

THE PEASANT AS COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY: THE RURAL ORIGINS OF THE AFGHAN INSURGENCY

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Discussions of Third World politics have frequently stressed the revolutionary character of the peasantry. It is clear that the peasantry has played an important role in most twentieth century revolutions.¹ Revolutionary leaders, such as Mao Ze Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Ernesto "Che" Guevara celebrated the peasantry as the main revolutionary force in the Third World. Fanon (1963: 61) succinctly summed up this radical perspective: ". . . in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain."² In the context of these views, the Afghan insurgency appears as an anomaly. The Afghan peasants have played a *counter-revolutionary* role. They revolted *against* a revolutionary government and opposed literacy, land reform, and equality of the sexes.³ The comparative studies on peasant politics make almost no mention of the potentially counter-revolutionary role of the peasantry⁴—but Afghanistan would seem to present such a situation. An examination of the Afghan case will, then, contribute to our understanding of peasant behavior.

The insurgency had its origins in 1978, when the Afghan government was overthrown in a coup, led by the leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. The new regime inaugurated the Saur ("April") Revolution⁵ and immediately attempted a series of radical social changes, including land reform. Virtually the entire rural population began an armed rebellion against these changes. The government proved incapable of suppressing the revolt and came to rely increasingly on Soviet support, leading to direct Soviet intervention in December 1979.

Why did the peasants oppose the revolutionary government in Afghanistan? This is the main question that we will consider. Reports in the Western press imply that the insurgency is simply a nationalistic movement, opposing a foreign power and a foreign-dominated puppet government. There is no doubt that anti-Soviet sentiments became a major factor after the Soviet Union invaded in 1979. This does not fully explain the insurgency, however, since the peasant rebellion was well underway before the Soviets moved in, and while the government

in Kabul was still operating independently (Hashim, 1983: 214). This essay explores the peasant resistance movement during the 1978-79 period, prior to the Soviet invasion. We will examine the rural economic structure, the rural social structure, the fundamentalist and Marxist political organizations, the role of the state, and the circumstances of the Revolution.

RURAL ECONOMY

Afghanistan is one of the most backward countries in the world. According to almost every index of development, Afghanistan ranks close to the bottom. The industrial working class numbered only 35,000 at the time of the Revolution (Chaliand, 1982: 20), out of a total population of about fifteen million. Approximately 90 percent of the people were illiterate. Agriculture dominated the economy, and the large majority of the prerevolutionary population lived in the countryside. Agricultural products accounted for 50 percent of Gross Domestic Product and about 80 percent of commodity exports in 1972 (American University, 1973: xxxv). Most of the farmers were sedentary, although there were still some 1.5 million nomads (Confidential Source, 1978).⁶ The main crop was wheat, along with rice, fruit, cotton, barley, corn, and sugar beets.

There has always been substantial inequality in rural Afghanistan. Economic well-being in the rural areas was more or less commensurate with land ownership. Yet, many peasants were totally landless, and others owned plots of land that were too small for subsistence. Halliday (1978: 33) estimates that in 1967 about 40 percent of the rural population was completely landless, and less than 12 percent owned plots that were large enough for subsistence. The landless and near-landless had to work as sharecroppers on the farms of the large landowners for at least part of the year. Traditionally, the sharecropper would provide the labor and receive 20 percent of the crop. The landowner would provide the land and the inputs, receiving 80 percent of the crop.⁷ Such a system was highly inefficient and unproductive since the sharecropper had little incentive to make improvements in the land or equipment. The water system was another source of inequity and inefficiency. By custom, landowners who were close to a source of water had preferential access over those who lived further away. The lack of an organized system of irrigation impeded food production (Confidential Source, 1978). Debt had always been an important feature of life in rural Afghanistan. The subsistence farmer required money to purchase seeds

and other inputs. In addition, young men usually borrowed money to pay the "bride price" required for marriage. The peasants would generally borrow from family members or, less often, from merchants or large landowners.

The rural economy was highly fragmented. In the words of one observer, "Afghanistan resembles a wide sea dotted with islands of economic activity, each one more or less limited to its own local market" (Fry, 1974: 56). The economic fragmentation was partly the result of Afghanistan's rugged geography. The country is relatively large (about the size of France), but it is sparsely populated. Most of the land is not economically productive. Only 12 percent of the land can be cultivated and, due to the lack of water, only 4 percent is actually cultivated on a regular basis (Dupree, 1977: 3). The cultivated land is not concentrated in one specific region; it is spread through several regions of the country in small patches. The productive regions are isolated from each other by huge mountain ranges, with peaks up to 25,000 feet, and by uninhabited deserts. The country is also divided by several river systems, few of which can be navigated. The weather, with harsh winters, also impedes integration.

