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Afghanistan. Ordinary state, failed state, or something else?

Abstract

The Afghanistan as a state defies the classical descriptions of the failed state, because on the one hand it has all its characteristic features, and on the other, this specific situation of "bankruptcy" has strong historical roots. The main sources uses to analyse the problems of Afghan state are historical sources, literature, press materials and reports from renowned international organizations. The closing conclusions is that the Euro-Atlantic approach to Afghan state and its problems point of view about is wrong and it is an obstacle to understanding challenges and finally may even be harmful.

Keywords: *Afghanistan; fragile state; failed state; decentralized state; president; Taliban*

Introduction

Describing a state as an institution, political sciences usually uses such terms as: territory, borders, international recognition, citizenship, executive powers, legislative powers, judiciary, internal and external sovereignty, etc. (Ehrlich, 1979; Lamentowicz, 1993; Winczorek, 2005, Zieliński, 2006; Dubel, Kostrubiec, Ławnikowicz, Markwart, 2011; *Nauka o państwie*, 2006; *The State. Critical Concepts*, 1994; Oppenheimer, 1975; *State Theory and State History*, 1992; Cudworth, Hall, McGovern). Those elements are the most obvious, especially when we use them in relation to the European or post-

European states such as the United States or Latin American states. But when we try to apply those terms to extra-European states we are facing another set of concepts and situations which are not so obvious, in which the usage of our stereotypes or sets of concepts may be misleading. For example there is a question of separation of powers, which is obvious for contemporary Euro-Atlantic state systems but in other, for example Muslim countries is debatable. Another obvious example is the character of relations between state and religion. In contemporary Euro-Atlantic world the division between state and church (or wider religion) is in most cases obvious, and such division is usually guaranteed by constitutions. (McWhirter, 1994) For example in Italian constitution the 7th Article states: „The State and the Catholic Church are independent and sovereign, each within its own sphere. Their relations are governed by the Lateran Pacts. Changes to the Pacts that are accepted by both parties shall not require a constitutional amendment" (The Constitution of the Italian Republic), when in French constitution the first article states that: „France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic" (The French Constitution of 1958 and Its Amendments). In the Muslim countries such a separation is virtually impossible because the religious, political, social and private lives and practices are so deeply intermixed that it is difficult to separate them.

One could point to many other theoretical and terminological problems in describing states belonging to other traditions by using terminology created or adapted for the Euro-Atlantic case. It seems, it will be better to use specific example as a case study, in this respect Afghanistan, to show certain set of problems. Afghanistan is an interesting case study, because its position is historically and structurally very specific, but on the other hand it could be viewed as an example of dealing with the accommodation of modern ideas to traditional states. One may wonder if so called 'Arab Spring'(*The Arab Spring and Arab Thaw: Unfinished Revolutions and the Quest for Democracy*, 2013; *The Arab Spring, Democracy and Security: Domestic and International Ramifications*, 2013; Prashad, 2012; *Islam and Democracy,* 2013; Alianak, 2014; *The Arab Spring: Will It Lead to Democratic Transition?*, 2013; *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East*, 2013; *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-*

revolution and the Making of a New Era, 2013) is also a way of dealing with the same problem, taking into account all the regional and local differences.

