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# Afghanistan in the Trap of an Ethnic Security Dilemma: Is There Any Solution on the Horizon?

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## Abstract

Afghanistan represents one of the most complex mosaics of ethnic groups in the world and its contemporary history has been characterised by ethnic hierarchy. Pashtuns domination of the country and their discriminatory policies toward non-Pashtuns have had long-term effects in destroying inter-ethnic trust. The hierarchical relationships among ethnic groups have always been an obstacle to creating ethnic harmony even in the pre-war Afghanistan. The paper, by adopting 'ethnic security dilemma theory,' seeks to analyse how and why ethnicity in Afghanistan was politicised and morphed into fault line that finally surfaced in the form of civil war in 1990s. It will discuss the impacts of internecine war on inter-ethnic relations and explores the possible options to deal with the long-standing ethnic security dilemma. Being caught in an ethnic trap, the paper argues, only a meaningful power-sharing mechanism can glue the future Afghanistan together.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Centralisation, Ethnic Civil War, Ethnic Groups, Ethnic Security Dilemma, Non-Pashtuns, Pashtuns

## 1. Introduction

Upon the fall of the Taliban's regime and the subsequent presence of the international community in 2001, Afghanistan was placed on the threshold of an economic, political, and socio-cultural renaissance. Over the course of twenty years, the international community bankrolled processes of democratisation and built a strong army. Despite all efforts, however, the fledgling democracy of Afghanistan ended on 15 August 2021 as Ghani fled the country and let the Taliban to bring back their authoritarian regime into play. Now the question arises that given the huge investment in state-building, army, civil society, education and so forth how the government collapsed overnight.

Contrary to other research, this paper takes a totally different path to answer this question. In so doing, the paper traces the process of events that happened one decade before the establishment of new government in 2001 so that to demonstrate to what extent the post-2001 political structure was (in)compatible with the socio-political realities on the ground. It is believed that establishing a highly centralised structure in an extremely divided society where ethnicity had long become politicised lacked political rationality (Maley 2013, Wang 2014, Kakar *et al.* 2017, Sadr

2021). Strong presidentialism with its 'winner-take-all' approach not only was not conducive to stability and democracy but further deepened socioethnic cleavages (Santos 2003, Fukuyama 2005, Lane 2011, Rahimi 2020). This flawed structure reinforced the public distrust of the government which led to a crisis of legitimacy and its subsequent rapid collapse (Murtazashvili 2022).

This paper is intended to discuss the second phase of civil war in Afghanistan (1992-2001)<sup>1</sup> by adopting 'ethnic security dilemma theory.' The analytical perspective discloses that in a multi-ethnic country in which inter-ethnic trust is absent, establishing a centralised political structure will not bear fruit. Afghanistan as a divided country has not been able to pass nation-building process successfully. The Pashtuns domination of Afghanistan and the systematic exclusion of non-Pashtuns from the government structure have always been source of resentment and conflict (Tarzi 1993, Giustozzi 2008). The repressive, foreign-backed Pashtun rulers, from time to time, have systematically attempted to turn Afghanistan into a homogenised Pashtun state by denying the existence of other ethnic groups and their cultures. Discriminatory policies and practices adopted by Pashtun rulers in favour of their coethnics and the brutal treatments of non-Pashtuns are still alive in the collective memory of the latter (Shahrani 2013).

From the last quarter of twentieth century, however, Pashtun rulers' monopoly of foreign patronage shattered. In the context of the Cold War, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks rallied around their ethnic elites and attracted considerable new foreign patronage (Shahrani 2015, p. 276). The unresolved ethnic issues coupled with ethnic leaders' access to military equipment for the first time laid the foundation for outbidding. As soon as Najib's regime fell in 1992 and subsequently an anarchic situation emerged, all preconditions for ethnic security dilemma were present. Since the ethnic leaders were not capable of managing this dilemma, it led to tragic events of civil war during the 1990s. The ethnic security dilemma has not been resolved yet and it appears in different forms every so often. The experience of other multi-ethnic countries and the lengthy tragedy of Afghanistan itself indicate that so long as a rational solution through which all ethnic groups feel included is not engineered, this traumatic drama goes on.

## 2. The Inter-Ethnic Security Dilemma

The term 'security dilemma' is a relatively new term in International Relations (IR). It was first coined by John Herz (1950) in his article *Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma*. At the same time, however, Herbert Butterfield (1952) described a situation in his *History and Human Relations* which was very much a security dilemma. Both works shed lights on what is said to be the most basic aspect of the security dilemma: a 'tragedy'. Because the security dilemma is used in IR to demonstrate how security-seeking states can end up in more insecurity and conflict (Snyder 1984, Glaser 2010).

The nature of the security dilemma is that the measures a state takes to increase its own security usually decrease the security of other states. Therefore, it is quite hard for a 'state to increase its own chance of survival without threatening the survival of other states' (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 36). Herz (1950, p. 157) believes that in an anarchic structure any attempt to 'attain security from . . . attack, [states] are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst.' So long as states operate in anarchy, little can be done to ameliorate the security dilemma (Mearsheimer 2001). Both Herz (1950) and Butterfield (1952) argue, the way to know how such a tragedy can occur is 'uncertainty'. Uncertainty is the factor that causes fear in both sides that the other wishes to harm them. Both parties fail to realise their predicament too. They do not know that they themselves are generating feelings of insecurity in the other. Both sides could be 'secure if only they could come to see the nature of the situation' in which they are (Roe 1999, p. 184).