The economic fragmentation retarded the development of commercial agriculture in Afghanistan. Agricultural production was overwhelmingly subsistence-oriented. If one region of the country produced a food surplus and another region produced a deficit, trade would not necessarily occur to rectify this imbalance. In general, the peasants consumed directly what they produced, or they traded it on a very localized scale. In a 1965 survey, peasants in six provinces were asked why they grew cotton, the main cash crop in Afghanistan. Only 11 percent responded that they grew cotton because it was a good cash crop (Gul and Pickett, 1966: 58).

The countryside was not static, however. The market economy had penetrated into certain areas, as the lack of infrastructure was gradually being overcome. The country's first major highway was constructed in 1933 (Hyman, 1982: 15). After World War II, Afghanistan received an extremely high level of foreign aid, especially from the U.S.S.R., but also from the United States and Western Europe. Much of this aid financed the development of infrastructure. By 1972, Afghanistan had several thousand kilometers of paved highways that traversed the country and connected it with neighboring countries. Regional price differences for wheat declined between 1961 and 1966, reflecting increased trade among various regions (Fry, 1974: 57-58). The rural economy

began to change from a subsistence orientation to a commercial orientation.

There was a substantial increase in agricultural investment during the 1960s and 1970s. Afghan moneylenders and merchants made considerable profits from increasing foreign trade, as well as from a reduction in foreign exchange controls (Fry, 1974: 47-49; 235-236). Much of this profit was apparently invested in the rural areas (Allen, 1974: 117). The improved infrastructure also facilitated agricultural investments. According to Anderson (1978), the new investors had a commercial, "businesslike" orientation.

The private investments were assisted by direct public support from the national government as well as from foreign countries. Foreign aid financed the construction of irrigation projects in Helmand and Nangarhar provinces. The government's Agricultural Development Bank (Agbank) provided low-interest loans for the purchase of tractors, irrigation equipment, and technical support (Norvell, 1972: 4). The number of tractors in the country increased from approximately 400 in 1968 (Male, 1982: 74) to 3,000 in 1978 (Confidential Source, 1978).

The commercialization and new investments were increasing social inequality by promoting usurpation of communal lands, increasing peasant debt, and augmenting rural unemployment. These changes created two new social classes: a large number of newly-landless, proletarianized peasants, and a commercially-oriented landed class. The new landed class seems to have included elements of the traditional landowners, who had participated in the commercialization, as well as urban-based land speculators (Anderson, 1978: 170-171; 177).

The first cause of this increasing inequality was that many of the government services only reached farmers that were already well-to-do. The Agbank loans were provided to only 1 percent of the farmers, the substantial majority of whom were large landowners (Norvell, 1972: iii; 1). However, the commercialization itself appears to have been the main cause of the inequality. Anderson (1978: 175) reports that commercial farmers were usurping communal lands in Ghazni province during the early 1970s. These lands had traditionally been used by all the villagers, but as land values increased, they were being taken over by landowners and city merchants who farmed with tractors. Sheep grazers were increasingly displaced by this process, as were peasants who had used the communal lands for gathering fuel. Anderson (1978: 175) notes that, "essential resources [communal lands] that had always been 'free for the taking' were becoming commodities . . ."

Commercialization was also causing land concentration and the dispossession of small landholdings due to increasing debt defaults. High levels of debt had always been a feature of rural life in Afghanistan. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, the debt burden was increasing. The interest rate was rising during this period (Fry, 1974: 47), possibly because the increased trade competed with agricultural production for credit. The nature of rural finance was also changing. A report by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) describes these changes in Paktia Province:

Creditors felt that the traditional static agricultural economy might, in good years, provide a regular return . . . In most cases, the small farmers could not find credit from sources outside their family. But this has changed. Recently there has been a noticeable trend in the rising price of land. Whereas, once creditors avoided the small landowner, they now readily satisfy these farmers' demands. Where previously they were interested in immediate repayment, *they now see the extension of credit to small landowners as a means to gradually acquire the land itself* [emphasis added]. The creditor is now interested that the debtor be as heavily burdened as possible and uninterested in quick repayment of principal . . . A bad harvest, a quick succession of social obligations that require large consumption expenditures, and the farmer is forced to sell his land to the creditor. (Baron, 1973: 3/22-3/23)

The moneylenders were encouraging defaults, causing increased landlessness.⁸ During the period 1969-72, Afghanistan had a disastrous drought, during which up to 500,000 people died from starvation. The drought was a major factor in increasing defaults and land concentration (Male, 1982: 76-77).

