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KABUL IV. URBAN POLITICS SINCE ẒĀHER SHAH

Under Moḥammad Ẓāher Shah and Davud Khan

As described by Xavier de Planhol, urban planning in Kabul during Moḥammad Ẓāher Shah's reign (1933-73) had been driven by an overarching assumption of steady but moderate growth, given the city's function as the capital of the country as well its focal center for higher education (see ii, above). The first master plan marked an important attempt to reorganize the spatial structure of the city. A first revision was authorized in 1971 in order to do justice to Kabul's unanticipated rapid growth. The revised plan accommodated an urban population of over 1.4 million expected by 1995. Its provisions included increasing residential density through large-scale construction of housing units. As de Planhol points out, this vision of urban life in Kabul was at odds with local preferences for secluded private spaces allowing for a separation between the public arena and the private personal and family sphere and can be considered a catalyst for rising political tensions within the capital city. Implied public criticism found its documented expression in no less than 6,000 applications to the municipality for individual property in 1975 alone. Besides, most of the newly constructed apartment blocks remained unaffordable for the lower strata, in particular for migrants from surrounding rural provinces (Grötzbach, 1979, pp. 55-56).

Providing additional momentum to rising intra-city tensions, Afghans living

outside Kabul who had remained hostile towards the promises of capital city life (cf. Hatch; Dupree, 2002, p. 982) increasingly managed to gain a foothold in the political structure of the capital itself. The prevailing urban-rural pattern of economic exclusion and ideological rejection nurtured its own Kabul-based opposition by creating a group of educated minority leaders coming from a wide political and religious spectrum, “ambitious men whose access to power was blocked. Through their participation in the state educational system and the time they all spent in the capital, they developed aspirations not only for themselves but for their nation” (Rubin, 1992, p. 94). Agency for structural change was thus nurtured not only by rural resistance against an alleged urban project of modernity, but also by concrete actions taken within the city. This created a pattern of political conflict that strengthened the opposition against the central government both nationally, that is, across urban-rural fault-lines, and in its own ‘backyard’ (the capital itself) and provided an explosive mixture of secular discontent and religious mobilization that culminated in the ousting of Moḥammad Ẓāher Shah through a military coup in mid-1973 and the subsequent proclamation of an Afghan Republic by Dawud Khan.

Having taken the first tentative steps towards accomplishing a politically and administratively challenging land reform in 1976, by 1977 the Davud government already found itself in an awkward quandary. On the one hand, there was strong and vociferous pressure from the urban technocratic and bureaucratic elite prodding the government to continue with the project of socioeconomic modernization. On the other hand, traditionalists and religious authorities with mostly rural constituencies had gained leverage. They now enjoyed greater clout thanks to a somewhat odd alliance with the popular, urban-based communist and religious factions. Led by aspiring young politicians from both affluent urban and indigent rural backgrounds, the communist faction also attracted army officers and high-ranking officials from the civilian administration (Westad, 2005, pp. 299-300). A year later, in 1978, Davud was overthrown by a movement led by the communist Khalq-Parcham party (see communism iv. in afghanistan). Given the absence of a significant Afghan industrial working class, the party’s reform agenda was focused on the spatial inequality between the majority of rural dwellers and rural and urban elites as well as on the perceived need for a more radical land reform.

Although domestic structures and agency thus played crucial roles in the demise of the king’s rule as well as that of the first republic, foreign policy and

external factors also contributed a significant part. Both Moḥammad Ẓāher Shah and Davud Khan had been concerned about the country's precarious strategic location between its two regional neighbors, Iran and Pakistan. Intensified cooperation with the Soviet Union, one of the principal players in the global Cold War scenario and even more so in the West Asian regional context, not only promised economic development but also a certain degree of political protection. As a result, hundreds of students, often military cadets, were sent to the USSR and, upon their return, nurtured the Khalq-Parcham movement, based in Kabul, and formed a critical intellectual incubator for ideas and policies that would eventually guide Afghanistan's political leadership throughout the late 1970s.

Under the Communist Regime and Soviet Occupation

As soon as they had taken over the governmental offices, the communists approached the second land reform in a more radical fashion. Rural change was to be implemented through young members of the communist student body and the party cadre traveling to remote provinces and overseeing the process of demarcation and redistribution. However, this strategy faced fierce resistance, not only from rural landlords, but also from its designated beneficiaries, who could not place their trust on the central government's capability to intervene on their behalf in cases of local retaliation. They conceived of the policy as a dangerous political gamble in which they could well become the ultimate losers, putting their already minimal livelihood at peril.

