

Afghanistan:

The Forgotten War

Naomi Minwalla is a third-year York undergraduate student studying economics and politics. In last week's *Excalibur* an article about her experiences was published. Minwalla spent last summer with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Peshawar, Pakistan. The IRC is a non-sectarian, voluntary organization which provides relief to refugees worldwide. Minwalla assisted the IRC Self-Reliance Programme Coordinator who organized income-generation projects for Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. Over one-third of Afghanistan's population has taken asylum in Pakistan since the Russian invasion in 1979.

The direct contact which Minwalla had with the Afghan refugees provided her with valuable insights about the history and politics of Afghanistan. Her perspectives are included in the following article which was written September 8, 1989 upon her return to Canada.

God is most great. I witness that there is no God but Allah (The God). I witness that Muhammed is His messenger. Come to prayer. Come to prosperity. God is most Great. There is no God but Allah.

Five times a day, these are the words which echo from the mosques when all Muslims are called to prayer in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Wherever the people may be — in a mosque, at work, at home, or on the roadside — they stop in the direction of Mecca to profess their faith and commitment to Almighty Allah and His Prophet Muhammed. The beginning phrase — "God is most great" — is also the battle cry of the mujahideen (Holy warriors) in neighbouring Afghanistan. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979, the Afghans have been committed to a Holy Islamic War (Jihad) in defence of their homeland.

Reasons For The War

Many reasons lie behind the Soviet intervention and the persistence of the Communist regime to affirm its power in Kabul today. The paranoia of Islamic militancy spreading into its southern borders has historically been one of Russia's concerns. Secondly, the strategic position of Afghanistan is one which any superpower would like to pin on its map. The mostly arid and mountainous country is land-locked on all sides by Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran. Many observers feel that if the Soviets had complete control of Afghanistan, then Pakistan would be next in line. This would give Russia direct access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Having an upper-hand in Afghanistan would also increase Soviet influence in the Gulf region, which contains most of the world's oil reserves. But perhaps the primary reason for the military invasion was to prevent the tenuous

Communist regime in Kabul from collapsing.

The Communist Party In Afghanistan

Throughout history, Afghanistan had been ruled by a monarchy with local tribal leaders in the rural areas. Their last king, Zahir Shah, instituted a new "liberalism" in the 1960s which enabled political parties to form and spread their word through the free press. This policy allowed for the emergence of the Communist "People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan" (PDPA) in 1965.

By the late 1960s many urban people began to question Zahir Shah's supposed constitutional monarchy and turned to extreme left-wing or right-wing parties in hopes of change.

became more fragile.

Another communist coup took place in September 1979, with Taraki being replaced by Hafizullah Amin. By this time, contempt for the Communist Party had heightened and security in Afghanistan was crumbling. The only Russian alternative was direct military intervention. In December 1979, Russian tanks rolled into Afghanistan, thus setting the stage for one of the most brutal guerilla wars in history.



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A coup d'etat in 1973 brought an end to the country's long line of monarchies and introduced Muhammed Daoud as president. Although he initially had close ties with the Communist Party, Russia's hope of using him as a "puppet leader" was soon dissipated. His new modernization programme and friendly relations with Pakistan, Iran, and the United States came as a surprise. By 1976, all pro-Soviet ministers in his administration had been purged.

The Invasion

The murder of a prominent Afghan communist in April 1978, set off a series of demonstrations against Daoud which were followed by the imprisonment of key communist leaders. Within days, Daoud was assassinated and the communists installed Nur Muhammed Taraki as their leader. Taraki immediately began a series of rapid reforms which were extremely offensive to the traditional Islamic way of life. Among these were land reforms and the abolition of dowries and arranged marriages. Within months, the people led an armed revolt and the Taraki leadership

The Peace Agreement

After nine years of fighting, a settlement under the auspices of the United Nations was finally reached in April 1988. The Russians were to remove their troops, while the West was to stop supplying arms to the resistance. Since the final phase of the Soviet troop withdrawal in February 1989, most of the international community thought that the war would finally be over. The mujahideen would claim a victory and the more than five million refugees in Pakistan and Iran would finally be able to return home. These presentiments are far from true. The pervasive and debilitating struggles of the mujahideen coupled with the tenacity of the Communist leader which the Russians left behind has surprised the world over. Contrary to popular Western belief, the war inside Afghanistan continues and neither the Communists nor the rebels seem willing to negotiate a compromise.

The War Today

Lack of security and political stability has induced more refugees to leave Afghanistan now than to return home. Although the mujahideen control most of the countryside, their

failed attempts to seize the two major cities of Kabul and Jalabad from the Puppet Regime have kept the war at a stalemate. The rebels are finding it difficult to change from guerilla combat to the conventional warfare which is necessary to capture the cities.

Recently, the mujahideen seem to be doing more fighting amongst themselves than they are against the Communists. Before the official Soviet withdrawal, the rebels were bonded by one common goal — get the Russians out. Islam, they claim, was their greatest source of strength and unity. Their religion, however, does not seem to be consolidating the top political leaders who appear unwilling to share their power in a future Afghan government.

The Interim Government

Six months ago, an Afghan Interim Government (AIG) was formed with its base in Peshawar, Pakistan. Its aim was to move inside Afghanistan, broaden its base, hold elections, and establish a government supported by all the people. None of this has come to pass. Internal conflicts have prevented the AIG from making any major achievements. In July, for example, tensions rose between the two most powerful and religiously fundamental groups when thirty commanders of the Jamiat-i-Islami Party were killed by the Hezb-i-Islami faction.

Many people also question how "representative" the Interim Government is. The lack of participation by the Iran-based parties continues to be a problem. No one is likely to recognize the Interim Government unless it gets its act together and establishes some form of credibility.

The Future

Although Prime Minister Bhutto of Pakistan and President Bush of the United States have agreed that a political solution to the problem is mandatory, they are continuing their military assistance to counter the rise in Soviet supplies to Kabul. The question now is twofold. Can the divided resistance unite to fight a conventional war against the Soviet-backed Afghan army and how long will it take before the United States tires of its efforts? One thing is for sure — we can no longer assume that the guerillas can swiftly conquer Kabul. The war is definitely not over in Afghanistan and the relentless nature of both sides could make it linger interminably.



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