

## THE FORUM FORUM

### The 1978 Afghan Revolution: Some Internal Aspects

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The Afghan revolution of April 1978 replaced a traditionalist, autocratic regime with one dependent on Soviet power and Marxist-Leninist in ideology. The causes involved both a successful communist conspiracy and the one-man government's own failings. These failings were not atypical of third-world regimes and

resemble those which contributed to the downfall of such leaders as the Shah of Iran and Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.

In July 1973 Mohammad Daoud seized power and overthrew the Afghan monarchy in an almost bloodless coup. Daoud was the brother-in-law and first cousin of the king, had been the king's Prime Minister from 1953-63 and had had a long government career, including such posts as Defense Minister, Ambassador to France and Governor of several provinces. His uncle, who was the king's father, had founded a new Afghan dynasty in 1929, although it should be noted that this event merely moved the crown from one branch to another of the same tribal family that had ruled Afghanistan since it became a state in the eighteenth century.

Partly because Daoud's coup was "within the family," it caused few ripples within Afghanistan. Tribal and religious leaders accepted it. The commercial sector had some hope it would revive business which had been in the doldrums, partially as a result of a major drought. Afghanistan's small intellectual elite was nervous because it had enjoyed considerable freedom of expression in the 1963-73 period between the two Daoud governments. It feared repression but was powerless to affect the change. By and large, the king's supporters were treated leniently by past Afghan standards, although there were some unfortunate exceptions.

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Three other aspects of the 1973 coup deserve special attention. First, although Daoud led the coup and was its charismatic figure, it was supported by a number of young military officers who had been trained in the Soviet Union, who favored closer bonds between Afghanistan and the USSR and who were inclined to favor socialist solutions to Afghan economic problems. Several of these officers were brought into Daoud's inner circle after the coup along with like-minded civilians who were given Cabinet and other high-ranking government posts.

Secondly, Daoud had a well-deserved reputation as one of the leading modernizers of Afghanistan. When he was Prime Minister, many large development projects had been undertaken. Subsequently, the pace of development had slowed. With his return to power, hope revived among many Afghans as well as western donors, including the United States, that the pace would pick up again.

Thirdly, Daoud abolished the monarchy and established himself as the President of a Republic. Although the Afghan monarchy, unlike the Iranian, was more a consensus arrangement among the leaders of the ruling tribal group than a dynasty, its abolition did end a tradition that was an important element in Afghan political stability. Ambitious Afghans who never could have hoped to become king could aspire to becoming President through a coup or otherwise.

Daoud quickly consolidated his power within Afghanistan, encountering no visible opposition, although there were announcements of two or three counter-coup attempts which had been nipped in the bud. Gradually it became clear that Daoud's guiding principles were Afghan nationalism and independence and that he was not wedded to any particular ideological framework. He weeded out of his entourage the leftists who had helped him return to power, either firing them or transferring them to jobs in remote provinces. His Cabinet and other advisers were chosen from among people personally loyal to him and not ideologically tainted. While correct in his relations with the Soviet Union, he attracted aid from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, western Europe and the United States. He insisted that the government maintain control of major industry but largely left the private commercial and agricultural sectors to their own devices. In early 1977 he convened a national assembly which passed a new constitution providing for a single political party and for parliamentary elections in 1979. He was unanimously elected President for a seven-year term.

Cracks, however, began to show in Daoud's armor. His insistence on personal loyalty kept out of government many able Afghans. He also increasingly maintained the reins in his own hands, personally deciding the most minor matters. These factors brought about a steady decline in the vigor and efficiency of the government. Daoud's own advanced age — he was in his late six-

ties, old for an Afghan — was also increasingly reflected in the pace of his administration.

Inefficiency and a slower pace inevitably affected the Afghan economic situation. The small but increasingly literate population, especially in Kabul, became steadily more critical of a regime that had promised much but delivered little. Private investment did not take up the slack because confidence in the future of the Daoud regime did not take hold.

The surge of optimism that came with the new Constitution in February 1977 was also quickly dashed. When Daoud announced his new Cabinet shortly thereafter, it contained mostly the same people whose effectiveness, with only a few exceptions, had already been brought into question. (Corruption, incidentally, appeared not to be a major problem; Daoud himself lived an austere life and was hard on any subordinate who tried to do otherwise.) Later in the year, a Vice President was appointed together with a four-man Central Committee of the new party. The men involved were all strict Daoud loyalists whose competence and vision, with one exception, were lacking. Daoud tended to exclude others increasingly from his inner circle of advisers.

By early 1978, therefore, Daoud had lost his charm with most of the middle class, with the leftist military officers and civilians who had helped him seize power in 1973, with those loyalists whom he excluded from his inner circle and with former supporters of the king. His power base in Kabul was increasingly restricted to loyalist police and military. He also became concerned about possible opposition among religious elements, many of which had long been wary of his modernizing efforts. An assassination of a Cabinet Minister in the fall of 1977 was blamed, for example, on the Moslem Brotherhood, many of whose leaders were rounded up and jailed, although there was much evidence that the deed was the work of leftists. Throughout these years Daoud was cautious about moving against the left because of his fear that the Soviets would react by organizing a leftist coup against him. He was also cautious about proceeding with meaningful land reform so as not to antagonize tribal leaders.