As explained above, of the two counter-movements that had evolved during the 1970s, the communist factions were initially the more successful in seizing the political momentum. But when public discontent rose in response to their radical reform agenda, the religious movement regained its strength. The first Islamist uprisings soon followed. They reached Kabul in August 1979. In late December, the USSR launched its invasion in support of the fledgling communist government in Kabul. Yet instability increased further and culminated in February 1980 in the 'Night of *Allāh o Akbar*,' a "largely spontaneous rejection of the regime and its Soviet sponsors" (Rubin, 2002, pp. 135, 186) involving students, shopkeepers, and workers.

The ensuing resistance movement of the Mujahidin (*mojāhedin*), although enjoying some city-based support particularly in the south and western parts of the country, can best be seen as a rural insurgency using appropriate

traditional and religious discourse to depict the occupying forces as “infidel foreign invaders” operating out of Kabul (Westad, 2005, p. 350; cf. Schetter, p. 2006). As a result, the Mujahidin began to enjoy mounting support, fueled partly by the occupiers’ brutal campaigns in the country’s vast rural areas. It must also be borne in mind that for the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, and particularly Kabul and the northern borders and the eastern provinces adjacent to Pakistan, were of great strategic significance in relation to the maintenance of its own internal security.

Within Kabul, the Soviet civilian and military presence led to large-scale construction of apartment blocks near the international airport and in Šahrārā quarter. Meanwhile, illegal settlements and squats sprang up as the rural population began to flee from the war-torn countryside (Grötzbach, 1986, pp. 82, 83; cf. ii, above). This rapid expansion exacerbated urban poverty in the capital and helped to tip the balance between public support and hostility towards the communist ideology, even within the capital itself. The Soviet-administered municipality tried hard to assuage the brewing discontent by reducing the vulnerability of urban residents through launching a system of subsidies for basic foodstuff and fuel in early 1980, but inflation levels in the capital prompted Afghan middlemen to opt for markets in the nearby provinces rather than in Kabul proper. Even though the authorities were aware of the problem, they were unable to seal off the city completely, as this would have had even more disastrous effects on the food supply.

In the ensuing military battles, first between the Mujahidin insurgency and the Soviet occupiers and later among the different Mujahidin factions themselves following the Russian withdrawal (formally concluded on 15 February 1989), the population and infrastructure of the capital suffered significant losses. An estimated 60,000 residents were killed during the fighting, and there was also substantial emigration of the population out of the capital. By the end of 1993, those government entities based in Kabul “probably exercised less control over the territory and population of Afghanistan than at almost any time in the preceding century” (Rubin, 1994, p. 187).

Given the Mujahidin’s reliance on various mobile guerrilla armies in fighting against the Soviet occupation, there were rapid and frequent changes in the military alliances during the infighting between 1992 and 1996 (Rubin, 2002, pp. 241, 265). Kabul ended up being divided into several factional zones, whose borders sometimes changed daily, akin to the situation in Beirut during

the Lebanese civil war of the same decade. The buildings along Maywand Avenue (Jāda-ye Meywand) became a frontline for rival factions and were reduced to rubble. The southwestern districts of Deh Mazang and Dār al-Amān, in particular, were heavily bombarded or, like Kārte Se, even razed to the ground. Yet despite these campaigns against and within Kabul, no decisive victory was achieved by any of the warring parties. In the meantime, it remained one of the three constituting pillars of the Islamabad-Kabul-Peshawar triangle from which international aid organizations were operating (Magnaldi and Patera, 2004, p. 81), although the constantly shifting front lines made the delivery of humanitarian assistance extremely challenging (Atmar and Goodhand, 2001, p. 51; Marsden, 1998).

