**[Historical aspect of Pashtun nationalism](https://nation.com.pk/19-Jan-2020/historical-aspect-of-pashtun-nationalism" \t "_new)**

Muhammad Tahir Iqbal January 19, 2020

The current sharpness in the ethno-nationalist trend in the Pashtun tribal belt of Pakistan is not new. The affiliation with the ideals of Pashtun nationalism was there since decades; but there has been vicissitudes in the intensity of attachment with the cause.

The state’s policy of absorbing more and more Pashtuns into its fold – intake in civil and military bureaucracy, share in federal ministries, participation in sports at national level, extension of provincial autonomy under constitutional clauses like the 18th amendment etc. – considerably toned down the sharp hue of nationalistic approach with the result that the political parties with predominantly federating colour penetrated into the Pashtun belts and brought them to the national embrace.

The state does not have any problem with the bent towards nationalism until the ideals are exploited by some external factors from across the Durand Line with the connivance of other stake holders in the region.

Let us travel down to the history lane to trace out ethno-nationalistic tendency in Pashtun terrain of Pakistan and ascertain what conduct it has been taking up over the decades.

Before the partition of sub-continent in 1947, the Khudai Khidmatgar, or Surkh Posh or Red Shirts – formed by Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a politician from Charsadda – was the movement that united and organized the Pashtuns of erstwhile NWFP and infused in them the ideals of Pashtun nationalism.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan had great affiliation with Gandhi and his party, Indian National Congress; and he knew that Pathans of NWFP will never go for this alliance. So, the idea of anti-imperialism – independence from the British Raj – was handsomely used to make Pashtuns pro-Congress with the idea that Congress also wanted independence.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan worked laboriously to carve out in-roads for Congress into the Pashtun areas. Due to his ardent support and tireless efforts, Congress was able to secure 17 seats out of 50 in 1937; and 30 out of 50 seats in the 1946 elections from NWFP.

But the winds started veering its directions when the Pashtuns sensed that Congress was planning to replace the British Raj with the Hindu Raj in NWFP. The conspicuous slogans of Muslim League like ‘No Hindu Raj’ and ‘Muslim Unity’ attracted the Pashtuns and weaned them off the crafts of Congress. By December 1946, Muslim League had emerged as a potent political force in NWFP and the adjoining tribal areas.

This disappointed Abdul Ghaffar Khan who had worked for Congress for more than a decade. To dispel the impressions created by Muslim League, he planned a visit of Pandit Jawahar Lal to the tribal belt.

On October 20, 1946, Abdul Ghaffar Khan was in the tribal areas along with Nehru, but their motorcade was attacked by the locals who then did not have soft heart for the latter and his kind of politics.

At the time of partition, Abdul Ghaffar Khan boycotted the referendum on the basis of “Pakistan or India”; he, instead, demanded referendum on the basis of “Pashtunistan or Pakistan”.

The situation became all the more complex when Afghanistan, too, jumped in to fish out of the troubled waters and claimed that the territories lying between Durand Line and the Indus River belonged to Afghanistan, and the tribal of these areas should be given an option to re-join Afghanistan.

From here starts a series of hostile episodes initiated by Afghanistan to support insurgencies on the western bordering areas of Pakistan.

On August 12, 1949, some locals of Afridi tribe met at Tirah, and issued a declaration of independence and sent that to the Pashtun organizations and parties in Pakistan, abroad and the UNO. The declaration was hailed by Afghanistan with great verve, and Kabul radio also broadcasted heated debates on it.

Other notable Pashtun nationalists, Mirzali Khan and Malik Wali Khan Kuki Khel, in alliance with Khudai Khidmatgars, refused to recognize Pakistan and started a guerrilla warfare with the nascent state through the clandestine support of Afghanistan. Malik Kuki Khel led two attacks on Pakistan’s territories from Kabul in January 1952. In 1959, he was pardoned and allowed to come back and settle in Pakistan as a policy of integrating disgruntled Pashtuns into the folds of Pakistan.

Meanwhile, Khan Abdul Jabbar Khan, the elder brother of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, was made the Chief Minister of the West Pakistan. The trend was followed by other Pashtun nationalists, too, who started taking part in the centre-oriented politics of Pakistan.

Important developments happened in 1970’s igniting once again the embers of Pashtun nationalism. By then, Khudai Khidmatgars had turned into National Awami Party (NAP) participating into parliamentary electoral process. But the leadership at the helms of affairs in Pakistan was piqued at the NAP chapter of East Pakistan for its support to the cause of Bangladesh there. In 1973, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, dismissed the NAP government in Balochistan resulting into the resignation of NAP government of NWFP as a protest.

This was a time when Sardar Daud Khan was in power in Afghanistan. He was an ardent supporter of Pashtun nationalism in Pakistan, and had also earlier led the Afghan army into Pakistan’s Bajaur region in 1960 but was repulsed by the military government of Pakistan. Some NAP nationalists, such as Ajmal Khattak, found this quite convenient to flee into Afghanistan so as to resuscitate Pashtunistan issue again.

During Zia-ul-Haq’s martial law, Pashtun nationalists under the NAP joined anti-Bhutto campaign of Pakistan National Alliance (PNA). Later, Talibanization shifted their attention to a bigger dilemma, thus landing them in an eerie ilk of quicksand which gripped them for quite a while but now remarkably out as a result of relentless military operations.

But the irony is that despite paying gratitude to the state’s policy to clean the tribal areas off Talibans, some politicians of the soil have again started raising ethno-nationalism with ever more vim and angst, and again in complicity with other players from across the Durand Line. So, we again stand the same ground with the same realities jeering at us.