Another effect of commercialization was increased unemployment. The dispossessed peasants had to work as sharecroppers or, increasingly, as wage laborers. Yet, the opportunities for such employment were diminishing. The large farms—which were growing in number—offered fewer employment opportunities (Baron, 1973: 3/9), partly because they used tractors. Also, handicrafts were declining, due to increased importation of inexpensive manufactured goods (Fry, 1974: 48). As the number of jobs decreased, the working conditions became more unfavorable. Traditional longterm sharecropping arrangements gave way to shorter-term work, often involving wage labor and much less security of tenure. Anderson (1978: 176) reports that sharecropping arrangements declined substantially in Ghazni province. Landlessness was nothing new in Afghanistan, but there is no question that commercialization was exacerbating this problem.

The exact land tenure situation before the Revolution is difficult to

determine. The best approximation is a 1967 study by the Afghan government (see Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, there was substantial inequality of land ownership in Afghanistan. In 1967, about 2.2 percent of all rural landowners held 42 percent of the land.⁹ These figures are quite dated and there is no information indicating how much the land tenure situation changed during the 1967-78 period. It is almost certain, however, that land ownership was more concentrated by the time of the 1978 coup.

The distribution of wealth in rural Afghanistan was becoming increasingly skewed during the 1960s and 1970s. The merchants and large landowners were becoming rich from the trade boom and the modernization of agriculture. They were also the main (sometimes the exclusive) beneficiaries of the government services. The peasants, on the other hand, were growing poorer due to unemployment, heavy debts, and loss of land. Fry (1974: 47-48) shows that the position of Afghanistan's poor was deteriorating in both absolute and relative terms during the 1960s. The Afghans themselves were well aware of these trends.

The discussion thus far has shown that commercialization had a significant impact on the rural economy. It is important to note however that, by 1978, commercial agriculture was still in a very early phase of development in Afghanistan. The continued inadequacy of the transport system remained a bottleneck. The road construction program had neglected feeder roads to link the main highways with the hinterlands (Fry, 1974: 58). The inadequacy of government support further inhibited development. Agricultural extension suffered from a serious lack of personnel and low morale (Etienne, 1972: 70-71). A

Table 1. Land Tenure in Afghanistan, 1967

Plot Size (in hectares)	% of Landowners	% of Land
0-0.5	40	4
0.6-3.9	40	25
4-19.9	17.8	29
20-99.9	2	34
Over 100	0.2	8

Note: These figures do not account for the totally landless, who constituted about 40 percent of the peasants surveyed.

Source: Halliday, 1978: 33.

government-sponsored cooperative program had attracted only 9,000 members by 1977 (Confidential Source, 1978). For the most part, modernization affected the cities rather than the countryside. By 1970, 87 percent of the country's motor vehicles were registered in Kabul (Fry, 1974: 15). Most of the country's doctors, schools, and public services were located in Kabul. According to Male (1982: 93), *none* of the rural villages had electricity. Technology, modern farming techniques, and market orientations had only begun to penetrate the countryside when the Revolution occurred. The exact size of the subsistence economy is difficult to estimate, but it clearly comprised the large majority of the rural population.¹⁰

At this point it is appropriate to return to one of the original questions of this essay: Why did the Afghan peasants oppose the land reform? Many Western writers have claimed that the agrarian reform failed because it was inappropriate for Afghanistan.¹¹ According to this view, which at present seems to be the dominant one, there was too little inequality in the rural areas for an agrarian reform to have been at all meaningful. This view is in error, however, as the previous discussion showed. The Afghan countryside was not egalitarian by any means. Only 2.2 percent of the landowners held 42 percent of the land in 1967. It may be objected that the traditional landowners were not at all rich by North American or European standards. Most were not even rich by Kabul standards. It is also true that, in Afghanistan, large landholdings were generally much smaller than the latifundia of Latin America or southern Europe. All of this is irrelevant. The traditional Afghan landowner did not live in the United States, Europe, Latin America, or Kabul. In their societies they were rich and were perceived as rich (Anderson, 1978). Inequality clearly was a major factor in Afghan society.

Agrarian reform could have had a beneficial impact. Many plots were large enough for expropriation. This land could have been distributed to the landless peasants, thus reducing unemployment. Ceilings on land size would have arrested the trend towards land concentration; it would have prevented the situation from growing worse. Land redistribution would also have increased crop output, since small plots were apparently more productive than large plots (Bhatty and Berouti, 1980: 344). The staff of a 1978 mission from the International Labor Organization (Bhatty and Berouti, 1980: 344) recommended land reform in Afghanistan, stating that "land redistribution is essential not only for greater equity—but also to achieve a more efficient use of rural resources." Land reform was therefore desirable

from a purely economic standpoint. To understand its failure during the Revolution, it will be necessary to consider social and political factors.

