



BAČČA-YE SAQQĀ

BAČČA-YE SAQQĀ (popularly Bače Saqqāw), “the water-carrier’s child,” the derogatory name given to the leader of a peasants’ revolt which succeeded in placing him on the throne of Afghanistan in 1307 Š./1929. He reigned for nine months with the title Amīr Ḥabīb-Allāh Khan Kādem-e Dīn-e Rasūl Allāh.

Ḥabīb-Allāh was his real name. He was born about 1307/1870 into a poor family settled at Kalakān, a large Tajik village in the Kōhdāman district some 30 km north of Kabul. His father had once been a water-carrier (*saqqā*) in the Afghan army. The son also enlisted, and in 1298 Š./1919 he fought in the third Anglo-Afghan war, serving in one of the best regiments and earning distinction for bravery and marksmanship. In 1303 Š./1924, however, he deserted, being unwilling to take part in the campaign against the Mangal tribe, whose antipathy to the regime of King Amān-Allāh he shared. After living for a few years as a fugitive in the tribal areas of northwestern India, he reappeared in his native district in the role of a traditional Iranian *‘ayyār* (chivalrous bandit), attacking official convoys, holding rich travelers to ransom, and distributing part of his booty among the peasants. The insecurity which he caused throughout the strategic Samt-e Šamālī region at the head of his fellow outlaws was so troublesome that King Amān-Allāh several times sent troops on unsuccessful missions to capture him. Their reverses enhanced Bačča-ye Saqqā’s popularity and brought more recruits to his cause, which, moreover, received active support from local Naqšbandī *mollās* and *‘olamā’*, who were now calling in their sermons for disobedience to the central government, which in their eyes had become impious and therefore



illegitimate.

The revolt of the Šīnwārī tribe in the Nangrahār district in ‘Aqrab, 1307 Š./November, 1928, posed a grave threat to the regime. Out of concern for the few troops left behind in Kabul, King Amān-Allāh offered an amnesty to Bačča-ye Saqqā. The latter sent a pretended acceptance, but then took the chance to seize the fortress of Jabal al-Serāj on 19 Qaws/10 December. From this stronghold he immediately launched an offensive against Kabul, but failed to advance much further than the hill of Bāg-e Bālā, northwest of the capital, before being forced at the end of ten days of confused fighting to retreat toward Paḡmān and the Kōhdāman in order to regroup his forces. He resumed the offensive on 23 Jadī 1307 Š./13 January 1929 and this time his men, said to have been 15,000 strong, easily outflanked the few thousand royal troops left in Kabul. In desperation Amān-Allāh abdicated on the following day in favor of his elder half-brother ‘Enāyat-Allāh and fled from the capital by car, taking the main road to the south. His action shattered the morale of his remaining supporters. When the fallen king reached Qandahār, the water-carrier’s son was in control of the capital except the Arg (citadel), which held out for a few more hours while the leading Naqšbandī *mollās* negotiated ‘Enāyat-Allāh’s abdication. They then crowned Bačča-ye Saqqā amir of Afghanistan on 27 Jadī 1307 Š./17 January 1929.

The resumption of this old title, which Amān-Allāh had replaced with shah, epitomized the program of the new ruler of Kabul and the conservative forces which he represented. National traditions were to be reestablished through abolition of Amān-Allāh’s modernizing reforms in the political, fiscal, judicial, and, above all, socio-cultural fields. Steps were to be taken for a return to the Šarī’a and for immediate closure of state schools, removal of dress constraints, and reinstatement of the lunar calendar. (In point of fact, all coins minted for Amir Ḥabīb-Allāh bear the lunar year-date.)

At Kabul the change of régime proceeded rather smoothly. A considerable number of men of the political class, and even of the royal family, rallied to the new ruler through genuine sympathy or mere opportunism. Ḥabīb-Allāh himself, in an evident quest for legitimacy, contrived to get a place in the royal clan by taking a second wife from the collateral E’temādī line. His staunchest supporters, however, were always the *mollās*, especially those in the Naqšbandī order to which he himself apparently belonged, and the Tajiks of the Samt-e Šamālī. After ten years of erratic effort to secularize Afghan society, the *mollās* got their revenge by recovering their influence and privileges. After



two centuries of Paštūn ascendancy, the Tajiks turned the scales by looting the homes of Moḥammadzī princes in Kabul and obtaining all the ministerial posts. None of the foreign powers, however, gave the new régime de jure recognition, and most of them evacuated their nationals from Kabul as soon as they could arrange airlifts to Peshawar and Termez.