The security dilemma as an analytical tool to explain the outbreak of civil war first emerged in 1990s (Tang 2011). In the light of so many conflicts after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Barry Posen first utilized the security

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<sup>1</sup> The first phase of civil war in Afghanistan erupted in 1978 when Daud Khan was deposed and assassinated by the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and lasted until 1992, the year the last communist ruler was forced out of power and the Mujahideen took over the country.

dilemma as an explanation for ethnic conflicts (Tang 2015). Posen (1993) highlights some interesting similarities between international system and ethnic relations within a state. First, the basis of Posen's argument is that a security dilemma within states can occur when conditions are similar to those between states in the international system. The collapse of multi-ethnic states, for Posen, "can be profitably viewed as a problem of 'emerging anarchy'" (Ibid, p. 27). Second, the absence of central authority means that various groups within the state are forced to provide their own security. In such a context, ethnic groups behave as if they are separate states. The security dilemma 'affects relations among these groups, just as it affects relations among states' (Ibid). Third, 'the indistinguishability of offence and defense' (Ibid, pp. 29-31) lays the foundation for the worst-case analysis and pre-emptive action. All these conditions leave every ethnic group within a state in self-help situation and similarly generates a spiral of action and reaction that is typically found in an international conflict.

After Posen, Stuart Kaufman (1994, 1996a, 1996b) and other writers (Roe 2002, 2004, Melander 2009) brought the security dilemma firmly into the field of ethnic conflicts. Kaufman (1996a, p. 151) argues that 'if ethnic groups effectively challenge the government's legitimacy and its control over territory', the situation can be approximated to anarchy. '[I]f anarchy reaches the point where the government cannot control its territory effectively enough to protect its people, while ethnic-based organizations can, then the ethnic organization have enough of the attributes of sovereignty to create a security dilemma.' In these conditions, each group's attempt to protect its members produces fear in other groups. In an effort to gain leverage over their rival, Kaufman (1996b, p. 132) believes, every group also seeks to win the support of other states, particularly countries that are eager to capitalise on the intra-state conflict to achieve their own strategic goals.

Posen (1993) and Kaufman (1994, 1996b) used the security dilemma to explain the outbreak of ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia and gave sufficient thought to the role that structure can play. Posen (1993, p. 27-30) believes that a group suddenly forced to provide its security must ask the following questions about any neighbouring group: 'is it a threat? How much of a threat? Will the threat grow or diminish over time?' When groups make judgments as to others' intentions, history is used as the major background knowledge: 'how did the other groups behave last time they were unconstrained?' Therefore, ancient hatred among different ethnic groups plays a huge role in activating an ethnic security dilemma.

Application of the security dilemma is not straightforward though. Visser and Duyvesteyn (2014), for example, believe that the security dilemma is 'irrelevant' to intrastate conflicts and such conflicts 'cannot be explained by the ethnic security dilemma.' They argue that a security dilemma exists when neither side has the intention to go to war. If one or both sides harbour(s) malign intentions, which is usually the case in the outbreak of civil wars from their perspective, the situation should be classified as a security threat rather than a security dilemma (Wheeler and Both 1992, p. 31).

Utilising the security dilemma in this way, this paper argues, causes fundamental epistemological and methodological problems. They concern the problem of determining benign/malign intents. By establishing actors' intentions, one seems to imply knowing what actors are thinking and what their motivations are. Roe (2002, pp. 61-62) believes, this seems 'to place large question mark against the operability of the security dilemma' because uncertainty lies at the core of the security dilemma. Motivations and desires cannot be understood with complete certainty; what can be determined is what is a probability. Moreover, the distinction between benign and malign intents is usually made on states being 'security seekers' or 'power seekers.' Although the pursuit of security is usually considered benign goal, while the pursuit of power is labelled malign, this may not be always the case. Sometimes the security of one state might require the insecurity of another one. If a state, for instance, thinks that invading its neighbour to acquire certain resources is vital for its survival, then even a security seeker/benign state may act aggressively which is called 'required insecurity' (Ibid).

In addition, the security dilemma is 'an essentially objectivist concept' (Roe 2005, p. 55) by which scholars can determine the intentions of decision-makers with hindsight. Analysts may interpret actors' intentions differently by looking at the same practices. For instance, for Roe (Ibid, p. 101) the removal of the Serbs from bureaucracies is a security-seeking policy, therefore, a manifestation of benign intention, whereas Tang (2011, p. 527) reaches the exact opposite conclusion. The determination of intention in most cases depends on how one approaches an

event, how one frames the historical cases and what is one's personal conception of threat (Bilgic 2013, pp. 191-92). Therefore, the position of those who argue against the application of the security dilemma to intrastate conflicts is quite untenable.

It should be noted that ethnic security dilemma comes either from mass-led or elite-led violence. Mass-led violence happens when long standing ethnic hostility pushes elites to take increasingly aggressive positions on ethnic issues. Such behaviour, as a result, creates a security dilemma and leads to ethnic war. Whereas civil war created by ethnic leaders through a process of stocking dormant ethnic hostilities is labelled elite-led violence. (Kaufman 1994, 1996a). Therefore, the elite-led and the mass-led processes of ethnic violence can be differentiated in terms of which of these factors activate the process (Kaufman 1996a, pp. 157-58).

All three factors—hostile masses, belligerent leaders, and inter-ethnic security dilemmas—are considered necessary for outbreak of ethnic war. They cause the war by reinforcing one another in a spiral of increasing conflict: belligerent leaders stoke mass hostility; hostile masses support belligerent leaders; and such interaction threatens other groups, giving birth to a security dilemma which in turn paves the way for even more mass hostility and leadership belligerence (Kaufman 1996b, p. 109).

### 3. Preconditions for Ethnic Civil Wars

The three factors mentioned above (mass hostility, belligerent leaders, and a security dilemma) only emerge if the necessary preconditions are met. The preconditions for mass hostility are 'a set of ethnically defined grievances, negative ethnic stereotypes, and disputes over emotional symbols.' To provoke ethnic civil war, mass hostility requires a 'fear (usually exaggerated) of ethnic extinction and a history of domination by one group over the other' (Kaufman 1996b, p. 109).

