

Permanent Occupation: Imperialism in Afghanistan, Past and Present

PART I

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Global Research, July 03, 2013

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Reform, Revolution, Reaction (1919-1929, 1979-1992)

History of Afghanistan is full of war, conflict and violence. It is also filled with revolutions; the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor; heroic struggles against (neo)-colonialism and imperialism.

The Saur Revolution of 28 April 1978 (7 Saur 1357 in Afghan calendar) is probably the most significant event in contemporary Afghan history. Its predecessor was a radical reform movement that engulfed Afghanistan after the third Anglo-Afghan war-Afghan-a heroic resistance against British colonialism. The reforms initiated under Amanullah Khan the “progressive” King were actually the demands of the Constitutional Movement of Afghanistan. The radical reforms almost shook the very socio-economic foundation of the country.

The reforms and revolution were carried out only to be betrayed later by retreating from their proclaimed goals.

The Reforms

In mid-19th century Afghanistan, the productive forces of society had developed to a level relatively conducive to a social foundation based on capital. And yet capital did not exist as an independent force to affect a qualitative break against the dominant pre-capitalist formation in the Afghan society.

During the reign of Amir Sher Ali Khan (1863-1879) special attention was devoted to the modernization of Afghanistan and especially to the building of a modern army. Sher Ali Khan came to power after a first attempt by imperialist Britain had failed to colonialize Afghanistan (the first Anglo-Afghan war 1839-1842) but the danger of colonialism and imperialist conquest was still looming at the door of the country. This was the time of the Great Game between colonial Britain and tsarist Russia. Sher Ali Khan sensed that in order to face the mighty power of British imperialism, he needed to undertake measures to modernize his system of governance. As a result, the following measures were taken at this time: Postal and Telegraph Services were established, Lithographic Printing introduced, factories for manufacturing military armaments were built, road and other construction projects were initiated, financial and tax reforms necessary for the development of capitalism introduced, etc.

During the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901) aka The Iron Amir additional measures were taken in the direction of the capitalist development of the country. The Amir is credited with establishing a strong centralized state by ruthlessly suppressing the rebellious tribes in different parts of the country fighting to maintain the independence of their fiefdoms. The centralization of society was essential for the development of capital and required by it; hence, the efforts. The centralization efforts continued under the Iron Amir's son and successor, Habibullah Khan (1901-1919). The Amir was assassinated on February 20, 1919 while on a hunting mission in the eastern Laghman province in what is considered a "coup d'état from above by the court's liberals"[1]. After the assassination, his son Amanullah Khan claimed the throne and a new page began in the Afghan history after the Third Anglo-Afghan war.

The radical reforms initiated by Amanullah lasted a decade (1919-1929) and aimed at rooting out feudalism by attacking the rights and privileges of the big landlords, the nobility, tribal chiefs and the Islamic clergy. The reforms are divided into two phases: the first phase from 1919 to 1924 and the second phase from 1928 to 1929.

The reforms were debated in the Grand Assembly (Loya Jirga) convened in Jalalabad in January 1922 and adopted as "Fundamental Statute of the State of Afghanistan" considered to be the country's first constitution. Some of its provisions that contradicted the Sharia as practiced were amended in the Loya Jirga of Paghman in 1924 forced by the reactionary uprising in Paktia in the same year. They were reintroduced in the Loya Jirga of 1928 (Paghman) after the King's European tour. His seven-month long trip began in December 1927 during which he visited India, Egypt, Italy, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Britain, Poland, the Soviet Union, Turkey and Iran before returning to Afghanistan in July 1928.

The most critical phase of the reforms began in 1928 when Amanullah returned from his European tour deeply influenced by the "progress" in European countries he visited. The reforms can be outlined as follows:

- · Some measures were taken in the direction of industrialization of the country when some factories were built in Kabul and other places.
- · A new set of statutes-Nizamnamas-became the cornerstone of law which, in some cases, marginalized the role of Sharia (Islamic law).
- · Individual political freedoms were guaranteed in the constitution
- · slavery and forced labor was abolished;
- · science subjects were added to the syllabus and primary education made obligatory for boys and girls;
- · girls' education was especially emphasized and the first group of female students sent to Turkey in 1928 for higher education;
- · obligatory veiling and social seclusion of women was discouraged;
- · equality of men and women before the law was proclaimed;
- · a new legal code was enforced to discourage child marriages and polygyny and to prevent extravagant marriage and related festivities as well as male circumcision ceremonies;
- · land reforms were introduced which directly challenged the interests of the feudal lords and regulated the relationship between the latter and the peasantry;
- · tax reforms were introduced which challenged the privileges of feudal and tribal lords but undermined by corruption at the local government level;

- tax imposition on the peasantry was tolerated but when not supplemented with rapid implementation of the reforms proved burdensome; thus, things did not change for the better for the peasants and led to discontent on their part.

