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The Khost Rebellion

The Reaction of Afghan Clerical and Tribal Forces to Social Change

In March 1924, a tribal revolt occurred in southern Afghanistan that shook the Afghan government to the core. The disturbance began in Khost, a small town in southeastern Afghanistan, near present-day Pakistan. The anti-government revolt in Khost soon resulted in a widespread rebellion, assuming the dimensions of a civil war. The rebellion continued for several months at varying degrees of intensity. It was finally quelled as a result of government concessions to high Afghan ulama and skillful propaganda that connected the uprising to foreign intrigue.

The Khost Rebellion has generally been viewed by the Afghan, Indian and Soviet press as an uprising instigated by the British against the Afghan King Aman-Allah whose policies threatened British interests in the region. The purpose of this paper is to show that the rebellion was the reaction of indigenous religious and tribal groups to efforts of King Aman-Allah to rapidly modernize Afghanistan in the early 1920s. The rebellion was provoked by reforms that most adversely affected rural taxpayers, the lower clergy and autonomous tribes. The general discontent was first articulated on behalf of the local population by a local clergyman who used his knowledge of the *shari'at* to challenge new state regulations.

Amani Reforms

In 1919, King Aman-Allah emerged as the hero of Afghanistan's War of Independence. Following a successful campaign against the British, Aman-Allah launched an ambitious reform program to modernize Afghanistan. As one of the most dynamic modernizers of the post-World War I period in the Middle East, his reform efforts preceded and overlapped those of his contemporaries, Ataturk of Turkey and Reza Shah of Iran.

Aman-Allah's reforms fall into two periods, those introduced between 1919 and 1923 and more radical reforms launched in 1928. The intent of the reforms

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of the first period, the focus of this paper, was to induce change by means of new state regulations. During this period, Aman–Allah employed legal experts to develop new legal codes to promote modernization within the bounds of Hanafi law, the official rite in Afghanistan. A commission of liberal ulama formulated a body of regulations that came to be known as the *nezam–nama* (from the Arabic word *nezam*, meaning order). The *Nezam–namas* enacted between 1919 and 1923 codified legal procedures, introduced a unified court system, universal conscription and changes in taxation, and defined family relations in a uniform written code. For the first time, traditional religious courts and tribunals came under direct government control, and the authority of religious judges (*qazi*) and the monopoly by the clergy of the system of education were curtailed.

Origins of the Rebellion

In its first year, the government set about solving financial problems. In 1920, a new Tax Law (*nezam–nama–i–maliyya*) created unified and efficient tax collection procedures controlled by the central government, and implemented the first increase in property taxes since the time of Amir Shir ‘Ali Khan¹. The tax increases, changes in tax collection procedures, and evidence of widespread corruption in the tax system provoked great resentment toward the reforms.

Resentment over tax increases was exacerbated by unprecedented social reforms that interjected government into peoples’ private lives, from regulations relating to marriage, funerals and business transactions, to prohibitions against the use of snuff and the manufacturing and wearing of traditional shoes (*paizar*)². Resentment over the reforms was especially great in rural area.

A Conscription and Identity Card Act (*nezam–nama–i–tazkera–i–nofus*), which made military service compulsory and universal, was the most unpopular of the reforms of 1923. This act stipulated that the registration and identity card (*tazkera*) was the only document that would be accepted in courts of law. So in order to protect their legal rights, citizens were forced to obtain the *tazkera* and accept government interference in their private lives. For example, in order to be legal, marriages had to be registered with an identity card (*tazkera*) number, which gave the state a means to enforce the new family law and control polygamy and child marriage. Resentment of the *nezam–namas* was illustrated by the popular adage “register for the *tazkera* and accept death (*tazkera begir wa bemir*)”³.

Other reforms threatened the status of traditional elites, in particular Pashtun tribal leaders. Universal conscription and the regularization of criminal law imperilled tribal autonomy and the authority of tribal leaders. Tribal chiefs

¹ *Afghanistan dar Penjah Sal–i–Akhir* (Afghanistan During the Last Fifty Years), Government Press, 1347/1868, 59. Kabul.

² *Aman–i–Afghan*, May 1, 1923. Kabul.

³ Interview with Musa Shafiq, Qargha, August 1976.

(*khans*), who had formerly controlled military recruitment, lost this prerogative and the power that accompanied it. The threat of increasing state control by means of a Western-style standing army motivated tribal leaders, whose loyalty to a central government was nominal at best, to join the forces of rebellion.

