



DĀWŪD KHAN, MOḤAMMAD

DĀWŪD KHAN, MOḤAMMAD (b. Kabul, 1288/ 1909, d. Kabul, 7 Ṭawr 1357 Š./27 April 1978), prime minister (1332-42 Š./1953-63) and first president of Afghanistan (1352-57 Š./1973-78; [Figure 1](#)). His father, Moḥammad ‘Azīz Khān, was a brother of Moḥammad Nāder Shah (1308-12 Š./1929-33). The family belonged to the Yaḥyākēl lineage of the royal Moḥammadzay clan of the Bārakzay tribe of the [Dorrānī](#) Pashtuns.

Dāwūd lived and studied in Europe from 1300 Š./1921 to 1309 Š./1930 while his father and for part of that time his uncle remained in exile during the reign of [Amān-Allāh Khan](#), representing a rival branch of the clan. After Aman-Allāh’s abdication in 1307/1929 Nāder Khan led the opposition to a usurper and succeeded in claiming the throne (See [AFGHANISTAN x](#)); Dāwūd Khan returned to Afghanistan and spent the year 1310 Š./1931 studying at the infantry officers’ school. In 1312 Š./1933 both Nāder Shah and Dāwūd Khan’s father, who was serving as ambassador to Germany, were assassinated by supporters of Amān-Allāh Khan. Nāder Shah’s son Moḥammad Zāher became king, and his uncle Moḥammad Hāšem Khan effectively ruled Afghanistan as prime minister. Dāwūd Khan joined Moḥammad Hāšem’s household. He married Nāder Shah’s daughter Zaynab in 1313 Š./1934.

Dāwūd Khan’s adolescent sojourn in Europe had left him acutely conscious of the backwardness of Afghanistan. Throughout his career he thus combined a strong desire to modernize the country with a close identification with the military. Nāder Shah had made him a major general in 1321 Š./1932; he subsequently served as military commander of several provinces and in



1318-26 Š./1939-1947 of the central forces at Kabul. In 1325 Š./1946 the prime minister, another uncle, Shah Maḥmūd Ġāzī, named him minister of defense (Adamec, p. 114).

By that time this branch of the royal family had become divided into two factions. Dāwūd and his uncle Moḥammad Hāšem led the faction favoring tough, activist Pashtun nationalist rule, while Shah Maḥmūd and the king were associated with liberalizing experiments and greater inclusiveness. After a disagreement with Shah Maḥmūd, Dāwūd was sent to Paris as ambassador in 1347 Š./1948. He returned a year later to serve as minister of the interior (*wazīr-e dāḳela*) and head of tribal affairs (*ra'īs-e qabā'el*; Adamec, p. 114). In the latter position Dāwūd exacerbated the dispute between Afghanistan and the new state of Pakistan, vigorously promoting demands for self-determination in the Pashtun tribal territories of Pakistan (Dupree, pp. 477-98).

In 1332 Š./1953 Dāwūd seized power from his uncle in a bloodless coup. During his tenure as minister (known as “Dāwūd’s decade”) he transformed the Afghan state. He immediately sought foreign aid to build the national army. When the United States, then embarking on an alliance with Pakistan, refused him, he turned to the Soviet Union, which, beginning with an agreement in 1333 Š./1955, provided the bulk of both military equipment and training for the Afghan army. Moscow also provided development aid, as did Washington, D.C., after 1335 Š./1956 (Dupree, pp. 522-23).

Although Dāwūd’s links to Moscow earned him the nickname “the Red Prince,” he was an autocratic modernizer, rather than a communist. He maintained a policy of nonalignment (*bīṭarafi*), playing off the United States and the Soviet Union against each other. The aid that he obtained enabled him to carry out the major elements of his state-building policy: centralizing control of weapons in a modern army and gendarmerie; strengthening commercial agriculture and exports by investing in economic infrastructure, particularly dams and roads; relying on state enterprises, rather than private joint-stock companies, as the main source of capital accumulation; expanding modern education in order to train personnel for the new state institutions; and creating a national transportation and communication network.

The increasing strength of the central government enabled Dāwūd to institute some modernizing reforms as well. In 1338 Š./1959 he decided that the army was strong enough to challenge both tribal leaders and the religious



establishment. He placed several influential tribal khans under house arrest and announced that he would thenceforth collect land tax in Qandahār, home province of his Dorrānī cotribesmen, who had long been exempted from taxation; the army suppressed the resulting protests. On independence day in 1338 Š./1959 he and his chief military commanders appeared on the reviewing stand with their wives unveiled. He let it be known that any women who wished could follow their example. He arrested those *'olamā'* who protested these measures, as well as others who had spoken out against his ties to the Soviet Union (Dupree, pp. 530-38).

Dāwūd remained a Pashtun nationalist. In 1342 Š./1963 confrontation with Pakistan, which controlled the principal land route from Afghanistan to the sea, led to an economic crisis that forced him to resign (Dupree, pp. 530-38). For the next decade Moḥammad-Zāher Shah ruled directly, inaugurating a system called Demokrāsī-e now (New democracy), with an elected consultative parliament (Wolesi jerga). Dāwūd was the main target of a provision of the constitution adopted in 1343 Š./1964 (see [CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN](#)), in which members of the royal family were forbidden to stand for election or to serve as ministers.

He maintained his ties with members of the new intelligentsia and the Soviet-trained officer corps, groups largely created by his policies and with which he therefore enjoyed special relations. Among his associates were members of the Parčam (banner) faction of the pro-Soviet People's democratic party of Afghanistan (Ḥezb-e demokrāt-e kaḷq-e Afġānestān; P.D.P.A.), led by Babrak Kārmal. In the early 1970s a series of bad harvests, a decline in foreign aid, and Zāher Shah's passive style of rule created a crisis for the regime. With the help of Soviet-trained army officers, including members of Parčam, Dāwūd again seized power, in July 1973. Instead of taking the throne, however, he proclaimed Afghanistan a republic and himself president. Although Parčamīs served him in important posts, he soon became wary of excessive dependence on them and the Soviets (Bradsher, pp. 57-59). By 1354 Š./1975 most had been dismissed, and Dāwūd, ever alert for new opportunities, was courting the newly rich monarchs of the Persian Gulf, especially the shah of Persia. The still tiny band of Islamic revolutionaries in Afghanistan staged an abortive uprising against him in 1354 Š./1975 and established bases in Peshawar, Pakistan.

In Moscow in 1356 Š./1977, when Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev warned Dāwūd about his growing ties with the shah, he replied that Afghanistan



would have relations with whomever it pleased. The Soviets then increased their support for the P.D.P.A. By the time that Dāwūd moved against the party in April 1978 it was too late (Bradsher, pp. 63-66). P.D.P.A. cells in the army launched a coup, during which Dāwūd was killed.

See also [AFGHANISTAN x, xi](#).

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