Ethnic civil war may not be possible without ethnic belligerent leaders (Tang 2015, p. 266). Such war usually happens due to elites' policies which exacerbate the old disputes, stoke the old hatreds, and make peaceful conflict resolution impossible (Kaufman 1994, p. 282). Ethnic leaders exacerbate ethnic conflicts through a process of 'outbidding,' in which ethnic leaders manage to fuel radical ethnically related demands among their own groups (Ibid). Such outbidding will not bear fruits unless the preconditions for mass hostility are present and the extremist appeals fall on willing ears (Kaufman 1996b, p. 114).

Finally, an ethnic security dilemma can be created if a *de facto* anarchy is present. In a situation of anarchy, the state is either unable or unwilling to protect all major groups, motivating groups to resort to self-help and forcing them to always assume the worst—mutual fear of ethnic extinction (Roe 2002, p. 60). An ethnic security dilemma also requires the availability of the means to mobilise and the military resources to enable both sides to fight (Kaufman 1996b, p. 114).

Ethnic civil war is defined, for the purpose of this article, as follows. First, an ethnic group is defined as 'a collectivity within a larger society [who] have real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood' (Schermerhorn 1970, p. 12). By ethnic civil war, I mean 'large-scale, sustained, organised violence in which the groups [within a state] and the values at stake are defined in ethnic terms' (Kaufman 1996a, p. 150).

### 4. Preconditions for Ethnic Civil War in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has historically been described as a mosaic of different ethnic groups. Its population is divided into four major ethnic groups—the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Hazaras, and the Uzbeks—and many smaller ones. Since none of the ethnic groups constitute a majority of the population, Afghanistan is usually described as "land of minorities" (Santos 2003, Rahimi 2020). However, each group does constitute the majority in one or more part of the country: Tajiks in the northeast, Pashtuns in the south, Hazara in the centre, and Uzbeks in the northwest (Barfield 2011, p. 56). The heterogeneity of the population is so great that nothing even Islam, to which around 99 per cent of the people adhere, has been able to function as a force for national unity (Schetter 2005a). Ethnic

division is the outstanding social feature of life, and the primary loyalty is to ethnic group which is called *qawm* (Barfield 2010, p. 18). Ethnic groups are so distinct that they can be identified by their physical facial features alone (Ibid). There has never been an agreement on Afghanistan's population because no census was held properly (Simonsen 2004, p. 721). From 1970s to 1990s, sixteen million was the most frequently cited figure (Barfield 2010). The current population of Afghanistan, according to Worldometer website (January 2023), is estimated to be around 42 million. In the absence of an exact national census, any figure which is given as the entire population of Afghanistan, or the population of each ethnic group is pure guesswork.

#### 4.1. Mass Hostility in Afghanistan

Afghanistan historically had a quasi-federal system and ethnic groups enjoyed a reasonable amount of local governance. Abdur Rahman Khan who came to the throne in 1880 attempted to rule Afghanistan directly and engaged in a brutal campaign of centralisation. He succeeded in ending the regional autonomy and concentrating all political power in Kabul. Moreover, by adopting discriminatory policies, Pashtuns became Afghanistan's politically privileged group. Although the Tajiks ran the government's administration in part, they did not enjoy any political power. Hazara, Uzbek, Aimaq, and Baluch leaders disappeared from public life, even in their home regions (Barfield 2011, p. 57).

After Abdur Rahman, all regimes attempted to maintain his model of government even when it brought ruin on the country. Although Abdur Rahman died in 1901, 'his zombielike shadow still looms large over the country and its politics' (Barfield 2010, p. 12). The idea of resisting any power-sharing mechanism and constant attempts to push non-Pashtuns to side-lines almost put an end to the prospects of peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnic societies in Afghanistan (Saikal 2004, p. 5).

The country which is called Afghanistan today was controlled by Uzbeks for centuries. Pashtuns never ruled Afghanistan before the mid-eighteenth century. Since then, however, they have been the rulers of Afghanistan one after another with some short time hiccups. For example, when Amanullah's regimes due to his radical reforms were toppled in 1929, Habibullah Kalakani was the first Tajik who named himself king of Afghanistan. Once a Tajik seized the power, for the cause of Pashtun solidarity, the very tribes that had just forced Amanullah from power now supported him. Amanullah, of course, had stoked the Pashtun Chauvinism, insisting that proud Pashtun people could never accept a Tajik as their ruler (Barfield 2011, p. 59). After nine months, the Pashtun tribes forced Kalakani out of Kabul and enthroned Muhammad Nadir, a Pashtun. Nadir believed that throne of Kabul was a matter of Pashtun national honour and restored the ethnic hierarchy. Finding ethnic politics useful for their cause, this rhetoric became the bedrock of all Pashtun rulers. The removal of Kalakani from the seat of power and his subsequent execution by Nadir caused a strong wave of resentment among the Tajiks and is still alive in their collective memory.

Although all non-Pashtuns have been subject to ethnic oppression, its ferocity varied from one group to another (Hyman 2002, pp. 306-07). The Hazaras were/are the most persecuted and marginalised group in Afghanistan (Hanley 2011) because they were probably the only ethnic group who could challenge and threaten Pashtun's monopoly of power, both 'from the point of view of numbers and geographic location' (Mousavi 1998, p. 17). The onslaught on Hazara lands and people also took place amidst a degree of sectarian fervour because they are Shia Muslim. In 1890s, Abdur Rahman waged a *jihad* against the Hazaras promising their land, wealth, women, and children as reward to those who took part in his campaign (Ibid, p. 126). The government-backed forces killed as many Hazara as they could, and numerous towers of human heads were erected from the defeated Hazaras. Hazaras also were sold as slave in slave markets by victorious Pashtuns. Only in Kandahar Province, annually, some 7,200 Hazara men and women were sold as slaves (Ibid, p. 135). Those Hazaras who survived the brutal campaign ended up being the most heavily taxed among all people (Chioventa 2018, p. 255). According to Ghoobar (1980), a distinguished Afghanistани historian, some sixteen different categories of taxes were levied on Hazaras. The level of taxes was as high as most Hazaras were not able to pay. In cases of failure to pay all taxes due, the wife and children of the failing family were sold as slaves, a lucrative trade legalised by Abdur Rahman in March 1894 (Mousavi 1998, p. 135).