In Afghan historiography, the rise of Ḥabīb-Allāh, the water-carrier's son, is called the Saqqāwī movement or Saqqāwīya. Despite the narrowness of its power-base, his government was able to bring the greater part of Afghanistan under control within a few months. No serious opposition was encountered in the west, where Herat surrendered on 14 Ṭawr/4 May, or in the north, where the Aymāq, Uzbek, and Tajik ethnic groups supported him. In other regions events took different turns. The Hazāra people of the center of the country remained loyal to Amān-Allāh out of gratitude for his abolition of slavery and tolerant attitude to Shi'ism; the amir Ḥabīb-Allāh did not succeed in subduing them, but eventually got them to sign a cease-fire whereby they were to stop their harassment of his troops. As for the Paštūns of the south and east, although most of them undoubtedly disliked Amān-Allāh, they resented the enthronement of a non-Paštūn even more deeply. Several ill-prepared risings of Paštūn dissidents took place and successively collapsed, more because of internal dissensions and tribal rivalries than because of any military superiority of the Saqqāwī troops. The old enmity between the Dorrānī and Ġelzī tribal confederations had been effectively rekindled by Naqšbandī preachers who had acquired great influence among the latter, and the resultant split was the direct cause of the failure of Amān-Allāh's attempt to reconquer the throne in the spring of 1929, after which he finally left the scene for exile abroad. With this event a spell of good fortune for Ḥabīb-Allāh set in. No longer having to face any serious adversary, he was able to establish his authority in almost all the Paštūn country, taking Qandahār on 10 Jawzā/31 May, and Gardēz on 5 Saraṭān/26 June.

The only irreducible stronghold of resistance was the Afghan part of the Solaymān mountains, where the tribes traditionally lived beyond the reach of the central government, whatever its complexion. It was in the area of one of them, the Jājī tribe, that Nāder Khan and his brothers of the Yaḥyā Kēl, a branch of the royal clan very distantly related to Amān-Allāh, established their base after returning hurriedly from exile in France. Spurning approaches from both Ḥabīb-Allāh and Amān-Allāh, they proceeded to organize anti-Saqqāwī operations for their own account. Their first thrusts toward Kabul in



April and June failed.

Before long, however, the Saqqāwī government's position began to crumble as a result of lack of money, resentment of high tax demands by newly appointed provincial governors, and defections of influential 'olamā' such as Faẓl 'Omar Mojaddedī, who swung the Ġelzī tribes to Nāder's side. Further disorders in Paštūn districts began at the end of the summer, and troops of the Kabul garrison had to be sent away to deal with them. Seeing the time ripe for another attempt on the capital, Nāder moved quickly. A three-week campaign ended with the capture of the Arg of Kabul by his younger brother and principal lieutenant, Šāh Walī Khan, on 21 Mīzān/13 October. Two days later Nāder entered the capital, and on 24 Mīzān/16 October he was proclaimed king by acclamation of his troops, whom he then let loose to pillage the city for three days. Ḥabīb-Allāh, now again only Bačča-ye Saqqā, had fled to the Kōhdāman, his main stronghold, but on 30 Mīzān/22 October he surrendered against the promise of an amnesty. The promise was not kept; he and some ten leading figures in his government were executed at Kabul on 10 'Aqrab 1308 Š./1 November 1929.

The death of Bačča-ye Saqqā did not mark the end of the Saqqāwīya. The Kōhdāman again erupted in 1309 Š./1930 and was very harshly subdued by means of bombardments, the burning down of the bazaar of Sarā-ye K̄vāja, summary executions, and seizures of cattle and women by bands of Aḥmadzī, Mangal, and Jājī tribesmen who were sent into the district. The repression was accompanied by systematic planting of Paštūn settlers to counteract the local particularism. Such steps, however, could not eradicate memories of Bačča-ye Saqqā. Glorified as the "Lion of the mountains" (Šēr-e Kōhsār), he still remains alive in the folklore of the Kōhdāman. Men directly descended from Saqqāwī supporters are known to be active as local cadres of anti-communist movements in the 1980s.

Afghan official historiography has always portrayed the period of Saqqāwī rule as a deplorable and rather ridiculous interlude, an accident of history due to a temporary upsurge of obscurantist and reactionary forces. It is indeed true that Bačča-ye Saqqā and most of his ministers were illiterate. This portrait, however, is oversimplified. The Saqqāwīya was a genuinely popular movement of opposition to the central power and not so narrowly confined to the Tajik ethnic group as is often said, because several notables of the Kōhdāman, who were of Paštūn descent but had become Persian-speaking, threw their weight behind it. On the other hand it was manipulated by *mollās*



