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Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction
of Afghanistan

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Abstract

Almost all policymakers, journalists and researchers recognize the ethnic fissions and fractions as the predominant lines of conflict in Afghanistan. What this approach ignores is the fact that, despite the ethnicization of the conflict, the ethnicization of the Afghan people themselves failed. Although ethnicity became a political-military force to reckon with during the 23 years of ongoing war in Afghanistan, the significance of ethnicity as basis of political articulation and social organisation remained very limited. Hence ethnicity has been opposed by competing identities as well as by strategic considerations of the war factions. This article will, firstly, discuss the particular meaning of ethnicity in Afghanistan in past and present, and, secondly, how the international community has dealt with ethnicity in its endeavour to bring peace to Afghanistan and to rebuild a political system.

Ethnicity has emerged as one of the most problematic and precarious obstacles for the political reconstruction and state building process in Afghanistan. As in many other violent conflicts tinged by ethnicity the general question is to what extent the consideration of ethnicity – mostly in the form of proportional representation[1] – is a political tool that will supersede or aggravate ethnic tensions.[2] The dilemma of how to cope with ethnicity in process of peace building, state reconstruction and national formation always arises in accordance with the question of what constitutes ethnicity in the particular country and what the boundaries and relationships between ethnic groups are. This question of how to define 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic groups' is discussed extremely controversially in the academic world[3] as well as in the arena of policy-making.[4]

Regarding Afghanistan, most researchers and policy-makers either explicitly or implicitly share the view that ethnic groups have existed since time immemorial.[5] They assume that ethnic groups are solid cultural units which are divided by obvious boundaries and have engaged in conflicts for hundreds of years. Set against that opinion, this article argues that the meaning of ethnicity has always been very blurred in Afghanistan, and usually the so-called ethnic groups enclose a socially and culturally amorphous set of people and still do not constitute the main reference of identity and solidarity for the population, even if the war is tinged by ethnicity.

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[1] See Arend Lijphart, Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Exploration (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977).

[2] For further discussion see Timothy D. Sisk, Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997); Ulrich Schneckener, Auswege aus dem Bürgerkrieg. Modelle zur Regulierung ethno-nationalistischer Konflikte in Europa (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 2002); Andreas Wimmer et al. (eds.), Facing Ethnic Conflicts. Towards a New Realism (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

[3] A sound overview gives Andreas Wimmer, 'Who Owns the State? Understanding Ethnic Conflict in Post-Colonial Societies', Nations and Nationalism, Vol 3, No 4, 1997, pp 631-665.

[4] For a more detailed investigation see Conrad Schetter and Ulrike Joras, 'Ethnic Labelling of Violent Conflicts', in: A. Wimmer et al (eds.): Facing Ethnic Conflicts. Towards a New Realism (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield 2004).

[5] E.g. Andreas Rieck, 'Afghanistan's Taliban: An Islamic Revolution of the Pashtuns', Orient Vol 38, No 1, 1997, pp 121-142; Amin Saikal, 'Afghanistan's Ethnic Conflict', Survival Vol 40, No 2, 1998, pp 114-126; Michael Ignatieff, Empire Lite. Nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan (London, Vintage, 2003).

The Chimera of Ethnic Groups

The belief that every individual belongs to a certain ethnic group or nation, evolves in the course of the 19[6] century in the context of the advent of nationalism in Europe.[6] However, if we behold the population in the region of today's Afghanistan in the course of the 19th century we can observe that concepts of identities and social categories were polymorph and poly-systemic: Identities derived from tribal origin, religious or sectarian belonging, social status and profession; societal boundaries and group formation altered in place and time with high dynamics.[7] Moreover, several ethnic denominations referring to certain ethnic categories of today were used in common parlance in the 18th and 19th century. However, they did not describe accurately defined social segments. On the contrary, the situation of social interaction determined the meaning of these ethnic denominations. For example, the terms 'Shiite' and 'Hazaras' were often used ex-changeably;[8] likewise, the term Tajik referred to all non-Pashtuns, sometimes to all non-Durrani Pashtuns or only to the people speaking Persian at least until the 1970s.[9] British agents, soldiers and explorers of the 19th century endeavored to throw light on this confusing terminological chaos by clustering the population along cultural lines. A typical example of this aim is Henry Bellew's report "The races of Afghanistan; being a brief account of the principal nations inhabiting the country"[10], in which the author not only equated 'races' and 'nations' but divided the inhabitants of Afghanistan into eight major categories, the Pathans (Pashtuns), Yusufzai, Afridi, Khattak, Daticae, Ghilji, Tajik and Hazara – today most of these categories are subsumed under the label of 'Pashtuns'.

It was not until the mid-20th century before foreign academics and the government started to divide Afghan society systematically into ethnic categories by differences in language, sectarianism, culture etc. However, instead of using the more analytical term 'ethnic category' the researchers preferred the term 'ethnic group', assuming that the action of the people is determined by their ethnic affiliation. The term groupe ethnique was firstly used by the French anthropologist Dollot;[11] Wilber introduced the ethnic taxonomy of the Afghan people to the Anglophone literature in the mid-1950s.[12] Hereby ethnic groups were understood as people sharing the same culture and boundaries (e.g. religion, language). Driven by the academic intention, to eliminate the hybrid transition between once established ethnic categories, new categories were created or at least shaped according to cultural customs in the course of the 20th century. Anthropologists such as Schurmann[13] invented ethnic groups such as the Pashai, Tajiks, Mountain-Tajiks or Farsiwans, neglecting the fact that some of these terms contain different meanings in regard to the social context. The best example for the construction of these so-called ethnic groups probably is the creation of the ethnic group of the Tajiks. The term

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[6] See, for example Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London, Verso, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[7] See Conrad Schetter, Ethnizität und ethnische Konflikte in Afghanistan (Berlin, D. Reimer Verlag, 2003), pp 168-216.