By early 1978, it had become clear that Daoud's regime was faltering, but most observers believed that his political skill and control of the security forces would keep him in power for a few years to come, probably to his natural demise. After that, all bets would be off.

Organized and waiting in the wings was one political group, namely, the *Khalq* (masses) party which in the summer of 1977 became allied to the *Par-cham* (banner) party. Previously these two parties had fought with one another for control of the leftist movement. The Soviets had pressed for their merger. Both were Marxist-Leninist in ideology and pro-Soviet. They drew for membership primarily on two groups. One consisted of Soviet-trained military officers. Since 1956, hundreds of Afghan officers had been trained in the Soviet Union, and many had been ideologically converted and no doubt some had been

recruited into the employ of their Soviet teachers. The second group consisted of some senior intellectuals and political activists who had been left out of the political mainstream of the royal and Daoud regimes and had recruited to their cause sizeable numbers of younger graduates of Kabul University and the Kabul teacher training institution. These people were also greatly attracted to the Soviet Union and to a socialist solution to Afghan political and economic problems.

The civilian Khalq and Parcham group provided the movement's leadership, with the Khalq leader, Noor Mohammad Taraki, emerging as the leader. After it became clear that Daoud was weeding out the leftists from his government, the Khalq and Parcham organizations went underground. In the summer of 1977 under some pressure from the Soviet Union, they united as the Khalq Party under Taraki's leadership. They organized along typical communist party lines, with both civilian and military cells. Younger party members travelled throughout Afghanistan making recruits, using Afghan family ties to protect their activities from the watchful eyes of Daoud's police. The Khalq organization in the military planned and practiced on paper its dispositions in the event an opportunity for action against the Daoud regime should arise.

That opportunity came much sooner than Daoud, Taraki or anyone else expected.

During the evening of April 17, 1978, the number three Khalq leader, Mir Akbar Khaibar, was assassinated in Kabul. To this day, it is not clear who killed him. The Khalqists blame Daoud. Others blame the Moslem Brotherhood. Others say the murderer was an enemy of Khaibar within the Khalq. Whatever the truth, the Khalq party moved to take advantage of the event. On April 19, with government permission, the Khalq organized a major funeral procession. Although entirely peaceful and also ostensibly non-political (except for shouts of "Down with the CIA" when passing the American Embassy), the procession in fact was the first non-governmental demonstration since 1973. About 15,000 people participated. Its size and organization impressed all observers and belatedly convinced Daoud that the Khalq posed a threat to this regime. The night of April 25-26, he arrested the top Khalq civilian leaders, including Taraki.

But Daoud made several fatal mistakes at this moment. Firstly, the arrests were not simultaneous. One Khalq leader, Hafizullah Amin, now holding the number-two position in the Afghan government under Taraki, was not picked up until the morning of the 26th and was able to get word to the Khalquists in the military that the time for action had arrived. Secondly, Daoud arrested none of the Khalq leaders in the military. It seems inconceivable that he was not aware of their existence. The most likely explanation is that his incompetent top military advisor falsely assured him that the military was under control. Finally, Daoud took no defensive security measures to protect himself and

his regime against a possible coup attempt. All these errors reflect the fact that Daoud, like so many third-world dictators, had himself lost touch with the reality of his country's politics and had nobody close to him who could change his course.

The end result was a successful Khalquist revolution which began on April 22 and had won control of Kabul by noon on April 28. Daoud and his inner circle were killed in the process. Afghanistan now has a red flag, a politburo, a Treaty of "Friendship, Neighborliness and Cooperation" with the Soviet Union, and most of the other trimmings associated with satellite status in the Soviet Empire.

The story has far from ended. The old Khalq-Parcham split has led to the ouster and exile of the former Parcham leaders. There has been a major purge in the military. Tribal and religious elements have raised the green Islamic flag of revolt in several Afghan provinces. The success of Khomeini in Iran no doubt spurs them on. Hundreds — maybe thousands — of former Daoud and royal officials and family members and religious and tribal leaders have been jailed and many executed. Uprisings in the provinces have been put down with indiscriminate bombing of villages. In a culture noted for its attachment to revenge, the new regime is making countless enemies. Although the tribal and religious opposition probably does not have the firepower itself, it is in a position to take advantage of any splits that develop within the Khalq leadership or between the civilian and military elements in the government.

But the odds favor the Taraki regime's staying in power. These odds are stacked by Soviet support, military and economic, which has been flowing into Afghanistan since last April, along with advisors of all kinds. Hundreds of Afghan civilians as well as military personnel are heading for training in the USSR. Within two or three years, Taraki should have available a cadre of Soviet-trained officials to staff his civilian ministries. Once that time arrives, his hold, and the Soviet hold, on Afghanistan will be fairly well solidified. In short, the next two or three years are critical.

Would all this have happened even if Daoud had not succumbed to the disease of self-isolation so common among dictators? Possibly not, had he lived a few more years. His ties with the non-Communist world were deepening. He was building better relations with Iran and Pakistan. He had launched many important industrial and agricultural development projects.

He had, to be sure, made major mistakes. His first was when he was Prime Minister and obtained Soviet military assistance and training for the Afghan armed forces. His second was to lose touch with his own country in the last two years of his Presidency.

Afghanistan's situation is somewhat unique, given its long common border with the Soviet Union and a twenty-year history of Soviet involvement in its armed forces. But the decisive factor was a failure of its non-Communist,