Tradition of Afghan state

When we look at the history of Afghanistan since its inception in 1747, we may observe that its statehood developed, in many ways, atypically, and its beginnings influenced strongly its future. When Afghanistan emerged as an epigone state after the fall of Nadir Shah empire and the disintegration of the Moghul Empire, it was one of several such entities. Ahmad Shah Durrani from the Abdali/Durrani tribe was accepted as a founder of the Afghanistan. Percy Sykes described him: „A monarch whose high descent and warlike qualities made him peculiarly acceptable to his aristocratic and virile Chiefs, as well as to his warlike subjects in general. In short, he possessed all the qualities that enabled him successfully to found the kingdom of Afghanistan" (Sykes, 1940, p. 367). His state build-up was based on the structure of Pashtun society and geared towards conquest and the collection of booty and tribute. Ahmad Shah Durrani gave most of the important offices to his own tribesmen. To further win their support, he granted them special favors, i.e. he provided his kinsmen with land in the Qandahar region in return for the provision of horsemen. These men received their lands rent-free. This and vocal support from the side of the Abdali/Durrani chiefs did not provide Ahmad with the means to extend his power. He couldn't force the Afghan tribes to pay taxes. What's more Ahmad Shah needed funds to "buy" the loyalty of the chiefs. Therefore he was forced to acquire wealth from beyond the Pashtun lands. As Mountstuart Elphistone, the British diplomat, pointed out "[Ahmad Shah] had the penetration to discover that it would require a less exertion to conquer all the neighboring kingdoms, than subdue his own countrymen" (Elphistone, 1972, p. 233). Ahmad Shah himself seems to have said that the West of his kingdom gave him warriors, and the East gave him funds (Gankovsky, 1981, p. 86).

Even in the conquered neighboring lands Ahmad Shah refrained from governing them directly. Instead he used the local chiefs to collect all taxes and to hand them to the Pashtuns. In this way, the Pashtun ruler did not need to administrate a huge amount of lands. Ahmad Shah used the military forces to

compel others to pay taxes and other bonds. This lead to such a situation, that structure of Ahmad Shah's kingdom was flimsy. It based on military force which was needed to obtain taxes and other necessary resources. Ahmad Shah was regarded as the leader of the military forces, he had no right to control other tribes outside his own although he instituted an advisory body compound of nine tribal leaders – seven from Durrani and two from Ghalji tribes. Among the tribal leaders he was only *a primus inter pares* (Vogelsang, 2002, p. 234–235).

This early model of state machinery, the position of ruler, the character of relations between central government and the governed did not change much during next several decades. This system was continued. And it did not favor centralization of power, the development of administration, or more elaborate state structures. On the other hand the willing consensus of most of the Pashtun clans and tribes was a basis of duration of the state. Even when Afghanistan had no ruler or there were several contending pretenders, the state was still functioning. It was because the local leaders on one side accepted the soundness of existence in one state, especially when it did not limit their freedom of action to much. On the other exactly because they were so autonomous in their activities, they were able to react quickly to any danger, and they ruled at their own discretion paying only a lip service to the central administration. The local communities had rather strong local identification as a tribes or ethnic groups (Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, or other). They did not have overall or even wider identification with Afghanistan as a whole, not to mention national identity or citizenship. But the dominant group, the Pashtuns understood that their privileged position beyond their ethnic areas depended on the existence of the state as a whole. Still even they were not ready to accept more centralized state system.

There were some efforts to create a sort of national identity especially in a period between 1919 (when Afghanistan regained complete sovereignty) and the Saur Revolution, which took place on 27–28 April 1978. The central government tried to build wider Afghan identity using modern education system to that end (Karlsson, Mansory, 2007; Sadat, 2004; Samady, 2001). They tried to use Pashtun identity as a base for wider Afghan identity. Those endeavors met with limited success, mostly in cities where there was an easier access to education and among Pashtuns who already shared some elements

wider, common identity. But for other ethnic groups such as Hazara, Uzbeks or Tajiks building of such identity was much more difficult exactly because of this Pashtun base of common identity (Gross, n. d.).

The other tendency, on the side of central government, were the endeavors to create more stable, more unified state. Consecutive rulers tried to achieve that, for example Timur, the son and heir of Ahmad Shaha, in order to free himself from power of the tribal chiefs moved the capital from Kandahar to Kabul in 1775, because this town laid outside Pashtun lands (Noelle, 1997, p. 23). Timur surrounded himself with Tajik administration and appointed personal bodyguard compound with Qizilbash. All this lead to that Pashtuns regarded him as anti-Afghan. As M. Elphistone pointed out "His situation did not lead him to adopt the character and manners of his countrymen; and he never seems to have been perfectly familiar with their language" (Elphistone, 1972, p. 558). Another of the rulers, Dost Muhammad, tried to strength his position using the religion as a base. He declared himself as *Amir al Mu'minin* (Commander of the Believers) in 1836. With this new title Dost Muhammad claim religious legitimacy, also to no permanent effect.