However, the reforms were compromised by a number of caricatural and childish measures (forcing Afghans in Kabul, for example, to adopt western-style dressing code and replacing Friday [an important day of praying for Muslims] with Thursday, or forcing people to tip their hats as a gesture of greeting instead of shaking hands, etc.). The latter were taken advantage of by British colonialists and their Afghan stooges to generate resentment among the oppressed against the reforms which had already invited strong opposition from the feudal lords and the Islamic clergy. Moreover, Amanullah Khan appointed corrupt bureaucrats and British lackeys at the royal court prominent among the latter Mohammad Nader Khan who eventually captured the throne after the short-lived reactionary uprising of Habibullah Kalakani.

Moreover, the “progressive” King was not actually progressive enough and proved incompetent when it came to the decisive historical moment i.e. to deepen economic reforms, supplement them with political ones and defend the changes by force when the need arose. For instance, at a big gathering in Kabul, Amanullah Khan had referred to himself as a “revolutionary” king in his speech. Abdul Rahman Khan Ludin a prominent figure within the Constitutional Movement who was present there stated:

“His Majesty called himself a “revolutionary King” in his speech; therefore, it is expected of him to accept revolution within the state apparatus. It has been ten years since His Majesty has personally assumed the office of the prime minister while revolution demands that another individual accountable [to a parliament] shall hold the office of the prime minister of Afghanistan.”[2]

The following day, Abdur Rahman Khan Ludin was summoned to the King’s court and ordered to resign from his governmental position as head of Kabul Customs Department.[3] It is worth mentioning that according to the first constitution of 1922, the King sat at the head of the cabinet and was not accountable to anybody.

After the first phase of the reforms (1921-1924), the King withdrew some of the important radical measures in the face opposition from the big landlords and the clergy (at the Loya Jirga of Paghman 1924). Only after he had returned from his trip to Europe and the Soviet Union did he try to reintroduce and reinforce the reforms albeit in a mocking manner this time (like forcing the wives of his court’s bureaucrats to appear unveiled at official receptions, etc).

Availing themselves of the king’s mockery of the people, the British and their Afghan lackeys (the feudal lords and the clergy) spread rumors to the effect that the King was sowing the seeds of infidelity in society by means his reforms. The king himself was branded an “infidel” who had introduced human-made laws in contradiction to the divine laws. True to his “royal” blood, Amanullah left the country without a fight against the feudal lords, the Mullahs (Islamic clerics) and their British masters. His withdrawal from the scene of struggle resulted in the brutal and violent suppression of the Constitutional Movement of Afghanistan by the successive monarchs. The reforms he had initiated, nonetheless, continued locked within a conservative zeal and mostly state-driven.

The reforms undertaken by Amanullah Khan dealt a strong blow to feudalism and facilitated the development of capitalism in Afghanistan which by that time was still in its most primitive stages. Capital in its embryonic stages co-existed with and outweighed by the feudalism but fighting its way to break the latter by establishing new relations of production on its own basis.

The political battle in the country reflected the above class contradictions between the antagonistic social forces. The royal court under Amanullah was divided into two camps: the reformists (bourgeois democrats who supported radical reforms that favored the rule of the bourgeoisie) and the conservatives (the feudal lords, the clergy and a part of the royal family who stood on the wrong side of historical development). That part of the king's court (many of them members of the Constitutional Movement of Afghanistan) which represented the bourgeoisie was fighting for a bourgeois monarchist liberalism more than the king himself.

The reform movement was defeated because the Afghan bourgeoisie was not socially strong enough to defeat the feudal class in the social battle and secure for itself political victory over the latter. Although the Afghan bourgeoisie was politically represented in the person of the king but subsequent developments proved that the feudal lords wielded enough social and political power to crush the reforms and temporarily maintain their position in society.