The oppression of the Hazaras did not end by the death of Abdur Rahman and the following regimes up to the present moment have followed the suit and, among other things, the Hazaras were subject to arbitrary taxation. For example, during the premiership of Hashim Khan (1929-1946) a special tax was introduced only for the Hazaras, levied per head of animal in cooking oil. At the same time, Pashtun nomads not only were required to pay any tax but received allowances from the central government (Ibid p. 163). It is estimated that, during Abdur Rahman's campaign against Hazaras alone, nearly sixty per cent of the Hazara indigenous population was either killed, enslaved, fled the country, or forced to go to elsewhere in Afghanistan (Chiovenda 2018).

Uzbeks who were politically dominant back in the day were pushed to side-lines as well (Barfield 2010). Uzbeks have historically been subject to insults promoted by Pashtun nationalism. For example, they were called 'simpletons' as a negative stereotype. This is an expression of contempt alluding to the supposed silliness of the Uzbek people, claiming that they were not above menial jobs. This is particularly insulting for Uzbeks since they consider themselves to have been the torchbearers of philosophy and science for centuries and believing that figures like Al-Farabi and Al-Biruni were of Uzbek origins. Such stereotypes, anyway, had brutal and far-reaching consequences for Uzbeks. They could never see one of themselves in high ranks of institutions such as the military or the diplomatic service (Khalilzad 2016), because they were considered unfit for such jobs from Pashtun nationalism point of view.

Pashtun nationalism is set of attitudes and beliefs which allude to Pashtuns racial supremacy over and above all other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. These beliefs dictate that Pashtuns have the right to rule over Afghanistan single-handedly. This God-given supremacy is seen by them 'as a charter for the establishment of social, economic, political, cultural and administrative structures needed to constitute a nation-state' (Mousavi 1998, pp. 5-6). In order to level out the ethnic heterogeneity of Afghanistan, Pashtun rulers engaged in a redefinition of spatial units over the course of the twentieth century. Toponyms that carried any ethnic or particular perception, such as Khorasan, Turkistan or Hazarajat were superseded by administrative terms which often referred to provincial towns (e.g., Kunduz, Bamyan). This administrative reorganisation also 'gerrymandered territorial administrative units with the intention that they should be dominated whenever possible by a Pashtun majority and that other cultural identities should be annihilated' (Schetter 2005a, p. 58). To concentrate Pashtun settlers in pockets throughout Afghanistan and redress the balance of non-Pashtuns in favour of the Pashtuns, Pashtun rulers also imposed a policy of forced displacement and confiscation of non-Pashtuns' lands and distributed them to the Pashtuns (Baiza 2014, p. 153). Thus, all regimes attempted to strengthen their ethnic base by pashtunisation of the country (Qassem 2018).

As part of cultural supremacy of Pashtuns, Pashtun elites transformed the regional and colloquial language of Pashtu into the national and official language. Attempts were made to replace Farsi by Pashtu in all areas of life and its teaching became compulsory (Sharifi 2018). The ministry of Education established some 450 Pashtu courses in Kabul alone; all public officials were required to attend these courses and learn their new 'national language' (Ibid). Since Farsi had historically been used as a lingua franca, spoken by nearly 78 per cent of the population (Australian Government 2022), people in Kabul were not able to read street and bus signs. Neither the students nor faculty members understood Pashtu but few. Thus, the policy led to chaos (Hunter 1959, p. 345) and caused significant resentment among Farsi-speakers (Hyman 2002).

#### *4.2. Belligerent Leadership in Afghanistan*

By the 1980s, all preconditions for mass hostility—rational grievances, negative ethnic stereotypes, dispute over emotional symbols, demographic fears, and a history of domination—were present in Afghanistan. A weak government in Kabul also provided ethnic leaders with the political space required to mobilise around ethnic issues and engage in outbidding. In such a climate, ethnic elites tried to develop their ethnic organisation in the form of ethnic political party. Through ethnic parties, ethnic leader not only mobilised the in-group and excluded the ethnic outsiders, but also revived their ethnic narrative (Hashmi and Majeed 2015).

The ethnic origins of political parties were as strong as sometimes a party and the related ethnic group were considered synonyms. Jamiat Islami (Islamic society) was seen as the Tajiks' political party. Hizb-i Islami (Islamic

Party) of Hekmatyar, Hizb-i Wahdat (Unity Party) of Mazari, and Junbesh-i Milli (National Movement) of Dostum were the Pashtuns, the Hazaras and the Uzbeks' political parties respectively (Giustozzi 2008). All these ethnic parties utilised ethnicity with respect to a specific political demand. Non-Pashtun leaders voiced their displeasure over Pashtun domination of Afghanistan and demanded a share of economic and political resources of the state for their respective ethnic group

By the rise of ethno-political parties, ethnic identity was further politicised (Sharan and Heathershaw 2011, Shahrani 2013). Ethnic cleavages were as deep as ethnic parties violently stood against each other. For instance, Giustozzi argues (2005), Junbesh-i Milli 'was created with an inbuilt hostility towards Pashtuns.' In June 1990, General Dostum, in control of northern provinces, openly stated: 'Uzbeks ... of Afghanistan will not allow the situation where Pashtuns would be in charge of everything, as in the days of old' (Saikal 2004, p. 253).