Those consecutive attempts did not help creating more centralized state with loyal population which identified itself with the state. They just made local leaders and Pashtun tribes more suspicious about the goals of the rulers.

There are also other factors which destabilized the central power in Afghanistan, at least as long as it remained a monarchy. There was no clear set of rules governing the succession to the throne. There was no law of primogeniture or agnatic seniority. The succession was contended by all, usually numerous sons (Timur for example left 23 sons), and also by closer or further cousins. Who in fact succeeded was usually decided by personal qualities of the contender, the scale of support in the court and among local leaders, the place where the contender was when the up to date ruler died, his determination, wealth and number of clients, the family connections of his mother and so on and so forth.

There is an example of Amanullah who succeeded his father Habibullah and took over the throne in 1919. After the death of his father, there were several contenders such as: Nasrullah Khan (Habibullah's brother), Inayatullah Khan (the oldest son of Habibullah) and three of remaining sons – Hayatullah,

Amanullah i Asadullah. Amanullah managed to take over the throne because his mother had a status of the 'first queen', and when his father died, he was in Kabul and managed to take over the capital and arrested potential contenders. He also managed to bribe the army by promising them a rise of pay from 14 to 20 rupee per month and also the payment of all overdue financial claims (National Archive, 1919; Poullada, 1973, p. 117).

Another destabilizing factor was, that most of the rulers were removed from power by violent means. If we take into account just the 20th century, we will see that only Abdul Rahman Khan died in 1901 from natural causes. His successor Habibullah was killed in 1919 during a hunt in an unexplained circumstances. Amanullah was removed from power in 1928 by a mutiny of border tribes led by Habibullah Kalakani (known as „Bacha-i-Saqqao"). Who in turn was deposed and executed in 1929 by the forces of Muhammada Nadir, who was assassinated by a Hazara student in 1933. He was succeeded by Muhammad Zahir Shah, who was ruled in Kabul for 40 years, a record among Afghan rulers, but he was deposed in 1973 by his cousin Muhammad Daud, who staged a coup and established a republican government with himself as the president. Muhammad Daud and members of his family were assassinated on April 27, 1978, as a result of the Saur Revolt which brought People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to power in Afghanistan (Bradsher, 1999, pp. 29–74). Then Nur Muhammad Taraki became the President and Prime Minister. On 16 September 1979 Taraki was replaced by Hafizullah Amin. Taraki was killed during a shoot-out between his followers and those of Amin or according to other sources was strangled in the night of October 8/9 (Dupree, 1997, p. 77; Cordovez, Harrison, pp. 39–42). Hafizullah Amin governed until December 29, 1979 when Soviet special forces assassinating him (Bradsher, 1999, pp. 98-100). Amin was replaced by Babrak Karmal. He resigned in 1986 and was replaced by Mohammad Najibullah. Najibullah lost his office of President in April 1992 (Rashid, 2002, p. 49).

After Soviet withdrawal

After the withdrawal of the Soviet troops in 1989, Afghanistan became an arena for bloody internal conflict. There were to causes of those conflicts, first the overthrow of the regime of Najibullah and the rivalry between different

groups of mujahedin (Goodson, 1998, p. 481; Rubin, 1995 a, p. 169; Rais, 1994, p. 210). Despite the consecutive understandings such as: the Peshawar Accord or the Islamabad Accord (The Peshawar Accord, n. d.; The Islamabad Accord, n. d.), which in theory settled who should be a president of the country, nothing changed, and Afghanistan was falling more and more into a state of anarchy (Barnett, 1995 a; Barnett 1995 b). This situation made it easier for Taliban, to take over control of Afghanistan. They took over most of the country in 1996.