[8] This example and others are cited by Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, 'Pratiques quotidiennes et usages politiques des termes ethniques dans l'Afghanistan du nord-est', in: Jean-Pierre Digard (ed.) Le fait ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan (Paris, Editions du CNRS, 1988), pp 233-246, here p 241.

[9] This example is drawn from Richard Tapper, 'Ethnicity and Class: Dimensions of Intergroup Conflict in North-Central Afghanistan', in: M. Nazif Shaharani and Robert L. Canfield (eds.) Revolution and Rebellions in Afghanistan. Anthropological Perspectives (Berkeley, University of California, 1984), pp 230-246.

[10] Andrew Bellew, The Races of Afghanistan; Being a Brief Account of the Principal Nations Inhabiting that Country (Calcutta, Thacker, 1880), Italics by the Author.

[11] R. Dollot, Afghanistan: histoire, description, moeurs, et coutumes: folklore, fouilles (Paris, Payot, 1937) p. 47.

[12] Donald N. Wilber, Afghanistan. Its People, its Society, its Culture (New Haven, HRAF Press, 1956).

[13] H. Franz Schurmann, The Mongols of Afghanistan. An Ethnography of the Moghōls and Related Peoples of Afghanistan ('S-Gravenhagen, Mouton, 1962).

Tajik, which was usually used in social interactions only in a negative sense for somebody who did not belong to any group but merely shared the belief in a common tradition, implied an anti-ethnic notion in general.[14] In the ethnic taxonomy of foreign academics the ethnic group of Tajiks was applied to the residual groups of all Sunnite Persian-speaking villagers or urban dwellers without a tribal background, i.e. without a shared history or any genealogical knowledge. The lack of a belief in a shared past turned out to be the major obstacle again and again concerning political attempts to establish a consciousness of being a Tajik and to create a real ethnic group of Tajiks.

Until today, the main difficulty of denominating ethnic groups in Afghanistan is that the particular segmented groups for whom ethnic labels were invented are often not familiar with such ethnic labels even today, let alone aware of any common identity. Ismail Khan, the current regional leader of Herat, is sometimes considered to be a Tajik, a Pashtun or a Farsiwan. He himself steadily refuses to be assigned to a certain ethnic group. Moreover, the criteria set up by anthropologists do not correspond with the reality of social behavior. For example, those who insist that Pashtuns speak Pashtu and are Sunni Muslims, are in serious error, since there are also Shiite Pashtuns in Qandahar, Uruzgan and the Pakistan border area, and Pashtuns from Kabul often do not speak a word of Pashtu. A good example of the aforementioned phenomenon is the former king Zahir Shah, the figurehead of many Pashtun nationalists. Finally, the difficulties of differentiating are aggravated by the fact that many Afghans – if they master the cultural patterns – claim to be of different ethnicity in different situations. The former Afghan president Babrak Karmal used to emphasize his Pashtun origin, whereas many Afghans considered him to be a Tajik or an immigrated Kashmiri or Ferghani.[15] Thus it is impossible to calculate how many ethnic categories exist in Afghanistan and how large they are. Additionally, different scientific approaches of researchers result in different ways of ethnic categorizing. A German survey concludes that there are about 54 ethnic groups,[16] while a Soviet study[17] claims there to be 200. Therefore the crucial problem is to define which ethnic categories and which yardsticks are to be taken into consideration in any political arrangement basing on ethnic affiliation.

Political Instrumentalisation of Ethnicity

The question comes to mind why ethnic groups rose to political relevance in Afghanistan. To answer this question one has to look back on history. The Afghan state was created by the rival colonial powers British India and Russia at the end of the 19th century. The ruling family of the Pashtun Durrani confederation enthroned by British India favored Pashtun elements in their concept of the nation-state. Besides the fact that the Pashtuns made up the royal family, the main reasons for the predominance of this Pashtun-biased nationalism were that the Pashtuns constituted the most numerous ethnic category and that the Pashtun tribes of eastern Afghanistan were considered to be the strongest military forces in the country. That

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[14] Peter Snoy, 'Die ethnischen Gruppen', in: Paul Bucherer-Dietschi and Christoph Jentsch (ed.) Afghanistan Ländermonographie (Bibliotheca afghanica, Liestal, 1986) pp 121-152; Pierre Centlivres, 'Groupes ethniques: De l'hétérogénéité d'un concept aux ambiguités de la représentation. L'exemple Afghan', in: Eckart Ehlers (ed.) Beiträge zur Kulturgeographie des islamischen Orients (Marburger Geographische Schriften 78, Marburg an der Lahn, 1979) pp 25-37.
[15] See Conrad Schetter, 2003, ibid., p 323.
[16] This data is cited and explained in Erwin Orywal (ed.), Die ethnischen Gruppen Afghanistans. Fallstudien zu Gruppenidentität und Intergruppenbeziehung (Wiesbaden, Ludwig Reichert Verlag 1986).
[17] This data is cited in V.M. Masson and V.A. Romodin, Istorija Afganistana, 2 Vol. (Moscow Izdat. Nauka, 1964/65).