The eventual victory and capture of the city by the Taliban (Ṭālebān) owed more to the political instability emanating from the squabbles among warring Mujahidin factions than to any coherent military or superior strategy by the Taliban themselves (Arez and Dittmann, 2005, p. 115). Following a political accord in May 1996, the Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud (Aḥmad Šāh Masʿud) had to accept the appointment of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (Golboddin Ḥekmatyār) as Prime Minister. As the commander of his own military forces, he had been playing a major role in the physical destruction of the capital (Rubin, 2002, pp. 272-73; Barakat et al., 1996). When the Taliban forces subsequently captured Hekmatyar's military base south of Kabul in August, Massoud was pressured to send troops from his urban stronghold to support him. This further weakened his own defense lines in the city and tipped the balance in favor of the advancing Taliban forces. They captured Kabul on 26 September 1996, having met with little resistance from Massoud's retreating units (Davis, 2001, pp. 56-68).

Under the Taliban Regime

Once they had occupied and subdued the capital, the Taliban quickly implemented a practice of 'anti-planning' towards it. Acting on a fundamentally rural-traditionalist ideology, the Taliban conceived of their attempt to reconfigure Kabul as a twofold agenda (Roy, 2001, p. 21). First, they regarded the city as a 'Babylon' in need of moral purification, a place that had to be 'pushed back to the roots' in order to provide for a better fit with the ethos of Pushtunwali-inspired Afghan tribalism. At the same time, the image of Kabul as a political 'actor' of anti-religious modernization justified a harsh punishment. The neglect of urban recovery or any significant development measures under the Taliban (cf. Arez and Dittmann, 2005, p. 148) should

therefore be understood, not as a measure of their ignorance, but as their determined expression of revenge upon the city. Urban cosmopolitanism was quickly destroyed by a regime of prohibitions that aimed to minimize freedom of movement. Moḥtasebin ("guardians")—an institution from Nāder Shah's times—were reinstated. Religious watchdogs had been one of the three constituting pillars for the creation of Kabul municipality, together with the police commander and the *kalāntar*s (Grevemeyer, 1990, p. 236). Their original role of maintaining public order was now framed by the need for strict adherence to the hard-line interpretation of the Qurʾān propagated by the new urban governors.

As a result of the neglect of basic urban services, the dependence of Kabul's fast-growing population on international aid agencies soon became a key urban feature (cf. Johnson and Leslie, 2002, p. 68). Before leaving the country in 1998, owing to the worsening security situation, the World Food Program was providing food for approximately a quarter of the city's residents, and by December 1999, international staff were quoted as estimating that two-thirds of the population relied on direct humanitarian assistance (Goodson, 2001, p. 122).

Owing to their explicitly anti-urban ideology, the Taliban also used forced migration from rural areas and scorched-earth policies to ensure ethnic cleansing. During the summer of 1999, for example, the destruction of irrigation systems, farmland, and shelter forced tens of thousands to flee either north to the Panjsher valley or south to Kabul, where approximately 30,000 IDPs (internally displaced persons) arrived just before the onset of winter (Johnson and Leslie, 2004, pp. 70-71; cf. Rubin, 2003, p. 569).

Under Allied Occupation and the Karzai Government

The starkest experience of physical vulnerability in Kabul was still to come. Two years later, in 2001, the U.S.-led campaign to hunt down the terrorist cell responsible for the September 11 attacks was also presented to the public as a benevolent mission to 'liberate' Afghanistan from the rule of the Taliban. In an attempt to avoid civilian casualties, carpet-bombing was eschewed in favor of 'precision attacks' on strategic urban infrastructure (radar sites, airfields, command posts, etc.) that supported the Taliban resistance. However, since most of these sites were surrounded by poorly built settlements housing large numbers of people, the result of the bombing campaign was that most civilian deaths in the 2001 war occurred in high-density areas. The agenda of physical

destruction under the Taliban was thus rounded off by their archenemies (Herold, 2004, pp. 316-17; Esser, 2007, pp. 14-15).