The period of Taliban rule completely changed situation with respect of central government. If up to date we could state that the central government was weak and unstable, with Taliban there came complete change of political structures. At the head of the state was mullah Omar, who was given by his supporters the title of the „Commander of the Faithful". In theory he was the leader of the state but the way in which it was done had very little to do with the modern European concept of state. There was no budget, no internal policy, no social policy, no representation of local population. In fact, Kabul lost its position as a seat of central government. In theory it still was a capital of the state. There were the ministries and other central offices of administration. But their functioning was problematic, as usually the military were at the heads of those offices, and in most cases, they spend their time on the battlefield, fighting against opposition forces, not fulfilling their obligations as ministers. On the other hand mullah Omar, the real leader of state resided permanently in Kandahar [between 1996 and 2001 mullah Omar was just twice in Kabul], here also met the Highest Shura which was the most important decision making body of the Taliban (Skain, 2002; *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, 2001; Nojumi, 2002; Rashid, 2002; Goodson, 2001).

With the fall of Taliban regime due to the US intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001, there emerged a question of organizing of central government and administration. All the interested sides: the Afghans, the United States, the international community, were faced with the dilemma, of the future shape of the new Afghanistan. There was an option of return of the monarchy [King Zahir Shah was still alive; he died on July 22, 2007 in the age 92], but the Americans were opposed, as well as some Afghan

groups, especially those, which were representing the Tajiks (*Afghanistan*, 2001; Johnson, Mason, 2009). In place of the monarchy a presidential system was introduced with Hamid Karzai as a first leader of the state. During the December 2001 International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn, he was selected to serve a six-month term as Chairman of the Interim Administration (*Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions*, 2001; Fields, Ahmed, 2011). In 2002 Karzai was chosen for a two-year term as Interim President by Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly). In elections of 2004 and 2009 he was elected President by a popular vote.

In 2004 elections the turnout was 70%, and Karzai got 55,4% of the votes (Shankar, 2007, p. 72; *Afghanistan: Decision Point 2008*, 2008, p. 72). In 2009 the turnout was just 30%-35%, and for Karzai voted 54,6% of those who took part (*Wysoka cena afgańskich głosów*, 2009; Jagielski, 2009). So his support fall down steeply during those five years, but more important was that in fact was not only his support but the participation in elections. He was viewed as a very week leader, and the president of the started to be seen as somebody with very limited influence in the country. It was most accurately described by the term 'mayor of Kabul', because it correctly described the real extent of his power. (Burki, 2010). The president was in control of capital and surrounding areas, but the governors of the provinces and larger cities were to great extent independent in their policies. It is worth to cite opinion of Barnett R. Rubin who described certain *casus*. "On occasion, strong commanders have even appointed governors in the provinces in their zones of influence. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban, General Dostum appointed the governors of Jauzjan and Faryab, who in turn appointed the governors. Soon after taking office in February 2003, Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali named new governors to those posts after consulting with Dostum, who reportedly raised no objection. When the new governor of Jauzjan tried to take up his post, however, factional fighting broke out. In Ghor province, where the governor was named by the central government, the deputy governor was appointed by Ismail Khan. The governor, who is from a district in the south of the province, could not even enter the provincial capital, Chaghcharan, which

is located in the district to which his Herat-appointed deputy belongs. The deputy governor therefore conducted the affairs of the province with financial support from Herat" (Rubin, 2013, p. 125).

In 2014 Ashraf Ghani was elected the president of Afghanistan. This election was good example of contradiction, clashes, incorrectness and low involvement of people (Byrd, 2015). About 12 million of Afghans were registered to vote in the country and about 8 million abroad (Najafizada, 2014). In the end about 7 million voters took part, with more than 850,000 invalid ballots (*Commission Releases Disputed 2014 Afghan Election Results*, 2016). In September 2019 the fourth presidential election took place, and as November the results of the elections are yet to be released. Voting took place at about 4,500 polling sites, 2,500 fewer that during 2014 election (Mashal, Abed, Faizi, 2019). Approximately 9.6 million people were registered to vote during recent election. Initial results suggested that voter turnout was only between 20% and 25% of registered voters taking part (Shaheed, 2019; Piccillo, 2019).