#### 4.3. *The Rise of Anarchy in Afghanistan*

By the fall of Najib's regime in 1992, the preconditions for a security dilemma were also present. As the *Mujahideen* entered Kabul, any semblance of functional central government evaporated, and Afghanistan slipped into anarchy (Barfield 2010, p. 253). Within a 24-hour period in August, for instance, three thousand residents of Kabul died in a barrage of rocket fire. To escapes rocket and artillery shells raining on residential neighbourhoods, people of Kabul left their houses and one of the world's largest internal refugee flows took place (Tarzi 1993, Ibrahim 2019). Far from being an accident, the war seemed inevitable in the eyes of the *Mujahideen* who had fully armed themselves in the context of the Cold War (Coll 2018).

#### 4.4. *The Ethnic Security Dilemma in Afghanistan*

As soon as the *Mujahideen* seized the power in 1992, members of Najib's regime joined *jihadi* parties based on ethnic ties and ethnic dimensions of the conflict became further salient. Pashtun elements of the Communist regime joined Hekmatyar's radical Islamist party to unite the Pashtuns; while the Tajik officers joined forces with Masoud (Barfield 2010, p. 248). As the northern forces, an alliance of Tajiks and Uzbeks, closed in on Kabul in April, Pashtun military officers in Najib's regime—mainly *Khalqis*<sup>2</sup>—arranged the infiltration of unarmed fighters of Hizb-i Islami into the city, where they were supposed to receive military means from their co-ethnics in the Interior Ministry. The threat of an imminent coup by Hekmatyar forced Masoud to act before the Peshawar leaders had reached agreement. On 25 April 1992, the forces of Masoud and Dostum entered the city. The Hazaras also joined the northern alliance. As a result of violent battles at the Interior Ministry and the presidential palace, the Pashtun *Khalqi* forces were expelled by the alliance (Rubin 2002, p. 271).

The Peshawar-based leaders who managed the war for a long time reached an agreement on 25 April 1992. According to the Peshawar Accord, Mojaddedi became the acting president on 28 April for two months. The post of prime minister was given to Hekmatyar. After two months, as agreed, Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the powerful Jamiat Islami to which Masoud belonged, assumed the presidency of Afghanistan for four months (Tarzi 1993). Rabbani was the second Tajik ever to become the head of state in the modern Afghanistan (Shahrani 2018b). Since this was against the thinking pattern whereby Pashtuns have seen state power as naturally belonging to them (Simonsen 2004, Lieven 2021), the Pashtun elites engaged in outbidding.

Hekmatyar refused to occupy the office of prime minister and challenged the interim government from its inception (Tarzi 1993). He sought to undermine the idea of coalition government. Obsessed with the idea of Pashtun hegemony, Hekmatyar attempted to be the undisputed ruler of Afghanistan. As he did not achieve the objective, he attempted to render the Peshawar Accord totally ineffective (Saikal 2004, p. 215). Hekmatyar 'vowed either to capture Kabul or destroy it' (Tarzi 1993, p. 174). The long-standing rivalry between Masoud and Hekmatyar took on the 'dimensions of a battle for the control of Afghanistan between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns' (Rubin 2002,

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<sup>2</sup> The Communists of Afghanistan formed the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1965 under the leadership of Nur Muhammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal. By 1967 it had split into two factions. The largely Pashtuns *Khalq* (Masses), under the leadership of Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, recruited heavily among the disaffected Ghilzai Pashtuns in the Soviet-trained military, while the mainly Tajiks *Parcham* (banner), under the leadership of Karmal.



Barfield 2011). Hekmatyar turned his guns against Kabul in August 1992 (Shahrani 2018b). To put Masoud under pressure and gain leverage at the negotiating table, he decided to conduct military action against civilian, causing pain, death, and economic hardship (Tarzi 1993, p. 170).

The legitimisation of the war as a *jihad* had lost its appeal and ethnic political parties nurtured the clashes by a non-religious logic. In order to gain popular support and mobilise the people, ethnic leaders employed an ethnic discourse (Dorransoro 2007, para. 31). As the war for control over Kabul (1992 onwards) began, ethnic identity rose to become the prime factor in political parties' claim to legitimacy (Simonsen 2004). All parties tried to impose ethnic homogenisation on the areas they controlled or at least attempted to establish their ethnic category as the prominent one in those areas (Schetter 2005a, p. 68). Ethnic logic saw the 'other' as a potential security threat, 'a fifth column' (Ibid).

The civil wars are popularly 'understood to have been, firstly by Pashtuns, an attempt to restore past hegemonic dominance.' Secondly, non-Pashtuns regarded it as 'struggles to consolidate adequate representation' (Ahmed 2017). The long domination of the country by Pashtuns was a source of deep resentment for non-Pashtuns. Now the Tajik-dominated government in Kabul caused severe anxiety among Pashtun tribes. Hekmatyar's opposition to the government played on Pashtun ethnic fears (Tarzi 1993, Saikal 2004). He accused Masoud of trying to seize power from the so-called majority group (Pashtuns) and raised the spectre of ethnic warfare. Since most Pashtuns speak Pashtu, whereas Tajiks, Hazaras Uzbek and most other ethnic groups speak Farsi, playing the ethnic card also accentuated linguistic cleavage (Tarzi 1993, p 170). Historically being dominated by Pashtuns, non-Pashtuns had no desire to return to that status; seeing Hekmatyar's military campaign as an effort to force them back into subordination (Hanley 2011). Non-Pashtuns now had broken the century-old ethnic hierarchy that had discriminated against them. They demanded a return to an older pattern of regional autonomy, in which ethnic leaders played a significant role in managing the life of their people and 'had a say in politics at the national level' (Barfield 2011, p. 60). Dostum, once a disadvantaged Uzbek, now had become one of the most powerful figures and gave the Uzbeks national political importance they had not enjoyed in 150 years (Barfield 2010). He, along with Abul Ali Mazari insisted on the idea of social justice and the formation of a multi-ethnic and broad-based government. The struggle between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns based on ethnic identity left them totally locked in an ethnic security dilemma (Tang 2011).