is the reason why 'Afghan' is the Persian synonym for Pashtun. Pashtu was always the Afghan national language and the Afghan history was written from a Pashtun point of view.[18]

Although the state policy meant to include the various regional leaders, tribal chiefs and notables by distributing resources in a clientelistic way,[19] the state used ethnic patterns to regulate access to public goods and offices:[20] Pashtuns were privileged in all areas and dominated the military. Tajiks were left with the economic sector and the educational institutions, whereas the Hazaras were marginalized in general. Hence, a resettlement and redistribution of land which took place during the 20th century generally advantaged the Pashtuns: The Pashtun settlers received the irrigated land in the oases of northern Afghanistan,[21] and pastures in central Afghanistan were given to Pashtun nomads.[22] The unequal treatment of the people came along with the forming of ethnic stereotypes: Pashtuns were considered 'bellicose', Tajiks were said to be 'thrifty', Uzbeks were known as 'brutal' and the Hazaras as 'illiterate' and 'poor'.[23] Even though the politics of the nation-state thus created an ethnic hierarchy, ethnic conflicts demanding for a change of the state policy surprisingly emerged very rarely. On the one hand the Zeitgeist was determined by the Cold War and political parties consequently constituted themselves by referring to ideologies such as communism or Islam.[24] On the other hand politics in the capital Kabul were of little interest for the people in rural Afghanistan.[25] Afghans even recognized the nation-state as a hostile factor which intervened in their social life by force rather as a key to the access to resources (such as offices or land rights) which they could take control of.[26] Furthermore, the categorization of ethnic groups remained a blurred concept for the Afghan population and was not respected as the general framework for collective action, even if the Afghan passport, the tazkira, provided an entry point for ethnic identity. Accordingly, the ordinary Afghans did not articulate a political will to overcome the ethnic hierarchy stipulated by the state.[27] However, this does not mean that ethnic harmony existed in pre-war Afghanistan. On the local ground conflicts, especially on property rights of water and land, were occasionally defined in ethnic terms. However, the social context, the motives and the political alliances constituted the decisive factors for the labeling of the conflict. For example, conflicting parties in the Hazarajat sometimes defined the same conflict as an ethnic one between Hazaras and Pashtuns, sometimes as a sectarian one between

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[18] See Conrad Schetter, 2003, ibid., pp 276 – 280.

[19] Barnett R. Rubin, 'Political Elites in Afghanistan: Rentier State Building, Rentier State Wrecking', International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, No.24, 1992 pp 77-99.

[20] See Conrad Schetter, 2003, ibid, pp 355 – 358.

[21] See Erwin Grötzbach, Kulturgeographische Wandel in Nordost-Afghanistan seit dem 20. Jahrhundert (Meisenheim am Glan, Anton Hain 1972); Thomas J. Barfield, 'The Impact of Pashtun Immigration on Nomadic Pastoralism in North-eastern Afghanistan', in: Jon W. Anderson and Richard F. Strand (eds.) Ethnic Processes and Inter-group Relations in Contemporary Afghanistan (New York, Afghanistan Council of the Asia Society, 1979) pp 26-34.

[22] See Klaus Ferdinand: 'Preliminary Notes on Hazara Culture. The Danish Scientific Mission to Afghanistan 1953 - 55', Historik-filosofiske Meddelelser Udgivet af det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab Vol 37, No 5, 1959; Robert L. Canfield, Faction and Conversion in a Plural Society. Religious Alignments in the Hindu Kush (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan 1973).

[23] An overview over the various ethnic stereotypes gives Max Klimburg, Afghanistan. Das Land im historischen Spannungsfeld Mittelasiens (Wien, Österreichischer Bundesverlag 1966); see also Conrad Schetter, 2003, ibid., pp 329-338.

[24] Regarding the Communist parties see Anthony Arnold, Afghanistan's Two-Party Communism: Parcham and Khalq (Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1983); a good overview over the party system is given by Barnett R. Rubin, The Fragmentation of Afghanistan (New Haven, Yale University Press 1995).

[25] In this respect Dupree introduced the contended term "inward looking society". See Louis Dupree, Afghanistan (Princeton, Princeton University Press 1973) pp 248-251.

[26] See Dieter Fröhlich, Nationalismus und Nationalstaat in Entwicklungsländern. Probleme der Integration ethnischer Gruppen in Afghanistan (Köln, Univ. Diss. 1969).

[27] See Conrad Schetter, ,Der Afghanistankrieg – Die Ethnisierung eines Konflikts', Internationales Asienforum Vol 33, No 1/2, 2002, pp 15-29.

Shiites and Sunnites and sometimes as a socioeconomic one between farmers and nomads.[28] Thus, the situation defined which pattern of explanation was used.