Dissatisfaction of the Clergy

Resentment over the reforms was eventually expressed by the lower-ranking rural clergy. They were the first to articulate the general discontent and rise up in protest. There were several reasons why the lower clergy in the countryside became involved in antigovernment uprisings. Unlike the high-ranking ulama of the capital, who were involved in court politics and influenced by Muslim reform movements elsewhere, the rural ulama had little contact with the outside world and were very conservative. Secondly, the rural clergy identified closely with the rural population because of their daily involvement in the lives of the people. Moreover, the lower-ranking clergy relied on the people they served for much of their support, unlike the high ulama who relied more on the government for their livelihood.

The majority of the high ulama and the lower-ranking clergy were suspicious of the effort to codify the *shari'at* and were offended by provisions of the Constitution, the Marriage Law, and the Penal Code that appeared to contravene it. The ulama took issue, in particular, with the Marriage Law, which involved several radical departures from prevailing norms. Restrictions on the practice of polygamy and the elimination of child marriage were among the most objectionable.

The clergy were also offended by the Criminal Laws, the Penal Code and the Guide for Religious Judges (*tamassok al-qozzat*), a codified version of Hanafi law. The Afghan Guide for Religious Judges, like the Turkish *Majalla*, was based on selected provisions of Hanafi law rather than on the prevailing interpretation of each law. The most important provision of the Guide for Religious Judges vested in the state the authority to determine discretionary punishments (*ta'zirat*). Heretofore, each crime had been adjudicated as a unique case for which *ta'zir* punishment could not be prescribed. A religious judge (*qazi*) had to examine circumstances of each crime and then apply his knowledge of the *shari'at* and his personal judgment. Under the new regulations, the *qazis* stood to lose both their autonomy and their monopoly of the legal profession, prerogatives they had enjoyed for centuries.

The opposition of the ulama to the Penal Code (*nezam-nama-i-jaza-i-'omumi*) focused on the right of the ruler to determine discretionary punishment and the designation of punishment before the commission of crime. While the Penal Code was declared by the government to be supplemental to the *shari'at*, theoretically inferior to it, the Penal Code often prevailed in practice. The outcome of cases was often changed by this bias, because the primary objective of the Penal Code was to safeguard public policy. Although concern over this bias was widespread among the ulama, they did not openly protest against it until after the outbreak of rebellion in Khost.

The Rise of Molla 'Abd-Allah as Leader of the Rebellion

Opposition to the reforms began to surface in the fall of 1923. Government attempts to enforce conscription in provinces populated predominately by Pashtun tribes created an uproar⁴. On November 27, and again December 11, 1923, shops were closed in Qandahar, and protestors took refuge in the local shrine and refused to leave until the government promised to postpone conscription⁵. Similar outbreaks occurred in the Eastern Province, where the Solaiman Khail, Ghelzai and Khugiani tribes also protested conscription and taxation⁶.

In March 1924, the protests turned into open rebellion in Khost, a region in the Southern Province, when a group of *mollas* publicly protested the new regulation as inconsistent with the *shari'at*. The chief instigator was Molla 'Abd-Allah, known as Molla-i-Lang, the lame molla. He infused the anti-government revolt with a passionate missionary commitment to Islam. The conflict began when a Mangal tribesman contested the marriage of another tribesman, claiming that the bride was betrothed to him in childhood. The local official interceded on behalf of the newly-wed couple. With the bride's consent, he rejected the claim on the basis of provisions of the new Marriage Law that prohibited forced marriages and marital arrangements before the age of puberty. Molla 'Adb-Allah, who had been deprived by the legal reforms of his authority to settle local disputes protested the decision of the local official, accusing him of acting against the *shari'at* and asking him to reserve his decision. The local official's refusal to consider the request provided Molla 'Abd-Allah an excuse to incite the Mangal tribe against the government⁷.

Joined by tribal leaders and other Khost *mollas*, Molla 'Abd-Allah raised the banner of opposition in the name of Islam and started a militant revolt against the reforms. In a report to London, the British minister in Kabul wrote: "With the new code in one hand and the Koran in the other, they called the tribes to choose between the word of God and that of man, and adjured them to resist demands, the acceptance of which would reduce their sons to slavery in the Afghan army and their daughters to the degrading influence of Western education"⁸. The call for the defense of the *shari'at* gave the opposition the impetus it needed to mobilize the people. What had festered as general dissatisfaction now burgeoned into a holy war with the *nezam-namas* as the immediate target of opposition.