It is worth recalling that Soviet Russia under Lenin was the first country to render diplomatic recognition to the newly-declared independent Afghanistan and offered economic, political, and technological assistance. Afghanistan and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1921 signifying a new era of independence as far as Afghanistan's international affairs was concerned. The young Soviet state had just come victorious out of a devastating civil war so it enthusiastically welcomed a strategically-located neighbor's freedom from imperialist Britain's influence.

In the intervening years between 1930 and 1979, Afghanistan underwent a slow state-driven transition towards capitalism under a succession of oppressive rulers. Perhaps the only generous exemption to this period is the decade 1963-1973 known in Afghan political literature as the "decade of democracy" aka "crowned democracy" or "democracy from above". During this period a new constitution was promulgated (1964) replacing absolute monarchy with constitutional monarchy and guaranteeing basic political freedoms.

The Revolution

The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was founded on 1 January 1965. Other leftist groups as well as Islamists founded their own parties. The leftist formations in Afghanistan reflected the Sino-Soviet split. PDPA declared Marxism-Leninism to be its official ideology. The advocates of the Chinese line of the split-the "New Democracy"-represented the Afghan Maoists who joined the counter-revolution after 1978.

The "decade of democracy" was a short-lived "experiment in democracy" which finally came to an end on 17 July 1973 as a result of a coup d'état by Mohammad Daoud Khan. He had to leave his post as prime minister (1953-1963) to pave way for the proclamation of constitutional monarchy in 1964. With his coup d'état, Daoud Khan abolished the monarchy and proclaimed a Republic from above.

PDPA helped Daoud Khan topple the monarchy. It also supported the progressive goals of the newly-established Republican government as announced in Daoud Khan's first "Address to the People" speech. The Constitution of 1976 is full of leftist phraseology aimed at reflecting the demands and aspirations of the workers and peasants. There were several PDPA ministers in Daoud Khan's cabinet.

Due to PDPA infiltration, the new government initiated socio-economic projects announcing a first five-year plan based on the Soviet model. The Daoud government also launched a persecution campaign against Islamists inspired by the extremist ideology of Muslim-Brotherhood. Some of the Islamist leaders fled to Pakistan where they were welcomed by the PPP-led socialist [sic] government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and provided with sanctuaries to topple the regime in Kabul. The Islamists launched their first attack against the government of Daoud Khan in 1975. Lacking popular support, it was quickly crushed by the government.

Daoud Khan later distanced himself from the Soviet Union to establish close relations with the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other US cronies in the region. In the meantime, it turned hostile to PDPA expelling its ministers from his cabinet, resorted to establishing an authoritarian government, banned all political parties, announced a one-party system with his own "National Revolution" party as the only legal party in the constitution of 1975, etc.

Under these circumstances, a prominent leader of PDPA Parcham faction, Mir Akbar Khyber, was assassinated in Kabul on 17 April 1978. His funeral procession three days later, considered being the first political funeral in the history of the country in which thousands took part, was turned into a massive expression of hostility against the government. Daoud Khan arrested the top leadership of PDPA on 26 April.

The ten days between Khyber's assassination (whose mystery is yet to be solved) and the military uprising of PDPA army loyalists on 27 April 1978 shocked Afghanistan and the world. PDPA toppled the Daoud government and took power in a revolutionary military uprising which came to be known as the Saur (April) Revolution. Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan proclaimed a revolution from above-revolution by decree-but a substantial one which was immediately supported by millions of oppressed Afghans.

The most important of the decrees issued by the Revolutionary Council were decrees No. 6, 7, and 8. They dealt with the following:

Decree no. 6:[4] concerning cancelation of debts, loans, mortgages and revenues due from peasants to the usurers and big landlords (in most cases inherited debt from generation to generation of peasants). According to para 2 of this decree, the sliding scale of repayment (for peasants holding 10 jerib[5] or less land) was fixed thus:

Year of Mortgage	Percentage of mortgage money to be repaid	Period of Repayment (after first year)
1978 (1357)	90 %	5 years
1977 (1356)	80 %	4 years
1976 (1355)	60 %	3 years
1975 (1354)	40 %	2 years
1974 (1353)	20 %	1 year
Before 1353	None	—

Para 3 of the decree fully exempted “landless persons who work on a landowner’s land as peasant or hireling [wage (day)-laborer]” from paying any dues and usury to the landowners and usurers.