RURAL SOCIETY

The traditional rural community was a complete, almost self-sufficient political entity. A USAID study (1973: 102) of the Helmand region notes that the leading village authority was the *khan*, who was usually one of the largest landowners. Other village officials included the *malik*, who was responsible for dealing with outsiders (including representatives of the central government), and the *mirab*, who was in charge of allocating the local water resources. Typically, the *khan* either appointed these officials, had a great deal of influence in their appointment, or held the positions himself.¹² There was also the village *mullah* who was the spiritual leader of the village and was responsible for Koranic education. Islam was a pervasive feature of village life, and it clearly exerted a conservative influence. In general, the *mullah* reinforced the authority of the *khan*, the large landowners, and the social status quo.¹³ Frequently, the *mullahs* were themselves landowners (Dupree, 1980a: 151). Finally, there was the village council (*jirgah*) which assisted the *khan* and the other village officials. It too was largely dominated by the upper classes.¹⁴ A field study by an American consulting firm (Whiting and Hughes, 1971) shows that, overall, the large landowners held higher than average levels of education and much higher levels of local influence. In short, political power in the Afghan village was more or less commensurate with land ownership.

Violence was a significant aspect of rural life, although it was almost never directed against the upper class or the social status quo. Violence was usually practiced as part of the custom of *badal*, or vendetta. A personal dispute, usually concerning land or women, could result in years of *badal* conflict between families or even entire villages (Poulada, 1973: 22-24).

Such conflicts were exacerbated by the serious ethnic divisions in the country. The Pushtun tribe is a plurality (about 40 percent) of the total population, and the tribe has a history of conquering and sometimes enslaving other tribes in the area. The Pushtuns have always dominated the central government of Afghanistan, and most of the government-funded development projects have been in regions where the Pushtuns predominate (Husain, 1974). Pushtu and Dari (a dialect of Persian) are Afghanistan's two official languages. Besides the Pushtuns there are

numerous other tribes, including Aimaqs, Hazaras, Nuristanis, Tajiks, Turkomans, and Uzbeks. There has always been a strong sense of tribal identity in Afghanistan.¹⁵ The tribes retain their own distinct languages, and some of them have elaborate tribal authority structures. In addition, the Pushtun tribe is itself divided into several clans. Finally, Halliday (1978: 8) notes that the country is divided between the Sunni Moslems (80 percent of the population) and the Shia Moslems (20 percent).

All these tribal, religious, and personal rivalries helped preclude any sense of peasant class identity. A peasant would identify with his village, tribe, or clan. He did not identify himself by social class, i.e. as a peasant. Classes clearly did exist in Afghanistan; class consciousness did not. The lack of any class identity helped to preserve the traditional social system, despite its inequalities.

Traditional social relations thus were based on inequality. This does not mean, however, that these relations were entirely exploitative. On the contrary, the upper classes in general, and the khans in particular, provided the peasants with employment, gifts, assistance in cultivation, protection against intruders, and other services that the government usually failed to provide in the rural areas. Anderson (1978: 169-170) writes that "khans are self-financed public servants, expending their personal wealth for the aggregate if not for the collective good . . ." They also provided a sense of cohesiveness and tied "the knot of the tribe." Moreover, Etienne (1972: 102) notes that the traditional landowners had frequent informal contacts with poor peasants.

The commercialization of agriculture, previously discussed, was changing the traditional rural society. There had always been inequality in the countryside, but commercialization brought an entirely new type of inequality. The traditional inequality had been considered natural and not at all oppressive. The new inequality was making the peasants much worse off materially, as well as severing the personal ties between the landlords and the peasants. Many of the new owners had only financial ties to the land. Their relationship with the peasants who worked the land was not based on paternalism or feelings of affection; it was purely a business relationship. Anderson (1978: 171) shows that many of these new landowners did not have legitimacy among the peasants. Sometimes, the new landowners would take the title of khan for prestige, but these new "khans" usually did not provide the services that were considered part of the position. Commercialization was thus breaking down the traditional social order.¹⁶ A peasant in Ghazni

province stated: "It is that way now, with tractors. There are no khans anymore" (Anderson, 1978: 171).

Commercialization was transforming the Afghan countryside from a precapitalist society to a capitalist one. These economic changes, in turn, were affecting the peasants' attitudes; the proletarianized peasants were becoming increasingly hostile towards the upper classes. Given enough time, this process could have spread to other regions of the country and changed the social order completely, making the peasants more receptive to new social ideas. At the time of the Saur Revolution in 1978, however, the majority of the peasants remained intensely conservative and supportive of the social system. To organize the traditional peasants against their landowners would prove impossible.