At first, the government did not take the uprising seriously. By the end of March 1924, however, authorities began to appreciate the gravity of the situation. By the middle of April, the whole Southern Province was involved in the insurrection. As resistance increased, the government attempted to negotiate a

⁴ India Office Records (IOR), "Summary of Events in Afghanistan", July 15, 1923 to June 30, 1924.

⁵ IOR, L/P&S/10/961, no. 2, January 3, 1924.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 84, July 3, 1924.

⁷ Faiz Mohammad Kateb, *Tazakkor-i Enqelab* (unpublished manuscript), 3.

⁸ IOR, L/P&S/10/961, no. 84, July 3, 1924.

peaceful settlement by sending a delegation of several highly respected ulama to persuade the rebel *mollas* that the reforms were not in conflict with the teachings of Islam⁹. Negotiations with the rebel *mollas* were not successful and ended without agreement.

In July 1924, matters took a new turn with the arrival of ‘Abd al-Karim, a son of an ex-king of Afghanistan forced into exile in India in 1879. The arrival of this pretender to the throne from India to lead the rebellion and the convening of a Grand Assembly (*Loya-Jerga*) to review the reforms opened a new phase in the conflict between the government and the rebels and the clergy.

The Loya-Jerga of 1924

In the midst of the rebellion, Aman-Allah called a Grand Assembly of tribal and religious leaders to discuss the reforms. He hoped in calling the *jerga* to obtain the support of the ulama for his policies and thereby counter the religious protests led by Molla Abd-Allah. To the king’s consternation, the vast majority of the ulama did not accept his views and demanded nullification of the regulations they felt were in conflict with tenets of Hanafi Islam.

The high-ranking clergy had their own reasons for objecting to the reforms and now had the opportunity to express them. The ulama of the High Religious Council, who participated in formulating the *nezam-namas*, had based legal and social reforms on the principle of limited interpretation (*ejtehad-i-moqayyad*), which permits a jurist under appropriate circumstances to re-interpret the law within limits¹⁰. The puritanical Deoband-trained ulama and other elite ulama, who had earlier supported the regime, now objected to *nezam-namas* that did not, in their judgment, strictly conform to Hanafi doctrine.

Secondly, most of the high ulama, who had earlier supported the regime, were now concerned by the government’s growing control over religious institutions and feared their own positions would be adversely affected in a matter of time. The high clergy who acted as religious judges (*qazis*) felt especially threatened by the centralization of the legal system¹¹.

Thirdly, rebel leaders had openly questioned the piety of higher-ranking ulama, especially those closely associated with the government. In response to these attacks, some high-ranking ulama argued against the reforms, partly to affirm their piety and partly to establish or confirm their reputation as scholars, turning the *jerga* into an arena of recondite debate. The condemnation of the members of the High Religious Council (*Hai’at-i-Tamiz*) was partly motivated

⁹ Mir. G.M. Ghoobar, *Afghanistan dar Massir-i-Tarikh (Afghanistan in the Process of History)*. Mo’assisa-i-Chap-i-Kotob (Book Printing Institute), 1346/1967, 807, Kabul. Leon Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan: King Amanullah’s Failure to Modernize a Tribal Society*. Cornell University Press, 1973, 122, Ithaca. R.R. Maconachie, “Precis on Afghan Affairs, 1919–1927”. Government of India, 1928, P300, 134; IOR, L/PS/10/961, no. 48, April 7, 1924.

¹⁰ Musa Shafiq, *Qargha*, June 25, 1976.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

by long-standing competition between the Deoband-trained ulama and home-trained ulama, graduates of Madrasa-i-Shahi, who filled most of the important religious positions in the capital, including membership in the High Religious Council¹².

The most controversial issues related to the Guide for Religious Judges (the *Tamassok al-Qozzat*), the Penal Code, the Fundamental Law, the Marriage Law, and female education. The ulama of the *loya-jerga* advocated restoration of the right of the religious judges (*qazis*) to pass judgment in *ta'zirat* cases. Polygamy and child marriage were also extensively debated. The provision of the Marriage Law pertaining to child marriage (*nekah-i-saghira*) generated the most heated controversy. The majority of the ulama maintained that the Prophet's marriage to 'Ayisha, a minor, set a precedent for the faithful. An opposing measure, they argued, would rescind a practice established by the Prophet (*sonnat*).