The weak position of Afghan presidents, both Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, is an effect of the lack of any means of coercion. Although both army and police force exist, they are still too weak to fulfill those functions (Bhatia, Lanigan, Wilkinson, 2004; Tarnoff, 2011; *Afghan National Army – End Strength*, n. d.; United States Government Accountability Office, January 2011; Norris, 2012). There are of course also other factors which weaken central government. First the lack of financial resources. Most of the Afghan budged is financed from outside. It is estimated that two third (66%) of budged resources are finance either by the United States donation or other countries donations (Bjelica, Rutting, 2018). In the case of extra-budgetary expenditures such as the development of infrastructure, 100% of fund come from outside of the country. In the case of defence expenditures situation looks exactly the same, 94% of the funds come from outside sources, the US provides 90% and other donors 4% (Afzali, Timory, 2017). Between 2001 and 2019 the United States has spent approximately $133 billion in various forms of aid (*Afghanistan. Background and U.S. Policy in Brief*, 2019, p.1). But that not all of problems which weaken the state. There should be also mentioned corruption. According to 2018 Corruption

Perceptions Index Afghanistan take the place of 172 least corrupt nation out of 180 countries (Transparency International, 2018). Afghanistan has low level of education. The literacy rate is 47% among population ages 15-24 with huge disparity males and females. The literacy rate of youth is 61.9% for male and 29.9% for female (*EPDC Spotlight on Afghanistan*, n. d.). Adult literacy rate for Afghanistan is 43% (Knoema, 2018). Afghanistan has been the world's leading illicit opium producer since 2001 although the United States has spent $8,9 billion fighting the opium production (Hennigan, 2019). Of course, that not all of problems. We can mention also unemployment (40%), poverty (55%), and migration thousands of Afghan refugees returning from Iran but also approximately 3 million leaved the country (Stanzel, 2016, p. 2), and many other challenges.

If we take into account all this elements, the question emerges why this state still exists, what are its perspectives and how to describe it as an entity. As it seems the crucial, for the survival of the Afghan state, especially in 19th century, were the external factors. Afghanistan found itself between two great powers – British Empire and Russia. Therefore it played a role of a buffer state and none of the neighbors was interested in a liquidation of this state. With the coming of the Cold War, Afghanistan as a Non-Aligned country, was an element of East-West rivalry. Each of the superpowers wanted to expand its spheres of influence there, so none of them was interested in destroying the existing status quo. They just tried to win over the support of the Afghan government. The weaker neighbors, Iran and Pakistan, even if they had some territorial claims against Afghanistan, they conceded that the destruction of Afghanistan would create more problems than gains.

Right now, the condition of Afghan state become more and more complicated. Central government, Afghan National Defense and Security Forces face challenges in holding territory and defending people, while the Taliban continues to take control over territory. At the end of 2018, 229 districts (56.3% of total districts) were under the control of central government, 59 districts (14,5%) were under Taliban control and the rest, 119 districts (29.2%) were controlled by neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban (Chughtai, 2019). What's more, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, a branch of ISIS, continued to expand in eastern Afghanistan and maintains

a presence in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. All this means that the central government's control over the entire state is very weak and weakening year after year (*Taliban Surpasses Islamic State as Deadliest Terrorist Group in 2018*, 2019).

Conclusion

The contemporary situation is difficult to describe, especially using the popular, well known definitions. It seems that international community, as well as specialists in political sciences and international relations will need to accept that Afghanistan will be described throughout the foreseeable future as a political entity which did not accommodate to modern definitions. It is also possible, that the same will happen in other regions, such as Iraq or Syria. It is difficult not to agree with dr Hussein Tahiri from Victoria University w Melbourne "The West has to accept that Afghanistan will not develop into a Western democracy in any foreseeable future and neither could it maintain a stable strong central government. Perhaps, it is time to understand Afghanistan's topography, history and peoples, and treat it as what it is, not what we wish it to be" (Tahiri, 2010).

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