**Ethnic Conflicts in Afghanistan: Adding Fuel To Fire**

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The ethnic diversity and the peaceful coexistence of different communities are said to be defining features of the modern democratic nations of the twenty-first century. But for some Godforsaken landscapes, this very diversity endangers the disarmed and outnumbered communities and vis-a-vis, makes the majority tyrannical, in the absence of a strong state. Afghanistan is a nation that has preserved its territorial boundaries despite a history of warfare and foreign invasions encompassing for centuries. Its national anthem acknowledges fourteen ethnicities. It is a nation, yes. But a nation for which national integration has always been a challenge. Many may confuse that the problem of ethnic conflicts in Afghanistan and the thorns in the way of a harmonious relationship between the communities is probably a Taliban orchestrated problem. But to set the record straight, Afghanistan and its ethnic cleavages are not a recent phenomenon. From King Abd al Rahman’s targeting of minority ethnicities in the 19th century to the formation of Setam e Milli (anti-Pashtun organization) and Afghan Millat (Pashtun Nationalist Organization) in the late 20th century to cancel each other’s domino effect, the roots of this tree and embedded in a history of at least two hundred years, dating back to the eighteenth century.

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In contemporary Afghanistan, ethnic belonging plays a key role in the life and treatment of an individual. The largest ethnicity in Afghanistan is the Sunni Pashtuns. Around 45 per cent of the entire population of Afghanistan is comprised of them and they have ruled it for over 270 years since the eighteenth century. Then come the Tajiks, which are 30 per cent of the Afghan population. Their adherence to Sunni Islam make them acceptable in Afghan life for the most part, along with the Uzbeks who constitute 10 per cent of the Afghan population. Last but never least, one of the most persecuted communities in history, The Hazaras, constitute approximately 15 per cent of the population of Afghanistan. In the late nineteenth century, King Abdul Rahman Khan, who is also known by the title “The Dracula Emir,” either wiped out in a genocidal move or enslaved 65 per cent of the total Hazara population of Afghanistan. The rest had to cross the border, where they still aren’t safe if we talk about the plight of Hazaras in Balochistan.

On the issue of ethnic divisions in Afghanistan and its possibility to add fuel to the ongoing fire in the country, we have to ponder upon the historical nuances to determine the dynamics. Ethnicity played the role of a critical juncture in the civil war fought after the downfall of the Najibullah regime in the 90s, with the formation of alliances made on the basis of ethnicity. Ahmad Shah Massoud, an ethnic Tajik, facilitated the weakening of Pashtun influence on an unprecedented scale. Then came the Taliban in the late ’90s who were initially perceived to be an Afghan Nationalist Militia but they didn’t take long to refute this title after they hanged many Pashtun leaders like Najibullah on the pretext of religious duty and their insurgency against Pashtun Mujahideen, hence further complicating an ethnic explanation of unrest in Afghanistan.

Then comes the case of Pakistan. The Durand Line divided the Pashtun population to an extent that currently, Pakistan is home to 35 million Pashtuns, way more than Afghanistan, which is home to 15million Pashtuns. Pakistani regime has always been very sensitive to Pashtun Rights Movement emerging from its Tribal areas, hence it extended support to Pashtun Islamism since the 90s in the form of Taliban in Kabul, subsequently facing its blowbacks in the form of terrorism.

The current Taliban regime governs Kabul with the juggernauts of their strict construction of religious code and they claim to see the ethnic division of Afghanistan only through the lens of Shariah. However, just as women’s rights, minority rights are also watched upon by the international community to substantiate the amount of truth in these claims of the Taliban regime. Ethnicity, in this regard, could be another hindrance in guaranteeing rights for minority communities. The foreign intervention also has been a spoiler. Since the Iranian Revolution, Iran took a potent interest in empowering the Shia communities, both militarily and resource-wise. This Iranian project was in place to cancel the effect of the Saudi backing of militant groups in Afghanistan. Iran also filled a vacuum created by the US invasion after 9/11, which toppled the Taliban regime and hence, gave Iran a way forward to enhance its influence.

Ethnicity is an unavoidable aspect of Afghan life. In the current Afghan regime, the guaranteeing of rights for these minority communities, their political and social representation and freedom of movement should be synchronized with foreign assistance, just to keep the current Afghan regime in check for its fair treatment of these communities. These ethnic cleavages historically have always heightened violence in the region, and it is still a potential threat to homogeneity and national integration for Afghanistan. In short, the genie of the tyranny of the majority should be tightly bottled.

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