Ethnicity became a political-military force to reckon with when the Afghan War broke out in 1979. Even though the war was dominated by the antagonism of communism versus Islam regarding the paradigms of the Cold War, the belligerent parties increasingly enhanced the ethnic momentum to strengthen their positions.[29] The communist rulers hoped to tie certain ethnic groups closer to them by raising them to the status of nationalities.[30] Even more important was the creation of militias that relied on ethnic affiliation; a well-known example is the Uzbek militia of Rashid Dostum. Pakistan and Iran also used the ethnic potential for conflicts. On the basis of Shiite loyalties Iran established the hizb-i wahdat, which was popular amongst the Shiite Hazaras. During the 1980s the jamiat-i islami, the oldest resistance movement, developed into a representation for the Tajiks. Pakistan supported the Taliban, a movement which followed a radical Islam and was Pashtun-dominated. Thus all four warring factions which dominated the military and political actions in the last decade were more or less supported by members of one of the four major ethnic categories.[31]

The political movements used ethnicity as the main argument for the legitimacy of their political existence, because all other ideologies – Islamic as well as communist or royalist – lost ground as a basis for the mobilization of the masses and as an instrument for political demands. The leaders of the warring factions made their supporters aware of their social and economic deprivation on the basis of their ethnic affiliation in past and present. They claimed that the survival of the 'own ethnic group' was endangered through the aggressive behavior of 'other ethnic groups'. Nevertheless, by means of the ethnic argument the warring factions stirred up a collective anxiety as well as hate and jealousy. Ethnic affiliation also provided the basis for the parties' demands concerning economic and political resources of the state and society. All warring factions justified their political demands by referring to the size of their ethnic group and their territorial roots.[32] Moreover, they used ethnicity to justify their military actions. Ethnic cleansing and ethnocides occurred frequently in Kabul between 1992 and 1994, in the Shomali plains between 1996 and 2001, in the Hazarajat between 1998 and 2001 and in Northern Afghanistan, especially Mazar-i Sharif, since 1997.[33]

However, the ethnicisation of the conflict was restricted with regard to one important aspect: The ethnic card was never played openly, but remained covert. Thus one can find very little proof of ethnocentrism among any of the political movements involved. No single political movement is linked to a certain ethnic category by its self-description. The published speeches of leaders such as Ahmad Shah Masood, Burhanuddin Rabbani or Mullah Omar were all imbued with an Islamic rhetoric, but all of them vehemently denied any ethnic dimension of the war. All politicians never tire of declaring their respective parties as being multi-ethnic.[34] The underlying reason is that Afghans refrain from picking ethnicity out as a central theme. Therefore it is

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[28] Convincing examples are cited in Robert L. Canfield, ibid.; Pierre Centlivres, 'Problémes d'identité ethnique dans le Nord de l'Afghanistan', Iran moderne: actes du XXIXe Congrès international des Orientalistes (Paris 1976), pp 1-13; Pierre Centlivres, 'L'histoire recénte de l'Afghanistan et la configuration ethnique des provinces du nord-est. Quelques données', Studia Iranica Vol 5, No 2, 1976, pp 255-267.

[29] This process is described in an excellent way in Olivier Roy, Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[30] See Jadwiga Pstrusinska, Afghanistan 1989 in Sociolingustic Perspective (London, Central Asian Survey Incidental Paper Series, 7 1990).

[31] See Olivier Roy, ibid.; Barnett R. Rubin, ibid.; Bernt Glatzer, 'Is Afghanistan on the Brink of Ethnic and Tribal Disintegration?', in: William Maley (ed.) Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban (London, Hurst, 1998) pp 167-182

[32] See Conrad Schetter, „Die Territorialisierung nationaler und ethnischer Vorstellungen in Afghanistan', in: Orient Vol 44, No 1, 2003, pp 75-97.

[33] Amin Saikal, ibid.; Conrad Schetter, ibid., pp 527-540.

[34] Conrad Schetter, ibid., 541 – 543.

important to note that parties used the ethnic moment rather in an undercover and strategic way. The reason is that there are serious barriers for a public emphasis of ethnicity: First of all, a major value in Islam is the idea that all believers are part of a united community (ummah). The fragmentation of society along ethnic lines contrasts with the concept of ummah. That is why ethnocentric slogans are avoided in public and many Afghans consider the accentuation of ethnicity as un-Islamic. Especially the parties rooted in the mujahidin movement of the 1970s/1980s strongly rejected any ethnic tensions in the public. Secondly, due to the resistance against the communist regime and the exile of many Afghans the identification of the Afghans with their country increased in the 1980s. The majority of Afghans support the continuance of the Afghan nation state.[35] On the other hand, the fragmentation of Afghanistan entails an uncertain future. Hence, the warring parties avoid questioning the integrity of the Afghan state. The possibility of exercising arguments of ethnicity is strategically very limited. There is a wide-ranging consensus amongst Afghans that arguments along ethnic lines will threaten the continued existence of the Afghan nation-state. Whoever claims rights in the name of an ethnic group is quickly considered a traitor. Thirdly, the ethnic groups involved in the Afghan struggle for power are represented in the neighboring countries as well, with the exception of the Hazaras. If the jamiat-i islami and the jombish-i milli stress ethnicity, they will run the risk that their separation from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan becomes blurred. These parties are not interested in the unification with these countries, though, because this could mean a limitation of their political freedom and their access to economic and social resources. The Taliban faced a different situation: Due to the influence of Pakistan on the Taliban, this movement was not able to turn to an obvious Pashtun ethno-nationalism. Fourth and last, as long as the parties strove for central power, they had to demonstrate their ability to rule a multi-ethnic Afghanistan. To sum it up all parties, which have been influential in the last decade, have used ethnicity to justify a specific political demand. But the current political and cultural situation in Afghanistan regulates and strictly limits the utilization of ethnicity as an instrument for political claims and military mobilization.