Following the ousting of the Taliban, the political centralization project of the occupation forces—led by the U.S. military and supplemented by NATO troops—was also reflected in the NGOs' reinstated dichotomy between decision-making in their headquarters, which were either outside Afghanistan or concentrated in Kabul, and implementation "in the provinces," the 'site' of the greatest need (cf. Stockton, 2002, p. 29). Immediately after the cessation of fighting, national politics within the urban realm revived around the issue of ethnic dominance over either newly created or reinstated national ministries. Former allies of Massoud, a Tajik 'troika' comprising the Foreign Minister, the Defense Minister, and the subsequent Minister of Education, formed an "alliance of convenience . . . to consolidate their power further in Kabul, . . . inevitably leading to tensions with [President] Karzai" (Wimmer and Schetter, 2003, p. 530). Political competition also manifested itself in frequent demands by the Tajik leaders for timely withdrawal of international security forces, a position directly opposite to the one advocated by the Pushtun President, who enjoyed practically no military support in the country and who has been frequently and pejoratively referred to as "the mayor of Kabul" (Hersh, 2004, p. 2), since his authority does not stretch much beyond the outskirts of the capital. At the same time, Kabul after the latest invasion is not the sole distribution center that it used to be in the past, especially during the Russian occupation. Several provincial cities are now rivaling its economic influence through their close locations to national borders. Moreover, the country's economic disintegration and subsequent sub-regionalization of provinces in the north and west during the Taliban regime have led to the emergence of sub-regional trade blocs (Pugh et al., 2004; Rubin, 2000). Nonetheless, the city remains "the main channel through which reconstruction funds flow, of which, by definition, a substantial part spill over and stay in the city. No city or province in Afghanistan can offer a comparable package of incentives" (van der Tas, 2004, p. 68; cf. Lister and Wilder, 2005).

Not surprisingly, therefore, post-war Kabul underwent a process of dramatic urban concentration (Bertaud, 2005). Its population was growing at a breathtaking pace, as vast numbers of refugees chose to come to the capital rather than return to their home regions. In 2006, the population was estimated at 3.5 million (Mumtaz and Noschis, 2004, p. 20). From Ḵayr-kāna in the north to Nur Moḥammad Šāh Minā behind the old Bālā Ḥeṣār, the city is

now one continuous urban area. The modern-looking central districts (*nawāhi*) have some infrastructure and more or less adequate housing, as well as a few luxury buildings and dense traffic with its inevitable pollution. Meanwhile, the city's outskirts are home to the uncontrolled development of densely populated districts of makeshift housing on and below slopes and hillsides in the form of camps, shantytowns, or traditional but illegal constructions. Of the 16,830 city hectares of usable terrain encircled by steep mountains, only 1,000 ha had not already been used for construction as of mid-2004. Amid such growth, Kabul was groaning under the increased demand for the most basic services. Reliable electricity has only recently found its way to the semi-peripheral neighborhoods, and some still remain without power. Roads are in poor shape and notoriously blocked for the better half of the day. Yet at the center of household concerns were rising rents and cost of living, rampant unemployment, and lack of sanitary services (Beall and Esser, 2005). Sewerage systems remain overburdened and present a major venue for spread of disease, particularly for more vulnerable residents such as children, widows, and the elderly.

Lucrative deals concerning urban land were common. Private capital, both from external accounts and generated through legal and illegal economic activity within the country, provided the capital for the physical reconstruction of Kabul (Magnaldi and Patera, 2004). Encouraged by the readiness of international development agencies to pay rents on a par with London and New York, officials extricated both private and public land by capitalizing on the actual power bestowed on them by their official positions (Morgan et al., 2005, p. 22). A hundredfold leverage on initial 'investments' in pseudo-formal documentation from the municipality was the norm, and occasional investigations into cases of corruption-backed land appropriation have regularly been outpaced by the speed of construction on redistributed allotments. Without doubt, the economic boom in Kabul has also been fueled by money from drug trafficking (Rubin et al., 2004, p. 13). The reinvestment of income from production and trade in narcotics has now become established almost as official policy, with one provincial governor talking openly about an "informal amnesty" for drug lords willing to end their involvement in poppy cultivation and 'leave their money at home' in order to help kick-start construction companies and small industrial plants (Cooley, 2006; cf. World Bank, 2006, p. 23).

Alternative structures of rent-seeking and distribution remain equally linked

to local “potentates, tribal leaders and notables [who] are bringing together the families who are dependent on them into local user associations . . . . and creating relations of dependence and partnership with intermediaries in NGOs in the capital” (Wimmer and Schetter, 2003, p. 532). This linking of the urban with the rural creates a new form of almost autonomous client non-states, “strengthened by the financial resources of the international donor community, and obstructing the stabilization of the state authority and legitimacy” (ibid.). Seen against this background, it is hardly surprising that rural-based politicians, many of them former commanders, have continued harnessing the frustration of rural folk over the slow pace of rural rehabilitation as a way of “political profiling” against the central government (Paasch, 2005), most visible in the persistently volatile east and south of the country but also increasingly prevalent in the north and west.

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