THE FUNDAMENTALISTS AND THE MARXISTS

The peasants in the precommercial areas were firmly allied with the upper class. But in the commercialized regions the upper class was losing its influence, and a power vacuum was beginning to emerge. There were essentially two groups in Afghanistan that might have mobilized the rural proletariat and filled this vacuum: the fundamentalist Moslems and the Marxists. In the end, it was the fundamentalists that succeeded in winning over the rural proletariat.

Fundamentalist Islam had its origins in the 1950s, with a number of Koranic scholars in Kabul. In the 1960s, the scholars began to organize students at Kabul University, and in 1968 they founded the Muslim Youth organization. This movement spread rapidly among students, until it won two-thirds of the elected seats in the Kabul University Students Union in 1972. The fundamentalist movement asserted that Afghan society was becoming decadent, and that a religious revival was needed. Rejecting the secular orientation of the central government, the fundamentalists intended to establish rule according to the Sharia, the traditional Islamic law. The fundamentalists' view of the government became increasingly hostile (partly due to repression), and the movement went underground in 1974. The following year, in 1975, they staged an armed uprising in the Panjshir Valley region. This insurgency was easily suppressed by the government. The fundamentalist movement began to fragment into several factions and, by 1978, there was a total of three fundamentalist organizations.¹⁷

The fundamentalist movement made a sustained effort, beginning in the early 1970s, to win support in the rural areas. Apparently, the

fundamentalists did not ally themselves with the rural upper classes or even with the mullahs, and they also opposed usury (Roy, 1982: 13). However, the fundamentalists did not advocate an economic revolution. There is no evidence that the fundamentalists supported land redistribution, or that they formulated an economic program. Their focus was overwhelmingly theocratic, and they opposed the rural upper classes on religious grounds. Nevertheless, the fundamentalist groups appear to have gained support among the proletarianized peasants in the areas that were undergoing commercialization.¹⁸ By the time of the 1978 coup, these groups already had a network of supporters in the rural areas.

Like the fundamentalist Moslems, the Marxist movement began in the urban areas. In 1965, the leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was founded by a group of students and intellectuals in Kabul. The PDPA's lack of unity was almost immediately a problem. There was a series of personal and doctrinal disputes which, in 1967, divided the party into two main groups: the Khalq ("People") faction and the Parcham ("Banner") faction. According to Hashim (1983: 198), Parcham was regarded as more reliably pro-Moscow than Khalq and less interested in bringing about radical social changes. The PDPA was officially reunified in 1977, partly due to Soviet urging (Harrison, 1979). This reunification was to prove somewhat superficial, as we shall see, and the party remained plagued by factional disputes.

In contrast with the fundamentalists, the PDPA made little effort to organize the peasantry. Many of the party members had been born in rural areas, but they usually had lost their ties to the countryside and had little interest in renewing them (Ahmed, 1980: 13-14). The Marxists made few efforts to establish a rural base. One exception was when Parcham, in 1973, dispatched 160 members to several villages in an attempt to win peasant support. The project was a complete failure, as the peasants showed no interest in Parcham, and the party workers became demoralized (Dupree, 1979: 39). At the time of their takeover in 1978, the PDPA had only about 4,000 members (Cynkin, 1982: 270). Apart from its immediate membership, the military appears to have been the only sector of the society that the Marxists had influenced. Their connections to the military were obviously crucial in the 1978 coup, but they never provided the mass base that was required to implement radical social changes.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

The state has historically been quite weak. On paper, Afghanistan had a centralized administrative system. In fact, the state had little

direct influence in the rural areas where the substantial majority of the people lived. Certainly the lack of transportation and the rugged geography impeded administrative integration, just as it impeded economic integration. The continuing influence of the tribal structures contributed to the near absence of nationalism. The Afghan bureaucracy was regarded as corrupt and ineffectual. The taxation laws were largely unenforced, leaving the government chronically short of revenues (Fry, 1974: 164-165). Few officials were willing to work outside of the cities (Male, 1982: 94-96), and the government had almost no impact on village politics which was dominated by the traditional, local authorities. Peasants had relatively few if any dealings with government officials; the peasants regarded them suspiciously, as outsiders.¹⁹ The Afghan government's influence in the rural areas was well below that of most Third World governments.