The Dominance of Family Affiliation and Clientelism

Taking the limited importance of ethnicity into consideration, the question arises what the dominant frameworks of political identity and action in Afghan society are. In general it can be noted that the Afghan society is based on small-scale communities and that it is characterized by a series of overlapping obligations of solidarity. Moreover we have to be aware that the social structures of communities in Afghanistan are extremely heterogeneous, thus social systems are changing from place to place: Village or valley communities, clans, tribes and religiously defined communities (e.g. Sufi orders) form the most important reference points of political identity and action and constitute the basis for modern forms of clientelism today. Accordingly, groups are formed along family and kinship networks or client-patron relations rather than along interests or ethnic identities.[36]

In this context it is worth to become aware of the family structures in Afghanistan. The population growth rate in Afghanistan remains one of the highest in the world (3.43%); on average, every household comprises 10 to 12 persons, children often stemming from different mothers. In this context, children do not merely constitute a retirement pension but also form the social, economic and political capital: Through marriage policies alliances are established and resources secured respectively extended. Few degrees of kinship are sufficient to be related

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[35] Conrad Schetter, Die Territorialisierung nationaler und ethnischer Vorstellungen in Afghanistan', ibid., pp 75-97.
[36] Andreas Wimmer and Conrad Schetter, 'Putting State-formation First: Some Recommendations for Reconstruction and Peace-Making in Afghanistan', Journal for International Development 15, pp 525-539.

to hundreds of Afghans. Albeit there are hierarchies concerning marriage relationships and ethnic borders often constitute barriers, family ties transcending ethnic borders are no curiosity. Thus the kinship system as the fundamental basis for confidence and alliances does not coincide with ethnic borders, but instead frequently overlaps them.[37]

The permanent conditions of war since 1979 did not impair the significance of family, but the increased insecurity strengthened the role of kinship and clientelism. Distrust grew to an extent that clientelism spread to almost every sphere of the Afghan society: politics, economy, education, and even the formation of so-called civil society organizations such as NGOs, social and cultural associations, and interest groups. Because of the dominance of family relationships and clientelism one of the most crucial problems of the political reconstruction process is the lack of a viable civil society and political parties in Afghanistan that can address matters of the Afghan people in a credible way. Today collective action seems to be short-lived without any long-term orientation. This is why ministries, NGOs or political organizations today are usually occupied by one clientele group only.[38]

The Bonn Peace Talks – Caught in the Ethnic Trap

The international intervention in Afghanistan and the collapse of the Taliban regime in autumn 2001 triggered a new situation in which the international community endeavored to develop a peace arrangement for Afghanistan and to rebuild the Afghan state under the leadership of the United Nations and the USA. Ethnicity played a crucial role in the overall strategy for the political reconstruction of Afghanistan. It was identified as the dominating line of conflict in the Afghan war, and the establishing of an ethnic balance in all government issues came to the fore of political decision-making of the international community. In the following I intend to analyze to what extent this strong emphasis of ethnicity was adapted to the political conditions in Afghanistan and which influence this policy had on the political reconstruction of Afghanistan.

The media and the politicians who were confronted very abruptly with the war in Afghanistan after September 11th quickly considered ethnicity as the main template of the conflict.[39] Ethnic affiliation of persons and political organizations served as an easy manageable coordinate system which rendered possible both a good orientation in the conflict as well as the assignment of the political actors. According to this notion, every Afghan was assigned to a certain ethnic affiliation: The 'Uzbek Dostum', the 'Pashtun Karzai', the 'Tajik Rabbani' or the 'Pashtun Zahir Schah'.[40] Besides the seeming feasibility of this procedure, it also fitted into the experiences many policy-makers and journalists made in conflict-torn societies of the Balkans, the Caucasus and sub-Saharan Africa. Although, as I have indicated, ethnicity turned out to be one of the major guiding lines of the Afghan conflict, this general reduction of the conflict to its ethnic dimension ignored the limited and specific meaning of ethnicity in the Afghan context as well as the importance of tangible incentives such as economic profit or group identities beyond ethnicity (e.g. political Islam).

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[37] See Nancy Tapper, Batered Brides. Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991); Gabriele Rasuly-Paleczek, 'Kinship and Politics Among the Uzbeks of Northeastern Afghanistan', in: Ingeborg Baldauf and Michael Friederich (eds.) Bamberger Zentralasienstudien (Berlin 1994) pp 11-27.

[38] Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, Conrad Schetter and Susanne Schmeidl The Transition from Relief to Development from a Human Security Perspective: Afghanistan (Commission on Human Security, United Nations, Kabul, 2002).

[39] See Conrad Schetter, Mediale Ethnisierung am Beispiel Afghanistan, Die Brücke No 130, 2003, pp 36-42.

[40] For example Wolfgang Günter Lerch, ‚Im Visier der Nordallianz', Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 23.October 2001.