to such an extent that it cannot be said to have been wholly spontaneous. Many commentators, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, hold that British secret agencies played a part in the destabilization and fall of Amān-Allāh's régime. Soviet historiography, in particular, asserts this thesis. While it can not be dismissed out of hand, the fact remains that no evidence to support it can be found in the copious British Indian archives pertaining to this period. There can be no doubt, however, that behind the stance of official neutrality which the British maintained throughout the crisis of 1929 lay an unwillingness to help Amān-Allāh to reconquer his throne and a benevolence toward the moves of Nāder Khan. While the Soviet authorities favored Amān-Allāh (though reluctantly) and aided a foray on his behalf by Ġolām Nabī Čarkī in the Balk region, the British authorities allowed Nāder Khan to reenter Afghanistan through India and to obtain a decisive addition of strength through his recruitment of thousands of armed Wazīr and Mas'ūd frontier tribesmen. Also helpful was their decision to lift a restriction order, imposing residence at a fixed address in India, on Fażl 'Omar Mojaddedī, who was to play an apparently decisive role in persuading the Naqšbandī *mollās* of Afghanistan to change sides and later was to become Nāder Shah's first minister of justice. In short, while all the evidence indicates that Bačča-ye Saqqā's rise was due solely to the internal disintegration of King Amān-Allāh's régime, there can be no doubt that British policy, tacit rather than explicit, helped to bring about Bačča-ye Saqqā's fall. The sudden entry of such a character onto the stage was bound to cause internal instability in Afghanistan, and the British policymakers could not tolerate a long continuance of the threat which this would pose to the delicate geopolitical equilibrium of that part of Asia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sources for study of the Sayqāwīya are plentiful but not fully informative on all the episodes. Bačča-ye Saqqā's autobiography, available only in an English translation, *My Life: From Brigand to King. Autobiography of Amir Habibullah*, London, n.d. (1936), is in all probability apocryphal and certainly not objective. Reminiscences of several other participants have been published. The well-



known poet K. Kālīlī (b. ca. 1906), who bore a personal grudge against Amān-Allāh and was treasurer (*mostawfi*) of Turkestan under Bačča-ye Saqqā, seeks to rehabilitate the Saqqāwīya in his recently published book *'Ayyārī az Korāsān: Amīr Ḥabīb-Allāh Kādem-e Dīn-e Rasūl Allāh*, Peshawar, n.d. (1980). The views of the other side are expounded in the memoirs of Šāh Walī Khan, *Yāddaštā-ye man*, Kabul, 5th ed., 1344 Š./1965 (Russian tr., Moscow, 1960; Eng. tr., *My Memoirs*, Kabul, 1970), an apologia for the struggles against the “forces of ignorance and tyranny” with details of Nāder Khan’s steps to form the tribal coalition which was to carry him to power. The same tone pervades two very detailed chronicles, one by Moḥyī-al-Dīn (Anīs), who recounts the events in strictly chronological order (*Borhān wa Nejāt*, Kabul, n.d., perhaps 1931), the other by B. Koškakī, who writes in a more convoluted way (*Nāder-e Afġān*, Kabul, 1310 Š./1931).

Diplomatic dispatches, sent in large numbers from the foreign legations at Kabul before the evacuation of the foreigners, have been used by L. B. Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919-1929*, Ithaca, 1973, and by L. W. Adamec, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs to the Mid-Twentieth Century*, Tucson, 1974 (both with a detailed list of documents). The sometimes thrilling account given by R. T. Stewart, *Fire in Afghanistan, 1914-1929*, Garden City, N.Y., 1973, is also based in the main on official sources but can not be used with confidence because she never cites them. K. Jäkel wrote his article “Reform und Reaktion in Afghanistan. Aufstieg und Fall Amānullāhs,” *Mardom nameh* 3, Berlin, 1977, pp. 24-57, after obtaining access to unpublished Afghan sources which enabled him to draw attention, for the first time, to the importance of Bačča-ye Saqqā’s links with the rural network of Sufi brotherhoods in the countryside of eastern Afghanistan. The only published account of Bačča-ye Saqqā’s last days by a foreign eyewitness is in the book by A. Viollis (pseudonym of A. d’Ardenne de Tizac), *Tourmente sur l’Afghanistan*, Paris, 1930, a pompous record of events during her stay at Kabul as a journalist in October-November, 1929.

The latest findings of Soviet historiography on the subject are set forth in the work of V. G. Korgun, *Afganistan v 20-30-e gody XX v. Stranitsy politicheskoi istorii*, Moscow, 1979.

Selected texts of Saqqāwī-inspired folklore from the Kōhdāman have been published by L. Dupree in his book *Afghanistan*, Princeton, 1973, pp. 120ff. Also from this source is a quatrain (no. 81) collected by A. Farhādī, *Le persan parlé en Afghanistan*, Paris, 1955.



The Saqqāwī lineage of anti-communist groups active in the 1980s is documented by O. Roy, *L'Afghanistan. Islam et modernité politique*, Paris, 1985, p. 89.

Search terms:

□□□ □□□ bache sagha bacheh saqaa bacheh sagha