Para 4 of the decree fully exempted “landless peasants and those owning 10 jerib or less land” who were in debt to one or more persons on basis of mortgage and usury before 1974 from paying any mortgage and usury.

According to Para 5 of the decree, the sliding scale of repayment (for peasants holding 10 jerib or less land) of the original loan money-the interest due written off-was fixed thus:

Year of Loan	Percentage of loan money to be repaid	Period of Repayment (after first year)
1978 (1357)	90 %	5 years
1977 (1356)	80 %	4 years
1976 (1355)	60 %	3 years
1975 (1354)	40 %	2 years
1974 (1353)	20 %	1 year
Before 1353	None	—

Decree no. 7:[6] concerning “Mahr” (“bride price”) and Marriage Expenditures. The introductory paragraph stated that the goal of the decree is “to ensure equality of rights between women and men in the domain of civil law, to eliminate unjust patriarchal feudal relations between wife and husband and to further strengthen good familial relations”.

Its most controversial provision was para 3 which fixed the price of mahr at 300 Afghani. It also criminalized: 1-a girl’s marriage based on exchange for money and goods; 2-forced marriage; 3-acts that either prevent a widow, because of family or tribal kinship, from willfully re-marrying or forcing them to an unwanted marriage (in Afghanistan it is common practice that a brother may marry a dead or disappeared brother’s wife in order to provide their livelihood and protect the honor of the family). It further fixed the age for engagement and marriage at 16 for women and 18 for men, thus, effectively banning child marriage.

Decree no. 8:[7] concerning Land and Water Reforms. Confiscation of feudal lands and the lands owned by the deposed royal family and their redistribution among landless peasants and peasants with small land owning. Its aim was first and foremost “to eliminate feudal and pre-feudal relations from the social and economic order of the country”. In this decree the permitted ceiling for land ownership was fixed at 30 jeribs first grade arable land; more than that agricultural area was considered “excess land” or “surplus land” and, therefore, qualified for confiscation with no compensation and redistribution.

Distribution of Land in Afghanistan, 1978[8]

Area of land	Percentage of landowners	Percentage of arable land
1-20	83	35
20-50	12	20
50-10,000	5	45

The figures above clearly demonstrate the distribution of land in Afghanistan and its concentration in the hands of a very tiny parasitic landlord minority in the year of the victory of the Saur Revolution. By the year 1984, however, the distribution of land looked like this:

Distribution of Land after the Revolution, 1978-1984*

Total area of land 679,567 hectares	No. of landowners 7000 big landlords 28,000 petty landlords	Total No. of Beneficiaries 308,210
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Some of the other radical programs undertaken by the PDPA are as follows:

- agrarian reform aimed at just redistribution of land was implemented (by 1984 “679,567 hectares of land have been distributed to 308,210 peasant families” out of which “665,000 hectares of land that was distributed to 295,988 landless peasant families was taken from 7,000 big landlords who possessed more than 40 hectares of land each and from 28,000 petty landlords who possessed from 6.1 up to 40 hectares each”);[9]
- peasant’s loans and mortgages exempted (by 1984 “eleven million peasants have been exempted from the burden of interests on loans and mortgages they used to pay to feudal lords”)[10]
- the revenue dues of the peasants were written off;[11]
- water reforms were implemented;
- peasant cooperatives were established;
- literacy programs were launched (by 1984 one and half million people had finished literacy courses and in the same year 20,000 literacy courses were functioning throughout the country enrolling 377,000 people. It was planned to eradicate illiteracy by the year 1986 in urban areas and by 1990 all over Afghanistan).[12] In the period prior to the Saur Revolution, only 5,265 people had finished literacy courses.[13]

What happened to the fate of the land reforms introduced after the Saur Revolution? Well, here is what happened:

A new version of the LML [Land Management Law] in 1988 raised the ceiling to 100 jeribs (20 ha); ceilings were effectively abandoned in the laws of the 1990s and disappeared entirely in the Taliban-issued land law of 2000. At the same time, restitution of lands taken since the Saur Revolution of 1978 replaced legal commitments to redistribution. Allocation of land to landless thus became a right of the state, not a duty. This is retained in...the 2008 law.[14]

The US occupation was immediately followed by what is known in Afghanistan as land grabbing by the land mafia. The “parliamentary form of the robbery...decrees by which the landlords grant themselves the people’s land as private property, decrees of expropriation of the people”[15] -to borrow Marx’s words-is the so-called “Land Management Law” quietly adopted by the reactionary parliament in 2008.