It is surprising that Afghanistan had such a weak central government since the country has a long history. Afghanistan is one of the few countries in Asia or the Middle East that was never subjected to direct colonial rule. It is a matter of debate as to when Afghanistan was first organized as a nation. Under the rule of Amir Dost Mohammed, beginning in 1834, there were indications that state power was growing. This centralization process was disrupted by two British invasions, first in 1839 and again in 1879. The Afghans defeated the British in the first instance, after several years of warfare. The 1879 war ended in a compromise agreement with the British. It would seem likely that such experiences would foster a sense of national unity. In fact, the wars detracted from national unity since the central government proved itself incapable of defending the country. It was the tribes that raised the armies and expelled the British. These campaigns were conducted in the name of Islam, not Afghan nationalism (Poullada, 1974: 38-39; Halliday, 1978: 9-10).

After the British invasions, there was a 21-year period of relatively centralized rule under the Amir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901). Rahman conquered the tribes and forced them to submit to central authority. He did not, however, attempt to alter the rural social structure. Rahman's rule was based more on force than on legitimacy (Poullada, 1973: 9-10; 1974: 40-41).

King Amunullah (1919-1929) attempted to modernize Afghanistan, much as the Kemalist regime was modernizing Turkey during the same period. Amunullah promoted Western education, equality of the sexes, Western law instead of Islamic law, agricultural modernization, public works, and an efficient administrative system. Amunullah sought to

impose centralized control through institutional, rather than military, means (Poullada, 1973: 92-142). These reforms clearly went well beyond the changes that Rahman had enacted. Amunullah encountered formidable opposition from religious and tribal leaders who denounced these reforms as unIslamic. Amunullah was also considered politically naive and inept. There were massive revolts in the countryside, and Amunullah was overthrown in 1929. A period of civil war and anarchy followed, until order was restored at the end of 1929 by the new monarch Nadir Shah. A new constitution was promulgated in 1931.

From 1931 until the 1978 coup, a *modus vivendi* was established between the central government (consisting of the monarchy and the civil bureaucracy) and the religious elites and rural upper classes. The villages were essentially left alone by the central government. The mullahs were given a great deal of influence in judicial and educational matters. In addition, the tribal and religious interests periodically sent delegates to a council in Kabul called the *Loya Jirgah*, which essentially had a veto power over many types of decisions made by the monarchy and the civil bureaucracy (Halliday, 1978: 14). Whether due to fear of revolt or simply a lack of interest, the central government remained passive vis-à-vis the countryside. This situation remained essentially unchanged until the Saur Revolution in 1978.

There were several political changes between 1931 and 1978, but they tended to be more formal than substantive. A new constitution was promulgated in 1964, establishing an elected *Wolesi Jirgah*, that was to share power with the monarchy and the *Loya Jirgah*.²⁰ Elections were held in 1965 and 1969, but they were of little significance. In the 1965 election, only 10 percent of the total population actually voted. Among the 216 elected legislators, 146 were tribal leaders. Mullahs constituted the best-represented profession in the assembly. The new legislature thus exerted a highly conservative influence on national affairs (Halliday, 1978: 19). In 1973, the military (with the support of the Parcham) overthrew King Mohammed Zahir.²¹ The military placed Mohammed Daoud, the King's former prime minister, in power. The new regime abolished the monarchy and established a republic, with Mohammed Daoud as president. A new constitution was written, establishing an official, government-sponsored party. The constitution was ratified in 1977 by the *Loya Jirgah* (Halliday, 1978: 30). All these changes did not alter the balance of power between Kabul and the countryside, that had been established in 1931. The villages held their autonomy, and the

tribal elders retained their veto power over legislation. Any attempt to rework this *modus vivendi* had the potential for producing disorder.

Curiously, the government did legislate a land reform law in 1975. Individual holdings were limited to between twenty and forty hectares, depending upon the value of the land. A graduated land tax was also announced (Dupree, 1978: 3-4). These reforms were largely unimplemented at the time of the government's overthrow in 1978, and it is doubtful that Daoud ever intended to implement them.²² The government had planned to conduct a cadastral survey before enforcing the land law. Yet, the survey was being conducted so slowly that, according to one estimate, an additional twenty years would have been required for its completion (Confidential Source, 1978). In light of Afghanistan's past history, any real enforcement of the law would have risked civil war.

There was one factor that was (slowly) increasing government power: commercial agriculture. It should be recalled that commercialization was largely the product of government aid, credit, and road construction. The government also played a role through its regulation of agricultural exports, which were becoming increasingly important. Finally, the government established granaries for storing wheat (Fry, 1974: 50).²³ Many landowners were growing rich from agricultural commercialization, but in doing so, they were becoming dependent upon the state and its services. Moreover, the growth of urban-based land speculators, who contributed to rural commercialization, diluted the political influence of the traditional upper class. Given time, these factors might eventually have undermined the position of the old upper class and given the state some independent power in the rural areas. In 1978, however, central authority—like commercialization—was only in a very early stage of development. On balance, the state remained extremely weak.

