

Afghanistan, 1978 Revolution and Islamic Civil War

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The first Afghan left party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), was founded in 1965 by urban intellectuals who sought to modernize the country and deter foreign intervention. The leftists supported the overthrow of the monarchy in 1973 and were granted four ministerial posts in Muhammad Doud's republican government. In the next few years, however, Muhammad Doud's authoritarian trend led to the formation of his absolutist regime, leaving no democratic freedoms. PDPA was banned and leading leftists went into exile.

In the late 1970s, political tensions escalated with the economic stagnation brought about by the drastic shrinkage of foreign development assistance. Afghan–US relations soured over Doud's support for Pashtun activists waging a longstanding autonomy struggle with Pakistan. The Baluchistan region of Pakistan extends into Afghanistan, and the people of the region have sought to create an independent state. In response to Doud's support for the Pashtun autonomy movement, the US halted development projects in Afghanistan. Soviet aid was not enough to sustain the Afghan economy and pervasive poverty strengthened public support for communist and Islamist radical movements.

Due to growing impoverishment, spontaneous uprisings flared up in the provinces, and the Afghan government's effort to repress mounting dissent created even greater public opposition. The assassination of Mir Akbar Khyber, a popular PDPA leader, on April 17, 1978, ignited mass discontent and a surge of protests in Kabul. Most Afghan leftists blamed the Muhammad Doud regime for Khyber's death. But Doud's government repressed the PDPA and imprisoned leading activists in the party. The rebellion spread into the army where the leftist sentiment was traditionally high. On April 27, 1978, army units surrounded the Presidential Palace, and following a skirmish, Mohammad Doud and members of his family were found dead. A new government was formed by PDPA leaders who were released from prison by the military, during what became known as the April Revolution.

Islamic Resistance and Civil War (1978–1996)

The April Revolution established PDPA rule in Kabul, which articulated a commitment to egalitarianism, equality, and social justice. But the new government could not focus on social reform, due to considerable opposition, and was forced to concentrate efforts on suppressing challenges from political antagonists. The doctrinaire radical wing of PDPA – Khalk (People) – which assumed power over the government pursued a policy of wiping out any source of dissent in the capital and in the provinces. Massive arrests, purges, and extrajudicial executions angered many traditional leaders, who unified popular resistance against the PDPA regime. In the summer of 1979 armed rebellions took place in Khazarajat, Nuristan, and ethnically disparate areas in eastern Afghanistan, and the PDPA government lost control over significant parts of the national territory. During the 1980s and 1990s, the war contributed to the collapse of the economy and means of subsistence in the countryside, particularly in the Pashtun region, a region where the Taliban emerged.

To control the uprising from overthrowing the government, and to regain control over the territory, the PDPA requested military assistance from the Soviet Union. Appealing to Marxist solidarity, PDPA leaders asked the Soviet Union for military aid, and in December 1979 the Soviet Union dispatched an army of 120,000 soldiers to Afghanistan in support of the PDPA. The Soviet troops assisted the PDPA in securing control over major towns and transportation routes but the countryside remained under the control of insurgents and opponents of the government. The Soviet army presence became yet another catalyst fueling the anti-PDPA rebellion and an arena for Cold War competition between the USSR and the US. PDPA leaders were stigmatized by opponents as betraying the Afghan people, as Soviet puppets, and as infidels threatening to destroy Islam in the country. The coming to power of a moderate PDPA faction – Parcham (The Banner) – did little to alleviate popular resentments.

The major opposition to PDPA leadership was led by Islamic fundamentalists who became known as Mujahedeen (holy warriors). The Islamic Party of Afghanistan and the Islamic Society of Afghanistan (Jamaat-i-Islami) spear-

headed the war against PDPA and the Soviet army, with the help of dozens of smaller religious organizations. As a major site of Cold War competition, the US bankrolled Islamic opposition through covert channels with logistical support from Pakistani intelligence services. During the 1980s a low-intensity military struggle escalated into a large-scale civil war, with numerous atrocities committed by both sides. Attempts to initiate a dialogue and reconciliation between PDPA and Islamists were unsuccessful and stymied by a deadlock.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party rapidly accelerated political and economic reforms in the USSR, leading to a decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. By 1989, the Soviet army pulled out all its troops from Afghanistan, yet the PDPA survived in power for three years without Soviet support. In 1992, when the Soviet Union severed all weapons and fuel supply to the PDPA army, the US-backed Islamic opposition won the final victory and seized power in Kabul.

The civil war did not end with the removal of the PDPA from power as Islamic parties contended for power, furthering political chaos and economic disarray. Following a purge and execution of PDPA leaders, Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the Islamic Society of Afghanistan, returned from exile to become president of Afghanistan in 1992. But Rabbani's government was not recognized by Islamic opposition leaders, and the leadership could not secure power outside of Kabul. From 1992 to 1996, virtually all of Afghanistan was governed by local warlords: Abdurrashid Dostum in the northern stronghold surrounding Mazar-i-Sharif; Ahmad Shah Masoud in the Panjsher valley; in western Herat Province, Ismail Khan, a Shia warlord; and Golbeddin Hekmatiar in the east, a major political and military force behind the rise of the Taliban. Relentless and open warfare as well as political chaos helped shape deep popular discontent for the pillage and violence and gave rise to the emergence of the Taliban movement in 1996.

SEE ALSO: Afghanistan, Resistance to 19th-Century British Invasion; Bacha-i Sakkao's Movement; Bin Laden, Osama (b. 1957) and al-Qaeda; Durrani Empire, Popular Protests, 1747–1823; Taliban, 1996–2007

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