



ČEHĒL SOTŪN, KABUL

ČEHĒL SOTŪN, KABUL, palace on a small, terraced hill rising at the southern end of a 30-acre walled garden about six miles south of the city center. At the end of the 13th/19th century the garden was confiscated by the amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān (1297-1319/1880-1901; see [afghanistan x. political history](#)) from Lt. General Parvana Khan (Schinasi, p. 57); according to a commemorative marble plaque at the base of the hill the cornerstone of the palace was laid in 1305/1888, and the palace was completed as a seat for Prince Ḥabīb-Allāh three years later. It was originally called Endakī after a nearby village (variously Indikki, Indiki, Hindaki, and Hindka’i in contemporary British sources and maps) but was renamed Čehel Sotūn (forty pillars) by Ḥabīb-Allāh because of the many columns that originally supported the roof of the verandah (Bell, p. 77).

Early photographs of the original (‘Abd-al-Raḥmān) palace show a platform on which stands a rectangular, one-story structure, slightly bowed at the western end and completely encircled by an arcaded verandah; the flat roof was railed by an elegant balustrade (*The Illustrated London News*, 12 October 1901, p. 523; Hamilton, facing p. 350; *Souvenir Afghanistan*, no. 17). ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān’s English surgeon, John A. Gray, provided the most complete description of the interior of the palace, which he likened to a Greek temple (pp. 363-65). From the main entrance on the east end a lobby led into a large long hall with a row of columns in the center. In the west end there was a smaller room with bowed west wall, which “had the appearance of a lady’s boudoir with flowers, vases, embroideries, piano, and so on” (Gray, p. 461); its large windows



overlooked the fertile Čār-deh plain to the west. Amir Ḥabīb-Allāh (1319-37/1901-19) remodeled the palace in British colonial style, enclosing all but six of the columns in the center of the north facade. The flat roof with its delicate balustrade was replaced by a complex system of pitched roofs, and the original shallow fan-shaped flights of steps gave way to heavy lateral staircases with iron railings (Plate xi; *Souvenir Afghanistan*, no. 15). Finally, Moḥammad-Zāher Shah (r. 1352-93/1933-73) walled in the entire building and added two squat towers, thus completely obliterating the original graceful structure.

Although the Čehel SotŪn was built for Prince Ḥabīb-Allāh, Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān was a frequent guest. During his visits the garden was illuminated with innumerable tiny colored lamps (Gray, p. 364), and, in Ša‘bān 1309/March 1892, the amir presided over an impressive military durbar in the great hall (Gray, p. 462). In addition, the palace occasionally served as a state guest house, the most eminent guests being members of the British mission charged with negotiating the boundary between Afghanistan and India (see [boundaries iii. afghanistan](#)) in Rabī‘ I-Jomādā I 1311/October-November 1893. The chief of the mission, Sir Mortimer Durand, was lodged in the bowed room (Sykes, p. 209).

Most recently, on 2 January 1980, President Babrak Karmāl made his first public appearance following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (4 Šafar 1400/24 December 1979) at the head of a procession from Kabul to the Čehel SotŪn, where a large rally was held in the garden (*Kabul New Times*, 2 January 1980, p. 1). The palace subsequently became the hub of government, and press conferences with local and foreign correspondents were frequently held in the great hall (*Kabul New Times*, 7 January 1980, p. 1; 12 January 1980, p. 1; 14 January 1980, p. 1). During the early days of the Soviet occupation the president reportedly made no public appearances outside the palace, which was heavily guarded by tanks and anti-aircraft guns (*Dawn*, Karachi, 19 January 1980, p. 1). As a result the Čehel SotŪn became a primary target of the resistance and was so severely damaged that Karmāl was forced to move to the safety of the Arg (citadel) in the center of Kabul (personal communication from resistance fighters, May 1980).



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