Half a century before the Saur Revolution, the Bolsheviks seized power after the Russian state had been weakened by the First World War. When the war was finished in 1918, governments were weak throughout Europe, and communist parties all over the continent attempted to seize power as the Bolsheviks had successfully done. These uprisings were defeated in every country. Why had the strategy worked in Russia but not in the rest of Europe? The Italian communist Antonio Gramsci attempted to explain this failure. Gramsci believed that Marxist theory had directed too much attention to the state and too little to society. In Russia, upper class rule depended almost exclusively

on the state. The state was all powerful. When it weakened, the communists were able to fill this vacuum by seizing power directly. In Europe, in contrast, there were powerful institutions, such as the Catholic Church, that supported upper class rule, but were autonomous of the state. Before a successful revolution could occur in Europe, the revolutionary party would have to penetrate the society in order to change these institutions or to neutralize their influence. In Gramsci's words (1971: 238):

In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks . . .

It might be added that Afghanistan represents a third category. There, civil society was everything; the state was gelatinous. The Afghan state was—to a much lesser extent than in Europe—merely an “outer ditch” for the upper classes. The Afghan state was far too weak to impose changes on rural society, to implement a revolution from above. Afghan Marxists were to learn this in 1978 and 1979.

THE SAUR REVOLUTION AND THE INSURGENCY

The PDPA seized power on April 27, 1978 in a bloody military coup. It immediately attempted to transform the rural social structure. This would have been an immensely difficult task under any circumstances, given the social arrangements that obtained at the time. There are several reasons why the PDPA regime was particularly ill-suited to carry out such changes.

The revolutionary government's first problem was that it had come to power unexpectedly (Harrison, 1979; Chaliand, 1982: 33-34). The PDPA takeover had its origins in a 1974 economic agreement between Daoud and the Shah of Iran, that sought to move Afghanistan away from its traditional dependence on the Soviet Union. Consistent with this new pro-Western tilt, Daoud ended his previously friendly relationship with the Parcham. The Interior Minister Abdul Qadir Nuristani stated that he intended to “finish off” the leftists. A massive purge of leftists from the civil service began in April, 1978, along with the arrest of the PDPA's top leadership and the possible assassination of a PDPA journalist. Fearing liquidation, the PDPA decided to seize power immediately. Party supporters in the military, led by air force

Colonel Abdul Qader, overthrew Daoud and established the PDPA in power with Mohammed Taraki as Prime Minister and Hafizullah Amin as Foreign Minister. The Soviet role in the coup is unclear, but it is almost certain that the Soviets did not plan the coup. According to Harrison (1979), "There is widespread agreement that the coup was a hastily improvised, eleventh hour affair." The Marxists therefore came to power without any preparation or any real plan of action.

The PDPA's second major handicap was its lack of unity. As we have seen, the PDPA was divided between the Khalq and Parcham factions. In addition, there was a major split within the Khalq, between a faction loyal to Taraki and another faction loyal to Amin. After the 1978 take-over, these divisions would result in debilitating power struggles within the party, that would undermine the government's ability to function effectively. The PDPA's few thousand members were rapidly reduced, after the coup, by intraparty purges and assassinations, as well as by attacks from counter-revolutionary groups. The purges were especially severe when, in September, 1979, Amin overthrew Taraki and, in December 1979, when Babrak Karmal of the Parcham faction overthrew Amin. Such divisive struggles were reducing the governments personnel and, hence, its capacity for implementing the reform program. A third problem was that the party had no organization in the countryside, and it lacked specific information on rural conditions.

In 1978, despite all the obstacles, the PDPA decided on a program of radical social change. The most important aspect of the PDPA agenda was agrarian reform. In July, 1978, as a first step, the government declared the cancellation of several categories of agricultural debt. Debt was an increasingly serious problem and a major cause of land concentration in many areas. The government decree could have had far-reaching beneficial effects. In practice, the decree was poorly conceived. The first difficulty was that the moneylenders, not surprisingly, often refused to make further loans to peasants. The peasants, in turn, were unable to purchase the seeds and other inputs required for cultivation. The Agbank lacked financial resources, and the government had failed to establish any alternative sources of credit. Another complication was that many nonagricultural debtors refused to repay their loans because of the decree. The government was forced to issue an amendment specifying that the debt cancellation applied only to agricultural debts. The government established a series of local, quasi-judicial committees to make decisions regarding ambiguities in the land law, but the officials who staffed these committees were often corrupt, permitting exceptions to the law in exchange for bribes (Dupree, 1980b: 5-7).

