ownership of schools and activism, the rise and fall of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan in Swat Valley and the assassination attempt made against Yousafzai, when she was aged 15, following her activism in support of female education. Afghanistan has now been a unique international preoccupation for more than twenty years. During that time Afghanistan has seen powerful personalities and occasionally genuine efforts to build democracy.

While not without accusations of intimidation and vote-rigging, modern Afghanistan has consistently conducted elections of some variety and with greater or lesser approval rating. Year zero has (however) been reached in the events of August 2021 by the arrival of a nomenclature of government yet unmatched by any of those precedents even all the way back to Shah Mahmud in 1949. The streets of Kabul are eerily quiet at night as this once vibrant city is visited by an invasion of outward and aggressive religiosity. Afghanistan hunkers down, fearful of the days ahead. Women house-bound, anyone with international connections nervous, and most fearful of the future.

Approaching Year Zero

It is almost a dystopian vision to wake up surrounded by an administration who required no democratic election and yet hold virtually the country's entire geographical territory. As those expensive American Humvees are sequestered by the Taliban to pursue Afghanistan's infamous ghost soldiers, one might be forgiven for skepticism as to the fortune reaped by such a colossal investment in money, life, politics, and spirit. To Afghanistan's ghost wars, we add its ghost soldiers who may well explain why resistance to the Taliban proved so limp (Venning, 2020) However we should not belittle the enormous sacrifice made by the international community and by Afghanistan to cultivate an indigenous democracy. Perhaps the terrain proved just too unviable for democratic elections to be fulfilled.

As the Taliban consolidate hands-on governance and the international evacuation effort ends, there is little prospect of future work for Afghanistan's psephologists. The aspiring words of global leaders and UN administrators could not hold the strategic progress which had been achieved. The international community sleeps uneasily contemplating the political future of this contested country. For Americans there is an inevitable "Saigon syndrome", for Britons re-lived horrors of the 1842 retreat from Kabul, and for NATO, a sense of a world imperfect.

There is palpable uncertainty about the months ahead, and what horror may yet face the people of Afghanistan. International eyes will be on the diplomatic and strategic red lines which evolve as nations engage with the emergent Taliban administration and its promissory statement on rights. As we do so, we should not forget these ill-fated people have endured a diversity of leaders amidst a rich modern history. There is some inspiration for us in the great Afghan tradition of proverbs. In a prominent acclamation we are encouraged to, "forget the past, but look out in the future", thus reminding us of the cyclicality of a tragic history. With great resonance for the present, Afghans also say, "blood cannot be washed out with blood."

References

Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, Thomas Barfield, Princeton, 2012.

Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords, Ahmed Rashid, Pan Books, New York, 2001

Heroes of the Age – Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier , David B Edwards, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

Before Taliban – Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad, David B Edwards, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002

I Am Malala: The Story of the Girl Who Stood Up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban , Malala Yousafzai, Little Brown & Co., New York, 2013.

Into Helmand with the Walking Dead: A Story of Marine Corps Combat in Afghanistan , Miles Venning et al, Pen & Sword Publishing, New York, 2020.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.