To make matters worse, the northern alliance cracked and finally collapsed. It is argued the *Jamiat* regime displayed many of the characteristics its predecessors: tendency to monopolise power (Giustozzi 2008). Hazara and Uzbek elites expected to be recognised as major players. Contrary to their expectation, they were not given any decision-making power (Mousavi 1998, Rubin 2002, Giustozzi 2005). Even worse, Masoud attempted to wrest control of some areas towards west of Kabul being controlled by Hazaras. In a military clash over control of Afshar district between Masoud and Mazari in February 1993, the forces loyal to Masoud succeeded in taking the control of Afshar and for 'the next twenty-four hours they killed, raped, set fire to houses, and took young boys and girls as captives.' Around 700 people were estimated to have been killed or to have disappeared. Disappointed from the Tajik-dominated regime, Mazari and Dostum joined the opposition centred around Hekmatyar in 1994. Leaders of this newly emerged alliance had many unresolved issues, however, what brought them together was their common enemy: Masoud. From January 1994, both sides engaged in many destructive battles without either side being able to gain a clear supremacy. By the end of 1994, the bombardment of Kabul by Hekmatyar and his allies destroyed half of the capital city and killed nearly 25,000 civilians. Putting ethnic consideration first, all sides committed massive human rights violations (Saikal 2004, p. 216). This constant infighting among the *mujahideen* paved the way for the rise of another extremist group: the Taliban.

## 5. Foreign Patrons as Enablers

There were many foreign countries involved in Afghanistan's plight in 1990s, however, Pakistan assumed a far greater role. As a Sunni majority country, with a sizeable Pashtun population concentrated mostly on its border with Afghanistan, Pakistan supported the main Sunni *Mujahideen* parties. Although Pakistan was supporting these Sunni groups, it favoured Hekmatyar as most conducive to its own objectives in Afghanistan (Saikal 1998). Saudi

Arabia also considered non-Pashtun parties as potentially vulnerable to Iranian influence because they shared language and culture with Iran. Therefore, Saudis shared Pakistan's support for Hekmatyar (Ibid).

Following the fall of Najib's regime in 1992, contrary to Pakistan's expectations of Hekmatyar, Masoud and Dostum captured Kabul (Shahrani 2015). Finding the recent development reprehensible, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) continued to provide Hekmatyar with logistical and military means so that he could force Tajiks out of Kabul and form his Pashtun-based government. Despite all efforts as discussed, Hekmatyar failed to dislodge the Rabbani government. Upon his failure, Pakistan sought to reconsider support for Hekmatyar with the intention of finding another client in Afghanistan (Saikal 1998). Thus, a 'fresh Pashtunist force, the ultra-fundamentalist Taliban militia' was created.

The Taliban fighters were mostly raised from Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan who were studying in religious schools in Pakistan led by Mullah Omar. Soon they found access to sophisticated weapons mostly supplied by Saudi and UAE's petrodollar. Since piloting jets and driving tanks were not subjects taught in religious schools, the men who supplied these skills were professional Pashtun soldiers of the previous regime trained by the Soviets. These professionals, mostly ex-*Khalqis*, who had joined Hekmatyar when Najib's regime fell, now 'agreed to grow untrimmed beards and serve the Taliban,' because they were fellow Pashtuns (Saikal 2004, Barfield 2010). The Taliban, indeed, was/is a movement intended to re-impose Pashtun supremacy and restore the traditional ethno-political hierarchy (Shahrani 2015, p. 278). Displaying itself as 'an Islamic Revolution of the Pashtuns,' (Schetter 2005b) the Taliban found strong supporters among the Pashtuns from all backgrounds—communist, monarchist, Islamist, and secular nationalist alike (Shahrani 2013). Even Pashtun intellectuals, residing outside Afghanistan, voiced their support for the Taliban (Giustozzi 2008). Nothing could bring Pashtuns of diverse backgrounds into such an alliance. The only thing that glued them together was Pashtun *asabiyyah* (group feeling). It clearly shows how ethnic fractions have historically been the predominant lines of conflict in Afghanistan and how ideological differences take a back seat to ethnic agenda. Taliban captured the areas controlled by non-Pashtuns with lightning speed. They captured Herat and neighbouring provinces from Ismail Khan, a *Jamiat* commander, in 1995 and Kabul from Masoud in September 1996 (Hyman 2002, p. 312).

Although the Taliban attempted to justify their rule in Islamic terms, they were largely Pashtuns who 'saw all other ethnic groups as enemies' (Barfield 2010, p. 7). Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, the conflict was an ethnic power struggle between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. That was why Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks once again joined forces (Simonsen 2004). This non-Pashtun alliance 'put up stiff resistance to the Pashtun army led by the Taliban' which according to Professor Shahrani (2002, p. 720) was intended to 'conquer their territories and resubjugate them to a form of internal colonialism'.

Towards the end of 1990s the front line dividing the Taliban from the Northern Alliance ran right through the Shomali Plain, north of Kabul. The Taliban applied their venomous scorched-earth tactics and ethnic cleansing policy in the areas they controlled, which included the deportation of thousands of Tajiks. They destroyed villages, irrigation system and farmland or gave vacant land to Pashtun fighters to prevent the Tajiks from returning. The policy was intended to "create a dense Pashtun-settled ring north of Kabul in order to make it clear once and for all that Kabul was a 'Pashtun city'" (Schetter 2005a, Shahrani 2013).

The Taliban attempted to seize northern provinces in May 1997, however, they were pushed back. One year later the Taliban once again marched toward the north. This time 'with the help of the local Pashtun population there,' who were transferred by Pashtun rulers from South to the North, captured Balkh Province (Emami 1999, p. 90). The Taliban then engaged in a wholesale Massacre of non-Pashtuns, particularly Hazaras, who had driven them from the city just one year ago, in which they murdered nearly 5,000 people (Schetter 2005a, Barfield 2010). The next month they occupied Hazarajat and subsequently carried out massacre of the Hazaras, especially in Yakawlang district (Shahrani 2013). The Taliban's takeover of Hazarajat left them in control of the entire country except for the northeast, where Masoud still stood alone against them for the next three years (Barfield 2010, p. 260).