The overall accepted strategy of the international community was that a conflict identified as an 'ethnic' one can be brought to a solution which builds on ethnic identities and a well balanced representation of the ethnic groups within the Afghan Transitional Government (ATA). Thus the broad consensus amongst international policy-makers was that top priority had to be given to the multi-ethnic composition of the Afghan government. This priority was emphasized again and again by leading policy-makers such as Collin Powell,[41] Condoleezza Rice,[42] Joschka Fischer,[43] and Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN-special envoy to Afghanistan. Similarly, the resolution 1378 of the Security Council of the United Nations stated:

"[The Security Council] expresses its strong support for the efforts of the Afghan people to establish a new and transitional administration leading to the formation of a government, both of which: Should be broad-based, multi-ethnic and fully representative of all the Afghan people ..."[44]

Although it might seem positive at first glance to call for a multiethnic government, the emphasis on a multi-ethnic orientation by the interim government – unintentionally – unbolted Pandora's Box: The sole emphasis on the multiethnic composition of the ATA marginalised other criteria such as regional provenance, political identity or the contrast between urban and rural areas which all are of similar significance in the Afghan context. Moreover, the approach of the UN disregarded the fact that an ethnic classification remained a taboo subject in the public and opposed the national and religious dogmas of the Afghan society. The consequence of this ethnic predominance of the international view on Afghanistan was that the UN-Talks at the Bonn Conference were increasingly dominated by discussions over which ethnic groups should be taken into consideration to what extent. The closing press conference on the 5th December 2001 demonstrated the overriding significance of the ethnic question for the policy-makers and journalists: Lakhdar Brahimi described the ethnic classification of the Afghan Transition Administration but missed the opportunity to mention how many ministers were affiliated to the particular political groups present at the Bonn Peace Talks – Northern Alliance, Group of Rome, Group of Cyprus, Group of Peshawar.[45] He announced that the interim government would comprise of eleven Pashtuns, eight Tajiks, five Hazaras, three Uzbeks and three others, a partitioning approximately corresponding to the roughly estimated ethnic proportions. Furthermore, he called for a collection of an ethnic census in his speech. This statement of Brahimi disregarded the fuzziness of ethnicity characterising the Afghan society; a fixed ethnic representation was utterly arbitrary, not only because a census of population was never carried out in Afghanistan, but because it was impossible to detect the accurate size of any ethnic group in Afghanistan in the first place. Moreover, the announcement to carry out an ethnic census ignored the problems of how to define the criteria by which ethnic categories can be differentiated, which ethnic categories should be officially accepted, and how to proceed with Afghans who refuse to attribute themselves to any of the officially accepted ethnic categories. Within the UN, this insight only caught on reluctantly. Only in summer 2002 the UN census

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[41] Quoted in US Department of State/ International Information Programs, 'Powell Praises Saudi Peace Proposal for Middle East'. Secretary of State Interviewed on CNN March 1, 2002, http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/nea/summit/text/0304pwlcnn.htm, 17 August 2004.

[42] The position of Condolezza Rice is quoted in Josef Joffe, 'Ist Allah jetzt mit Amerika?', Die Zeit No 47, 2001.

[43] Quoted in Joschka Fischer, 'Speech at the Foreign Ministers Conference 'Rebuilding Afghanistan: Peace and Stability', Petersberg near Bonn, 2 December 2002, http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/0/498a711ff21401e485256c84006f9d1f?OpenDocument, 17 August 2004.

[44] Cited in United Nations Security Council, UN resolution 1378, adopted by the Security Council at its 4415th meeting, on 14 November 2001, http://ods-dds-y.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N01/638/57/PDF/N0163857.pdf? OpenElement, 17 August 2004. Italics by the author.

[45] The author attained the press conference personally.

authority refrained from this idea. However, since that time the UN administration has blended out the ethnic question in Afghanistan completely.[46]

Incidentally, the presentation of the final cabinet list on the 6th of December proved how unsuitable the ethnic proportional system was: There were far fewer Pashtuns and far more Tajiks on the list as Brahimi had announced. This decision gave rise to reservations amongst nationalist-minded Pashtuns since they did not feel represented proportionally.[47] The road into a war of numbers was prognosticated. A study recently undertaken by a Pashtun NGO[48] summarized that 62, 63 percent of the population in Afghanistan are Pashtuns. In contrast, Abdullah Abdullah, who was appointed as foreign minister of the transition government at the Bonn Talks, countered that only 38 percent of the Afghan population are Pashtuns.

All in all, the crucial mistake of the Peace Talks in Bonn was to play the ethnic card which disregarded the Afghan rules of how they address respectively conceal ethnicity. The question remains whether another, more adequate path might have been possible regarding the significance of ethnicity in the resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan. In my view, the Afghan codes should have been taken into account, that is, the non-public character of ethnicity should have been maintained. Without question, an ethnic balance regarding the composition of the government is essential and necessary. However, this claim should have been treated as a secondary, non-public criterion and implemented discretely. Likewise, the emphasis on ethnic distinctions made it impossible to impose the strong national identity developed during the war as the fundament for the resolution of the conflict.

After Bonn – the Re-fueling of Ethnicity

Since the Bonn Talks, Afghan leaders attained political legitimacy increasingly through their positioning as representatives of an ethnic group. In particular, the warlords and politicians who had lost popularity during the war could now play the ethnic card – with the consent of international policy makers.[49] For example, Rashid Dostum distinguished himself as the advocate of the Uzbeks by repeatedly demanding the autonomy for the Uzbeks. Mohammad Mohaqqeq, one of the leading representatives of the hizb-i wahdat, also linked his candidature for the presidential election with his Hazara identity. Finally, the Neo-Taliban capitalised on the public perception of the ATA as a 'Tajik rule' to link their struggle against the Coalition against terrorism with a Pashtun deprivation.

