

FIGHTING TO THE LAST AFGHAN

There is no shortage of Afghans who could form a popular government – if only the outsiders would get out of the way.

BY SELIG S. HARRISON

THE COMPLETION OF THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL from Afghanistan in February set the stage for a new and bloodier phase of the civil war that led to the invasion a decade ago. After six months of inconclusive fighting, however, the Afghan adversaries and their superpower mentors are cautiously edging toward negotiations on a political compromise.

Moscow is eager for a settlement. Mikhail Gorbachev recognizes the limitations of the Afghan Communist Party and wants to escape from the futile commitment made by his predecessors. This was unambiguously spelled out to me in a series of high-level meetings with officials of the Foreign Ministry, the Defence Ministry and the Communist Party Central Committee during a recent three-week visit to Moscow.

To be sure, the Kabul Communist regime has displayed much greater motivation, discipline and staying power than most observers anticipated. But Soviet leaders – and Afghan President Najibullah – are keenly aware that the regime could not survive on its own without the continuous airlifts and supply convoys provided by Moscow.

In my view, Gorbachev is prepared to support a peaceful transfer of power in Afghanistan in which President Najibullah's regime would step down coincident with the conclusion of negotiations to establish a broad-based transitional government. Moscow's minimum conditions for such a political settlement are that the Communists not be excluded from the process of establishing a transitional regime; that the process be conducted under independent auspices, free from the control of Pakistani and American intelligence agencies; and that the Communist Party be recognized as a legitimate participant in any future elections to be conducted by a transitional government. Representation of the Communist Party, as such, in a transitional government is an expendable bargaining demand.

While giving up its effort to ensure Communist dominance, in short, Moscow wants to be able to say that it has preserved an opportunity for the Communists to compete in the power struggles ahead. Indeed, it is important to recognize that the Geneva accords were accept-

able to the Soviet Union as a face-saving compromise precisely because they did not require Moscow to abandon its Afghan clients.

THE BASIC DILEMMA NOW CONFRONTING Moscow and Washington alike is that neither the Kabul regime nor the Peshawar government-in-exile established by Pakistan and the United States, represents the majority of Afghans. Neither can serve as the nucleus of a broad-based transitional regime because both have alienated the Afghan nationalist majority. The Afghan Communist Party has been indelibly tainted by its collaboration with a foreign occupation force. But the Pakistan-based government-in-exile is also widely rejected as the creation of Islamabad's Directorate of Interservices Intelligence (ISI).

The ISI played a conspicuous, heavy-handed role in arranging and manipulating the Islamabad *shura*, or council, that set up the exile government in February, 1989. Protégés of the late President Zia Ul-Haq are still in control of the ISI despite Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's continuing efforts to tame the powerful military intelligence organization. Zia had made no secret of his desire to install a Pakistani satellite regime in Kabul dominated by Islamic fundamentalist Afghan splinter groups that have been artificially built up with Pakistani support. Despite the installation of a moderate, Sibghatullah Mojaddidi, as its figure-head president, the narrowly-based exile government is firmly controlled by fundamentalist factions, and has thus been discredited from the start in the eyes of most Afghans.

In order to understand the political isolation of the government-in-exile, it is necessary to recognize the nature of Islam in Afghanistan, where the established clergy has long been identified with the Hanafi school of Islamic law and various Sufi sects. The power of the local mullah in traditional Afghan society has been reinforced by a symbiotic relationship with chieftains of the Pashtun tribes, Afghanistan's dominant ethnic group. By contrast, the fundamentalist groups, preaching more purist Islamic doctrines, are seeking to destroy the Pashtun tribal system as incompatible with

their concept of a centralized Islamic state linked to a pan-Islamic revival. They oppose most of the modernization measures initiated by previous regimes, especially those liberalizing the status of women.

Numbering at most 1,100 in the early 1970s, the Afghan fundamentalists faced severe repression under former King Zahir Shah, a Pashtun, and his successor, Mohammed Daud. In 1975, most of them fled to Pakistan. There they linked up with the Intelligence Directorate, staging raids against the Daud regime then at odds with Pakistan. This link made them Pakistan's favoured Afghan protégés after the 1978 Communist takeover. Nurtured by massive aid from the US as well as by fundamentalists in the Middle East and Pakistan, the fundamentalist factions have grown to number some 15,000 hard-core activists.

FOR MANY AFGHANS, ZAHIR SHAH SYMBOLIZES a period of relative stability when Afghanistan enjoyed friendly relations with the Soviet Union. But fundamentalist leaders, remembering the former king's repression, bitterly oppose any role for him in organizing or leading a new regime. Pakistan has actively obstructed efforts by Zahir Shah's supporters to organize broad-based negotiations among Afghan factions that would pave the way for the peaceful replacement of the Communist regime. Instead, Pakistan has treated the seven-party resistance alliance as the sole voice of non-communist Afghans.

The roots of Pakistan's hostility go back to the early nineteenth century, when the original Afghan state created in 1747 by the Pashtun tribes under Ahmad Shah Durrani embraced the Pashtun areas of what is now northwest Pakistan. Later, as part of the "Great Game," the British Raj annexed 40,000 square miles of Afghan territory between the Indus River and the Khyber Pass. They then proceeded to hand over their ill-gotten territorial gains and half the Pashtun population to the new Pakistani government in 1947. By dividing the Pashtuns, the British bequeathed an issue that has preoccupied Pashtun-dominated Afghan regimes ever since and has poisoned the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.