The Taliban's takeover of the country was a triumph for Pashtun nationalism (Sharifi 2018). Pashtu gradually became the dominant language of the administration and government. The Taliban also engaged in a systematic anti-Farsi campaign by burning Farsi books and manuscripts, reaffirming the Pashtun identity of the Taliban. Such pro-Pashtunism was pleasant to Pashtun nationalists who felt marginalised after the *mujahideen* takeover of Kabul in 1992 (Ibid). The hostile treatment of non-Pashtuns by the Taliban and disrespect to their culture and language 'brought back terrible historical memories and a sense of déjà vu of the previous violent and humiliating conquest of their lands and subjugation at the hands of supremacist Pashtun ruler of the pre-1978 era' (Shahrani 2013, p. 32). The Taliban occupation of non-Pashtun provinces which had brought untold sorrow to the locals, according to Giustozzi (2005), renewed and greatly strengthened anti-Pashtun sentiment. Thus, the mono-ethnic regime of the Taliban constituted yet another serious step towards ethnicising the conflict in Afghanistan (Simonsen 2004). Afghanistan has historically been riven by ethnic division and ethnic harmony has never existed even in pre-war era. The Pashtuns have historically tried to dominate others and their regions which is usually called as internal colonialism (Hashmi and Majeed 2015, p. 324). Since 1880s, Pashtun rulers have attempted to turn Afghanistan into a monoethnic country. In so doing, Pashtuns of the south, southeast and even tribal regions of Pakistan have been relocated to the north and west of Afghanistan systematically by forcing out a huge number of the locals. As late as the 1970s, every Pashtun retiree was given four hectares of land in the north so that they go and live there (Rahimi 2020, p. 94). Adopting discriminatory policies toward non-Pashtuns blocked the way to the establishment of effective modern state and governance system based on internal cohesion and failed to create a sense of nationhood (Shahrani 2018a; Sahar and Sahar 2021). Thus, it is safe to echo Anthony Hyman's (2002, p. 299) dictum that People of Afghanistan 'are neither one people nor one political community.' The continued discriminatory policy of rulers widened ethnic cleavages to the extent that, as stated by Professor Saikal (2004), put an end to the prospect of non-confrontational coexistence of diverse ethnic groups.

## 6. The Search for Solutions

Ethnic security dilemma as an analytical tool not only explain why ethnic wars erupt, it also helps in terms of conflict resolution (Roe 2004, p. 281). In this regard, scholars believe that for a multi-ethnic country caught in the trap of an ethnic security dilemma only two solutions can be considered: partition or decentralisation.

### 6.1. Partition

The first category of scholars (Horowitz 1977, Lijphart 1977, Kaufmann 1996) argue that if it is impossible for ethnic groups to live together due to an ethnic security dilemma, it is not logical to seek accommodation among them. They had better live apart in separate and relatively homogeneous states because this can eliminate the security dilemma faced all sides (Roy 2004 p. 281). This solution is increasingly recommended for multi-ethnic states in which ethnic groups historically have not been able to reach a credible agreement based on historic/cultural differences. Separating the antagonists—partition—is a recipe for genuine peace and security. In a country where groups do not have a common history and culture, 'any attempt to create a unitary state is doomed to fail' (Bilgic 2013, p.205). Afghanistan was truly 'Balkanised' (Barfield 2010, p. 3) and divided along ethnic lines in 2001 that could have easily broken into smaller parts, however, no side showed interest in partition.

### 6.2. Decentralisation of power

The second category of scholars (Reynolds 2007, Adeney 2008, Afzal 2022) believe that multi-ethnic societies will not succeed in forming a stable state unless there is a reasonable distribution of power in place. Indeed, federal and autonomous arrangements could help in a number of countries in which some groups feel excluded (Reynolds 2007, p. 53). A meaningful decentralisation of power is a viable political option in divided countries (Murtazashvili 2014). Decentralised system of government could help all groups feel included by enabling them to govern themselves in their respective regions. Thus, decentralisation is critical for ending an ethnic security dilemma in multi-ethnic states and paving the way for peaceful coexistence.

Many experts and politicians, in the light of ethnocultural heterogeneity, believe that Afghanistan is 'a perfect candidate for federalism' (Adeney 2008, p. 542) and only 'a loose federal system' can save it from further

bloodshed (Saikal 1998, Murtazashvili 2022). In 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga (Constitutional Grand Council, "CLJ") non-Pashtun explicitly voiced their concern over the type of the political system. They argued that a federal structure by devolving a reasonable amount of power to provinces could end the century-old problem of power-sharing in Afghanistan (International Crisis Group 2003, Kakar *et al.* 2017). Pashtun elites, however, who see Afghanistan primarily as a Pashtun-led state preferred a strong centralised government (Sadr 2021). Therefore, Pashtun elites who had dominated all aspects of the CLJ, 'for ethnic reasons' rejected all power-sharing mechanisms (Rubin 2004) and despite significant geographical concentration of mutually distrustful Pashtuns, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks established an extremely centralised system (Reynolds 2007).

This arrangement not only 'flew in the face of wisdom drawn from other conflicted and fragmented societies,' but also went against the realities on the ground (Ibid). A huge number of Constitutional Law experts believe that the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan did not address the origins of the ethnic crisis by taking 'winner-take-all' approach in a highly divided country. Since the Constitution was not established with an eye, so to speak, upon the ethnic realities, it was extremely hard, if not impossible, to lay the foundation for an inclusive government (Desautels-Stein 2005, Rahimi 2020). The exclusionary and non-representative government that came out of the Constitution reinforced non-Pashtuns' distrust of the government and undermined its legitimacy significantly (Hussaini 2022). This narrow-based government ran by Ghani (after 2014) and his two Pashtun advisors was sarcastically labelled the 'Republic of three.' Finally, this unpopular government collapsed when Ghani and his small clique, without any significant resistance, fled Kabul on 15 August 2021 and gave way to a far weaker insurgent group, the Taliban.