Articles 29-33, chapter Four titled “Restitution of Confiscated Land to the Landlords”, of the Law deals with the restitution of lands confiscated “in violation of Islamic Sharia” from feudal lords and the then royal family under decree No. 8 of the DRA Revolutionary Council. The law not only provides for the restitution of the confiscated lands to their “original owner or their heirs” but also takes the “culprit, their legal representative or heir” (i.e. the beneficiary of decree No. 8 above) accountable for paying compensation due to any change which may have reduced the “value or price” of the land.[16] The law is completely silent on

questions of peasant mortgages and loans.

The reaction

Given the geostrategic location of Afghanistan, the Saur Revolution posed a significant threat to the region and beyond. Therefore, the revolution found itself surrounded by imperialism and a variety of hostile countries from the Middle East and South Asia to Iran and China. It was, therefore, simultaneously isolated and encircled within the geographical limits of Afghanistan and attacked from outside. History, thus, teaches that emancipation of the oppressed classes in Afghanistan from the chains of capitalism is bound with the emancipation of the oppressed classes in the region and the wider world. And that there will be no socialism on a world-scale without first destroying the world market founded on a capitalist basis.

In the 80s, the US and its allies channeled billions of dollars to the counterrevolutionary mercenaries not only to fight the soviets and the soviet-backed Saur revolutionaries but to entirely uproot the only left movement in Afghanistan at that time. The intention was not just to drive the PDPA out of power; it was also to extinguish every left-wing force from the Afghan political scene once and for all. Why? Because the Afghan left was the only anti-imperialist force in the country. Even now, the west and their fundamentalist allies, fearing reemerging of the left, finance TV channels and other outlets inside and outside Afghanistan that are engaged in malicious propaganda against “communism”.

Islamist fundamentalists and extremists from the Middle East and North Africa (many of whom were convicted criminals released from jails on the sole condition to participate in the Jihad-similar to the release of criminals who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his genocidal “discovery” of the New World) as well as from madrassas run by the Pakistani ruling classes were used by western imperialism aided by “Communist” China as a surrogate army to crush the Saur Revolution.

Apart from the opposition of classes dispossessed by the revolution and imperialism, the Saur Revolution faced another reactionary opposition right at the heart of PDPA leadership. The antagonism between form and substance in the faction-ridden PDPA, whose very foundation was based on a shaky unity of antagonistic trends and had since seen few splits, was now to come out naked in the face of a clash between revolution and reaction, between revolution and imperialism. By the mid-80s the reactionary trend within the bureaucratically centralized PDPA was strong enough to assume leadership of the revolution and start a process of retreat from the revolutionary course both internally and internationally. It was by now certain that the “irreversible” Saur Revolution was really reversible.

Moreover, its dependence for political, economic and military assistance on the Soviet Union, on the one hand, made its survival even more vulnerable since the Soviet bureaucracy did not have a genuine internationalist foreign policy; its foreign policy was rather based on a chauvinistic basis. They finally betrayed the Afghan revolution just when their support was most critical in defeating the counter-revolution. On the other hand, patron-client-like dependency of PDPA leadership on the Soviet bureaucracy severely undermined the independence of PDPA and prevented its spontaneous and healthy development as a popular mass movement. It helped identify it, in the eyes of the oppressed masses, with something alien and foreign-especially as a result of dogmatic attachment of PDPA to the official soviet ideology.

While adhering to a principled attitude to internationalism, PDPA was mired with patriotism and Afghan nationalism. Following in the footsteps of Stalinism, it believed in the two-stage theory of revolution. Therefore, PDPA called the Saur Revolution a national-democratic revolution and its programs, therefore, were confined only to democratic changes. Socialism was a proclaimed strategic goal to be achieved at a distant future only once the bourgeois-democratic stage had been accomplished. The PDPA declared the character of the Afghan Revolution as “anti-feudalism, anti-pre-feudal relations, and anti-imperialism”. The radical reforms of the Amanullah period too had an “anti-feudalism, anti-pre-feudal relations, and anti-imperialism” character.

Part II of this article forthcoming

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