Furthermore, ethnicity became the dominating template among the Afghans to judge the political developments. Almost every political decision, official position and military action was now interpreted against the background of ethnic differences.[50] Albeit Karzai being a Pashtun, a large part of the population perceived the rule of the Afghan government as a rule of the Tajiks, since almost all positions in the security sector were assigned to Tajiks. Still, this perception of an ethnic dominance evades the actual problem. Rather, this one-sided awarding of positions has to be ascribed to such common institutions and practices as family affiliation and clientelism. Thus, the government was not dominated by the ethnic groups of Tajiks but by the clientelistic network of the Panjshiris. The significance of clientilistic bonds for the political

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[46] Quoted in Sven Gunnar Simonsen, 'Ethnicizing Afghanistan? Inclusion and Exclusion in post-Bonn Institution-building', Third World Quarterly, Vol 25, No 4, 2004, 707-729.

[47] International Crisis Group, Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation, Asia Report No 62, 05 August 2003, http://www.crisisweb.org//library/documents/report_archive/A401078_05082003.pdf., 17 August 2004.

[48] The data is cited in WAK Foundation for Afghanistan, The Ethnic Composition of Afghanistan. A Six Year Survey and Research (1991-1996) (Peshawar 1999).

[49] Sven Gunnar Simonsen, ibid.

[50] See International Crisis Group, ibid.

leaders Mohammad Fahim, Yunus Qanuni and Abdullah Abdullah, who all shared the political heritage of Ahmad Schah Massud and occupy the ministry of defense, the home office and the foreign ministry, is obvious: On the one hand they only trusted their own clientele, on the other hand they were obliged to provide work and pay for their followers. Almost all security forces in Kabul were made up of members of the Panjshiri clientele. Furthermore, the Panjshiris attempted to expand their influence by the means of marriage alliances transcending ethnic borders. For example, the Pashtun Taj Mohammad Wardak, the Interior Minister from June 2002 until January 2003, was married to a niece of the Panjshiri leader Yunus Qanuni, and the Minister for Culture and Information, Sayyed Makhdom Rahin, an Arab by descent, was married to a woman from the Panjshir valley. Incidentally, other ministers also availed themselves of their family and clientele networks in order to surround themselves with confidants. For example, the relatives of Ashraf Ghani, Ajmat Ghani and Hashmat Ghani, as well as the brothers of Hamid Karzai, Qayum Karzai and Mahmood Karzai, were all given certain powers. They possessed their own NGOs which were said to take advantage from their links to the government or appeared at meetings such as the Constitutional Loya Jirga as representatives of the people. Concerning the dominance of the Panjshiris, one has to point out that despite the notion of a Tajik and Panjshiri rule the number and the influence of Pashtuns within the cabinet increased considerably during 2003. In particular, Ali Ahmad Jalali (minister of the Interior since January 2003), Ashraf Ghani (Minister of Finance) and Hanif Atmar (Minister for Rural Development) gained an outstanding importance.

Beyond the increased significance of ethnicity in the public perception, violent action was also motivated ethnically. In northern Afghanistan and Herat for instance, banishment and acts of violence against Pashtuns were frequently registered,[51] whereas in southern Afghanistan ethnically motivated violence was directed against the Hazaras.[52]

The Constitutional Loya Jirga

One of the fundamental problems of the Bonn Talks was the very limited time frame which was scheduled for the stabilisation of a new political system in Afghanistan. In June 2002, an Emergency Loya Jirga confirmed Hamid Karzai as president and the Constitutional Loya Jirga, which had been repeatedly postponed, adopted a new constitution for Afghanistan on 4th January 2004 after three weeks of discussion. This limited time frame was not only endangered by the consolidation of warlordism and the obvious lack of security, but was also called into question by the segmentation of the society. The politicisation of ethnicity which had gained legitimacy by the politics of the international community now advanced as the dominant demarcation line within the Constitutional Loya Jirga. Ethnic resentments and fears almost brought the constitution process to the verge of failure. The central question of how many powers the president should be provided with was reduced to the criterion of how the proportion of power between the Pashtuns and ethnic minorities should be divided. Nearly all Pashtun members of parliament who made up about half of all delegates favoured a strong president since they assumed that the Pashtuns would then be able to always provide the president in the future. Accordingly, the representatives of the ethnic minorities voted against a strong president but instead favoured the strengthening of the wolusi jirga, the parliament. These ethnic tensions were further aggravated by the proposal to sing the national anthem in Pashtu. The following compromise finally put oil on troubled waters:

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[51] See Human Right Watch, Paying for the Taliban's Crimes: Abuses against Ethnic Pashtuns in Northern Afghanistan, Vol 14, No 2, April 2002.
[52] See Reuters, 'Gunmen kill 12 minority Hazaras in Afghanistan', 7 January 2004.

Article Twenty
The National Anthem of Afghanistan shall be in Pashtu and mention "Allahu Akbar" and the names of the ethnic groups of Afghanistan.