Those who are familiar with the contemporary history of Afghanistan know that it is an unstable country, and the average life span of regimes have not been long. Each regime has had occupied the seat of power for a relatively short period of time and the Taliban's regime cannot be an exception. It is safe to express that the Taliban's radical and ethnically exclusive regime will not last long. Sooner or later it would be consigned to the dustbin of history. Thus, the future political structure must be designed based on political rationality and 2003 CLJ mistakes should be avoided.

With hindsight, it has become apparent that only a fair power-sharing mechanism based on federal arrangements can break the vicious cycle of failed regimes in Afghanistan. Recently, a large number of Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara political elites declared that centralised system of government has been the root of problems in Afghanistan. The only possible way to ensure the integrity of Afghanistan is to adopt a loose federalism. In such a federal structure the provinces should be allowed to govern themselves while, there should be also mechanisms in place for accountability of provinces to their communities and the central government. For non-Pashtuns, indeed, federalism is an arrangement that ends the Pashtuns' monopoly over power and promote greater accommodation of ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity (Wafaei 2022).

Despite non-Pashtuns' call for federalism, Pashtun political elites still advocate a centralised structure. In October 2022, Haneef Atmar, Pashtun political elite and national security advisor to Ghani voiced his displeasure over non-Pashtuns' insistence on federal structure, expressing that federalism does not work for Afghanistan (Hashte Subh 2022). Pashtun elites always attempted to tar federalism by arguing that federal structure provides resources to ethnic groups with which they can mobilise against the centre and is 'a recipe for disintegration' of Afghanistan (Zakhilwal 2001). This argument is simplistic in nature and assumes away two important points. First, if federalism has not always been successful in holding multi-ethnic countries together, other forms of government also failed in this respect. Second, federal structures differ according to many criteria, including levels of centralisation, the number of federal units, and whether they are majoritarian or consociational. Professor Katharine Adeney (2008), in the light of what just mentioned, argues that to 'blame' federalism as a step towards disintegration of Afghanistan is nonsensical; instead, 'the form of the federation in relation to the country's ethnic demography is vital in this equation.' Moreover, in divided countries where ethnic security dilemma is activated, according to Professor Barfield (2011), adopting a decentralised structure is not a step towards disintegration but a wise solution to avoid it. Federalism by devolving a reasonable amount of authority to provinces and redressing the imbalance between national and local governments would solve the ethnic security dilemma that has been standing in the way of peace in Afghanistan and is the only silver bullet that can glue the future Afghanistan together.

The real reason behind Pashtun elites' deep desire for centralisation is the continuation of internal colonialism. They believe, only by a centralised government they can impose their ethnopolitical agenda on non-Pashtuns, dominating and Pashtunising Afghanistan. However, should Pashtuns elites try to dominate Afghanistan once again and ignore others' call for change, non-Pashtuns will abandon the unitary state and secede, leaving the Pashtun elites to struggle for power with one another in the Southern provinces (Ibid). Given Ghani's discriminatory policies and the Taliban's brutal oppression of non-Pashtuns, the idea of disintegration has turned into a strong discourse among non-Pashtuns (Hussaini 2022, p. 20). It is safe to say that either Pashtuns agree with federal arrangements and let all groups retain their culture and identity or they should prepare for partition; there is not the third option on the horizon.

## 7. Conclusion

Afghanistan's modern history has been characterised by ethnic hierarchy. Equality has never truly ruled among different ethnic communities. The relative coexistence among groups has been possible due to the implicit recognition of an unequal, hierarchical structure. The Pashtun domination of Afghanistan and their discriminatory policies and practices against non-Pashtuns, particularly Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks had caused formidable resentment among the historically oppressed groups. Non-Pashtuns attempted to change the mono-ethnic nature of the regimes on many occasions, but to no avail. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a turning point in the history of ethnic relations though. It shattered the Pashtuns' monopoly of foreign patronage and access to military means. In the context of the Cold War, non-Pashtuns organised themselves around their ethnic elites. Equipped with sophisticated weaponry, they found themselves on an equal footing with their Pashtun rivals for the first time. Absent a central authority upon the fall of Najib's regime (1992) all preconditions for mass hostility, leadership belligerence and ethnic security dilemma were present. Pashtuns' fear for loss of their hegemony and non-Pashtuns' attempts to gain leverage at the decision-making table appeared in the form of inter-ethnic civil warfare. The rise of the Taliban in 1990s and their harsh treatment of non-Pashtuns even further deepened ethnic cleavages in Afghanistan and made coexistence among ethnic groups nearly impossible.

By the time of the US invasion of Afghanistan (2001) inter-ethnic trust was at the lowest level. Political rationality and historical experiences called for a power-sharing mechanism by which all ethnic groups could feel included. Despite the realities on the ground, however, the post-Taliban system was not designed with an eye towards ethnic heterogeneity. Pashtun political elites with the help of international community imposed a highly centralised structure of power on Afghanistan; one that was not conducive to democracy and stability in a divided country. Such a flawed structure played a major role in the public distrust of the government and its subsequent collapse in 2021.

Non-Pashtun's strategic patience has come to an end, and they do not want to be ruled and subjugated by Pashtuns anymore. Therefore, Afghanistan's future government should be based on a meaningful power-sharing mechanism and ethnic groups should be awarded the authority to rule their own regions. Such an arrangement is the only solution that can keep Afghanistan as one country. If Pashtun elites manage to adopt a mono-ethnic regime and repeat the historical blunders of the past, it is highly probable that Afghanistan will explode into several small countries.

### Note on contributor

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