The debates in the *loya-jerga* resulted in a decisive victory for the conservative ulama. Regulations restricting child marriage and polygamy were eliminated. The *loya-jerga* declared further that all business transactions must be conducted according to provisions of the *shari'at* and that the statement on the back of identity cards requiring its presentation to validate many transactions was not desirable from the point of view of the *shari'at* and should be removed.

Article 2 of the Fundamental Law was revised as follows: "Islam is the official religion of Afghanistan, and Hanafism is the state's formal religious rite. Hindus and Jews in Afghanistan are protected by the law provided they pay the poll tax (*jazy'a*) and adopt distinctive signs and do not disturb public morale and tranquility". Article 9 was also revised: "All Afghan citizens enjoy freedom subject to strict observance of religious duties as imposed by the *shari'at* and the state penal codes". In return for acceding to the ulama's demands for a totally Islamic system, Aman-Allah effectively restored his image as "the defender of Islam" and his legitimacy in relation to the *shari'at*.

Cooperation of the High Clergy in Suppressing the Rebellion

The *loya-jerga* transferred some of the state's authority back to the ulama, restored the king's image and legitimacy in the realm of religion, and issued a religious decree (*fatwa*) condemning the uprising of the rebel *mollas* against the government. The *fatwa* reads in part,

We the ulama of the *loja-jerga* have corrected the few infirm provisions that had been included in the *nezam-namas*... and have brought them in line with Hanafi law... We declare that the ruler (*ulu al-'amr*) has the right by the authority of the *shari'at* to impose any type of punitive measure which he feels appropriate upon whomever either by personal choice or encouragement of others would rise up against the State.

¹² I am grateful to 'Aziz al-Din Fofalzai for this information obtained in an interview in Kabul in June 1976.

The resolutions of the *loya-jerga* marked a victory for the high ulama. They did not, however, change the attitude of the rebel *mollas*. Molla 'Abd-Allah responded to the *fatwa* in a letter to the king,

You say the laws you issued are not against the *shari'at* and were issued by ulama. We beg to say that these did so under the pressure of the government or to get money from you. It is these very scholars who were called to Kabul lately to a conference which decided to amend the laws which they had first thought were in conformity with the *shari'at*. If they had been true to their religion they would have stuck to their first opinion.... You say that the spiritual leaders have decided that we are infidels and liable to be beheaded in accordance with the *shari'at*. We beg to ask how any reliance can be placed on such spiritual leaders when they change their tune at every turn¹³.

Rather than accede to the resolutions of the *jerga*, the rebel forces expanded their activities, because the *jerga* had failed to address other issues of importance to them. One such important issue was compulsory military service, a major cause of the uprising. Far from being settled to the satisfaction of the tribes, compulsory military service was endorsed by the high ulama at the *jerga*.

At the end of July, a force of several tribes led by Molla Abd-Allah cut communication lines between Kabul and Gardiz and advanced into the southern end of the Logar Valley, close to Kabul. Molla 'Abd-Allah interpreted the concessions of the king at the *loya-jerga* as a sign of weakness and as repentance under pressure. He claimed further that prior to Aman-Allah's repentance, 'Abd al-Karim Khan, a man of royal descent, had already been proclaimed amir of Afghanistan¹⁴. The dissident leaders insisted on Aman-Allah's abdication, denouncing him as an iconoclast whose policies had caused dissent and bloodshed in the country¹⁵. 'Abd al-Karim was now generally accepted as amir in the Southern Province, and Molla 'Abd-Allah was appointed his major advisor and grand judge (*qazi-qozzat*)¹⁶.

Alleged British Intrigue

When efforts for a peaceful settlement failed, the government moved to crush the rebellion with full force, soliciting the support of the high ulama and the neutral tribes against the rebels. Simultaneous efforts were undertaken to disparage the rebel leaders as traitors serving British interests. The arrival of a claimant to the throne from British India to spearhead the rebellion worked to the regime's benefit, providing the pretext to invoke Islamic nationalist sentiments against the rebels. By manipulating reports of 'Abd al-Karim's involvement in

¹³ The English translation of the rebel *molla's* manifest was provided by the Frontier Intelligence Bureau (FIB), 1923-24, IOR, L/P&S/10/1081, P4397, no. 38, Oct. 9, 1924.

¹⁴ Statement of Abd al-Karim Khan issued after his arrest. IOR, L/P&S/10/1112, P529, 1925, confidential.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, P4220, Sept, 22, 1924, no. 115.