Finally, the question of which languages should be designated as national languages threatened the success of the constitutional convention – in fact a very sensitive issue which has led to tensions time and again in the history of Afghanistan.[53] Whereas the draft of the constitution envisaged Pashtu and Dari as national languages, many Pashtun delegates insisted on Pashtu as the sole national language; many minorities, in particular the Uzbeks, demanded to have their languages accepted as national languages as well. A compromise was finally reached which was reflected in the constitution as follows:

Article Sixteen
"From among the languages of Pashto, Dari, Uzbeki, Turkmani, Baluchi, Pashai, Nuristani, Pamiri (alsana), Arab and other languages spoken in the country, Pashto and Dari are the official languages of the state.
The Turkic languages (Uzbaki and Turkmen), Baluchi, Pashai, Nuristani and Pamiri (alsana) are – in addition to Pashto and Dari – the third official language in areas where the majority speaks them. The practical modalities for implementation of this provision shall be specified by law."

The question whether Afghanistan should assume a federal system was also rejected by the constitution draft and only played a marginal role at the Constitutional Loya Jirga. This was due mainly to the fear of many Afghans that the national state would break apart by a division of Afghanistan into five to six federal states, which in turn would strengthen the position of the warlords and would merely pass on the problem of ethnic exclusion and oppression from the national level to the federal states.[54] The strong adherence to the current province structure and to a strong power centre can therefore be interpreted as an identification of most delegates with the national state.

Regarding the finally adopted constitution, a number of important compromises concerning such key issues such as language and religion[55] were made by the delegates. However, the discussion on the constitution further aggravated ethnic tensions since it became obvious that ethnicity had emerged as a decisive political factor in the public. It became clear that all Afghans now predominantly position themselves on the basis of their ethnicity and that there are very few political actors (e.g. the Islamists) who are capable to bridge ethnic distinctions. Hamid Karzai for instance played the Pashtun card on the Constitutional Loya Jirga after having distinguished himself as a national, super-ethnic integration figure in order to secure himself a strong presidential position; this move lost him the credit of many representatives of the ethnic minorities.

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[53] See Jadwiga Pstrusinska, ibid.
[54] This argument is elaborated in detail in Andreas Wimmer and Conrad Schetter, ibid.
[55] In this regard, Islam was codified as the state religion in Chapter 1, Article 2 and ethnic minorities were granted the free exercise of their religion. An important fact was that this Article did not distinguish between Sunnites and Shiites, and Chapter 7, Article 16 respected the Shia school of law in cases dealing with personal matters involving the followers of the Shia sect.

Outlook

The example of Afghanistan clarifies the necessity to address conflict lines and their possible causes far more sensitively in the case of international interventions. Attempts to provide simple patterns of explanation and classification have to be avoided and the social codes applied by the population concerning a conflict should be respected and taken into account. The crucial misunderstanding of the peace process as initiated by the United Nations at the Bonn Conference was that the predominance of clientelism was defined as ethnicity and both terms were equated. Even though the politics of the international community have not caused the current dominant significance of ethnicity single-handedly, they still provoked a political acceptance and publicity of ethnicity which was unthinkable before. The procedure of the international community neglected the fact that ethnicity remained a taboo subject in the Afghan public and instead encouraged Afghan leaders and politicians to display their ethnic identity in order to acquire political resources. Furthermore, the time schedule of the UN did not allow for the establishment of political institutions which had the capacity to bridge or attenuate existing ethnic tensions. Even though some compromises were reached in the Constitutional Loya Jirga, ethnic tensions were not relieved; rather, ethnic prejudices were intensified even more.

Against this background, the presidential elections which are scheduled for autumn 2004 have to be viewed with scepticism. Not only the precarious security situation, but also the increasing significance of ethnicity jeopardises the presidential elections despite a ban of ethnic parties (Art. 34 of the constitution). Thus Rashid Dostum, Mohammad Mohaqqeq and Yunus Qanuni aim to win the votes of the ethnic constituencies of the Uzbeks, Hazaras and Tajiks, while Hamid Karzai endeavours to position his re-election as a multiethnic alternative under Pashtuns guidance; his deputies are the son of the late Panjshiri hero Ahmad Shah Masood, Ahmand Zia Masood and the influential Hazara leader Karim Khalili. The main reason for the ethnicization of the elections is that they produce losers and may lead to the permanent exclusion of the candidates from power if institutional mechanisms for distributing and dissolving power are not established at the same time.[56] The struggle for success at the ballot box becomes a struggle for political and material survival, and means of winning are chosen accordingly. On the other hand the fact that democratic government is carried out 'in the name of the people' also has the effect of politicizing ethnic differences. Defining the boundaries and character of 'the people' becomes increasingly significant, so that the struggle for power is frequently perceived as a conflict between ethno-religiously defined groups,[57] whose leaders are now presenting themselves as the representatives of 'their people' in order to seize the greatest possible share of power at the centre. The ethnicization of politics in Afghanistan may well lead to constellations of conflict that are difficult to resolve through negotiation and compromise. The Islamist alliance between Burhanuddin Rabbani and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf constitutes the only political group which is currently capable of bridging ethnic disparities. However, the victory of the Islamists is the worst case scenario for the engagement of the international community and the end for a newly begun democratic process in Afghanistan.

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[56] The following is drawn from Andreas Wimmer and Conrad Schetter, ibid.
[57] See, for example Jack Snyder, From Voting to Violence. Democratization and Nationalist Conflict (New York, Norton 2000); Andreas Wimmer, Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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