Effects of Ethnicity on Afghanistan's Politics

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Afghanistan is once again undergoing a profound political transition. Since 1973, the frequency of change in regimes and political systems have remained unusually high. Historically, this can be blamed on repeated foreign interference or direct military interventions in Afghanistan but apart from the role of foreign powers, internal dynamics of the country have also played a part in the mayhem that has scourged the country. The most important internal factor that has unmistakably contributed to the unrest, instability and chaos in the country is its ethnic divisions. How this factor played/contributed to the continued chaos and instability in the country requires critical enquiry.

The last census in Afghanistan was held in 1979 yet it remained [incomplete](#) primarily because it was conducted by a Soviet-backed government and the mujahedeen were fighting against the Soviet/Government forces, thus, the census teams could not go to the areas under mujahedeen control. According to recent estimates, the population of Afghanistan is around [40 million](#), which, in addition to multiple smaller groups, is divided into [seven major ethnicities,](#) i.e., Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Aimaq, Turkmen, and Balochis. The key historical factor that contributed towards this ethnic diversity in the country is repeated conquests by peripheral empires. These attackers, including Persians, Turks, Indians etc., conquered Afghanistan at different times and their descendants settled in various parts.

Amongst various ethnic groups, the Pashtuns are considered to be in majority, around [40 to 45 percent](#) of the total population, yet each ethnic group also constitutes a majority in the region in which they reside. Pashtuns, being the largest ethnic group, consider it their right to govern Afghanistan, and historically they have done so. The other ethnic groups during Pashtun rule have remained marginalized. This has created a sense of alienation in these communities. During the US-sponsored post-Taliban era, the two Heads of State, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, were from the Pashtun community. People from other communities, like Abdullah Abdullah, Amrullah Saleh and General Abdur Rasheed Dostum, among others, were also part of the US-sponsored post-Taliban governments, but the sense of being marginalized remained.

Due to this unscrupulous marginalization of non-Pashtun communities in Afghanistan, voices are being raised in support of a decentralized Afghanistan arguing that the country should be divided into autonomous regions and governed by regional capitals. Historically, the central government used to control the provinces from Kabul. This trend continued during the Taliban regime and the US-sponsored post-Taliban era under the draft constitutions of 1998 and the 2004. Both proposed a centralized state with marginal administrative and political authority delegated to the provinces. Provincial governors were appointed by the central government and the provincial budgets were set by national ministries in Kabul. Advocates of centralized government argue that a confederate system can lead to further divisions in the country and allow warlords to create ethnic fiefdoms. Pashtuns support a centralized governance system as it allows them to effectively control the whole country.

In August 2021, when Taliban took over Kabul, they showed their willingness to form an inclusive interim government. However, the Western world and the Taliban had different interpretation of the word 'inclusive.' The international community wants a government that includes people from other ethnicities, who may be ideologically different from the Taliban, whereas the latter included people of other ethnicities, but only those who were part of their organization or who were ideologically aligned with them. Thus, the international community has abstained from recognizing the interim government.

Ethnicity, especially when beneficial to certain internal and external players, will continue to play a dominant role in the politics of Afghanistan. Therefore, the most likely and suitable political setup, though opposed by various quarters within the country, is a federal system with a parliamentary form of government, where all political parties are allowed to contest elections. Keeping in mind that no ethnic group is in absolute majority, under such a system, it is likely that a coalition government would be formed, thus, giving representation to other ethnicities in the corridors of power.

During the last two decades, the world has transformed. With advancement in technology and intensifying influence of social media, people around the world, including the people of Afghanistan, are more informed and take a stand for their rights. Those in power in Afghanistan need to realize that such an environment and its resultant stimulus has

affected Afghanistan and its people as well. The tendency to rule the country with iron hands cannot be continued perpetually.

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