¹⁶ Diary of the Military Attache in Kabul (DMAK), IOR, L/P&S/10/1120, P411, no. 111, Sept. 15, 1924.

the rebellion and his alleged connection to the British, the government was able to divert attention from dissension over reforms to defense of the country against the British.

The Afghan press began alluding to British involvement in the rebellion. By reproducing articles from the Indian press and quotations from Reuters, *Aman-i-Afghan* insinuated that Great Britain was the enemy behind the scene¹⁷. ‘Abd al-Karim was portrayed as a British instrument, a man from the land of infidelity who had been swayed by enemy interests since childhood. *Aman-i-Afghan* also questioned British motives in providing financial support to Afghan refugees of royal descent in India.

Curiously, the British themselves were perplexed about the source of military and financial support to ‘Abd al-Karim. It was generally suspected in India that the Bolsheviks were providing money to the rebels¹⁸. The Afghan government was also frustrated at not finding evidence to prove that the British were behind ‘Abd al-Karim’s activities. The acting foreign minister in Kabul reportedly admitted to the British *chargé d’affaires* that the Afghan government had no proof of involvement by the British in the rebellion and confessed that the Afghan government was using anti-British propaganda to extract a *fatwa* of *jihad* from the ulama against Molla ‘Abd-Allah and ‘Abd al-Karim. The acting foreign minister explained that the need to undermine ‘Abd al-Karim “...outweighed everything else, and [that] the best chance of success in this direction lay in making it known that he was acting as the tool of the unbelievers”¹⁹.

The anti-British propaganda, carefully orchestrated by the government-controlled press, was highly successful in turning public opinion against the rebels. The Soviet press and some Indian Muslim publications also claimed that the Khost rebellion was instigated by the British. Afghan historians unanimously share this belief. However, neither the press reports nor Afghan historians have provided corroborating evidence for the theory. The arrival of a claimant to the throne from British India to lead the rebellion was evidence enough of British involvement.

The ulama, whose fear was fueled by the memory of past wars with the British, were now determined to fight against the rebel *mollas* and their, presumed, foreign ally. The outright rejection of the resolutions of the *loja-jerga* by Molla ‘Abd-Allah and his collaborators suggested they were motivated by other grievances or objectives. Between July and December 1924, the high ulama issued several *fatwas* condemning the rebel *mollas’* uprising against the government. On September 3, 1924, *Haqiqat* reported that the *eman* of the Congregation Mosque in Kabul “...read out a proclamation of holy war and urged

¹⁷ *Aman-i-Afghan*, Sonbola 17, 1303/Sept. 6, 1924.

¹⁸ FIB, 1923–1924, IOR, L/P&S/10/1081, P4397, no. 38, Oct. 9, 1924.

¹⁹ Note of an interview between Shir Ahmad Khan, officiating Afghan foreign minister, and the British charge d’affaires in Kabul, September 17, 1924, IOR, L/P&S/10/1112, P4221, no. 116, Kabul, Sept. 27, 1924.

his congregation... to show no mercy to the rebels”²⁰. *Tolu’-i-Afghan* of Qandahar printed a decree of *jihad* issued in Kabul by one hundred and eighty ulama²¹.

On January 30, 1925, the rebellion was ended when Molla ‘Abd-Allah and his collaborators were apprehended by government forces.

Conclusion

British archival records indicate that the British were not involved in the activities of ‘Abd al-Karim, were embarrassed by them and suspected the Soviets of having assisted with his escape from India. Rather, the uprising was precipitated by widespread resentment over far-reaching reforms imposed by the government at too fast a pace. Low-ranking, mostly rural *mollas* became the spokesmen for the dissidents and provided religious justification for the uprising, making it possible for high-ranking ulama to force the government to abrogate reforms they found offensive and to re-assert their influence in policy-making. Other important issues, like conscription and taxation, of equal or greater concern to the rebels were either not addressed or not resolved.

²⁰ The account in *Haqiqat* is included in the following report of the British from Kabul. IOR, L/PS/10/1120, DMAK, no. 107, Sept. 8, 1924.

²¹ *Tolu’-i-Afghan*, Sonbola 18, 1303/Sept. 7, 1924, Qandahar. British archival reports confirm this story, see IOR, L/P&S/10/1120, P4111, no. 111, Sept. 15, 1924; IOR, L/P&S/10/961, no. 124, Oct. 1924.