Thus, the debt cancellation proved difficult for the government to enforce, partly because of the PDPA's lack of personnel and expertise in agricultural problems.

The next aspect of the PDPA agrarian reform involved land redistribution. The government announced in November, 1978 that it would expropriate all land if it exceeded a fixed size limit. The limit ranged from six to sixty hectares, depending on the quality of the land (Halliday, 1980: 24; *Kabul Times*, 1978). Expropriated land was to be given to the landless peasants and to those whose plots were too small for subsistence.²⁴

The land redistribution also failed; it suffered from many of the same problems as the debt cancellation. Its implementation was confused by the lack of accurate land tenure information, and by the technical inadequacy of the PDPA personnel. The government claimed to have undertaken a cadastral survey, but, according to Dupree (1980b: 8), the results appeared contradictory and unreliable. When redistribution was effected, peasants often returned the land, either because they felt that the redistribution was sinful, or because they were intimidated by the former landowners. It is also possible that many peasants returned the land because they lacked implements and seed (as well as the means to obtain it), and they were thus unable to farm (Male, 1982: 119; Dupree, 1980b: 8-9; Halliday, 1980: 24). As a result of all of these problems, the land redistribution plan was not very effective. According to the government's own figures, only 8 percent of the total land was ultimately redistributed under the decree (Dupree, 1980a: 8). Yet, the disorder that accompanied the decree caused a major decrease in crop output (Newell and Newell, 1981: 81). It would seem likely that these reforms lowered the rural standard of living, at least temporarily.

The government introduced several other reforms. Women were granted additional rights (Halliday, 1980: 23), and a massive education program was begun, designed to increase literacy to 50 percent by 1982 (Hyman, 1982: 93). Also, the government radio began to broadcast, for the first time, in four tribal languages, in addition to Pushtu and Dari (Halliday, 1978: 39). These reforms evoked hostility from the peasants who regarded the actions as intrusive and as a threat to their customs. Even the use of tribal languages in official broadcasts failed to win support since the minority groups were offended by the PDPA's Marxist rhetoric (Halliday, 1980: 32-33). It is also likely that the minorities regarded the PDPA as Pushtun-dominated, which it was.

Popular opposition to the PDPA emerged soon after the reforms were implemented. The literacy classes were typically ignored and, in

some villages, the PDPA officials were murdered (Chaliand, 1982: 38). Armed resistance began towards the end of 1978 and quickly spread through the country, involving the minority tribes as well as the dominant Pushtuns. The rural resistance was of two varieties (Amin, 1984: 380-381). First, there were six guerilla groups which operated from bases in Peshawar, Pakistan, across the border from Afghanistan. Second, there were about 200 local rebellions, which were directed mostly by local elites.²⁵ The government's large and relatively well-equipped army responded with considerable brutality,²⁶ but it proved incapable of containing the insurgency. Mutinies and desertions became common by 1979, and these problems undermined the military's effectiveness. Increasingly, the PDPA had to rely on Soviet aid, at first in the form of advisors and pilots; then, in December, 1979, tens of thousands of Soviet ground troops intervened to fight the insurgents. There is no doubt that the Soviet invasion greatly increased popular support for the rebellion.

CONCLUSION

The most distinctive feature of the Afghan insurgency was its popular support. The revolutionary government was opposed by all rural classes in virtually all regions. It is clear that the rural upper classes had a motive for opposing the PDPA's reform program. They were, after all, going to lose much of their power and land. But why did the poor peasants oppose the reform program when they were the intended beneficiaries? In the course of this discussion, we have identified four factors that explain this opposition. The first factor was the backwardness of commercial agriculture in Afghanistan. In those areas, where commercialization was taking place, the peasants' standard of living was declining, and the peasants were losing their respect for the social status quo. Given time, commercialization could have spread through much of the country, transforming the society and undermining social stability. However, when the coup occurred in 1978, only a minority of the peasants had been affected by commercialization. The majority, who lived on traditional farms, still held great respect for their landlords. Several comparative studies (Hobsbawn, 1959; Wolf, 1969; Paige, 1975) show that rural commercialization is often associated with a revolutionary peasantry.²⁷ It should not be surprising therefore that, in Afghanistan, the *lack* of commercialization produced a counter-revolutionary peasantry.

The second factor that undermined the PDPA concerned political

strategy. Simply stated, the Moslem fundamentalists followed an effective rural strategy, and the PDPA did not. While the Moslems had been organizing the peasants for years, the PDPA concerned itself almost exclusively with the cities. Although most of the country was not yet commercialized, there were several areas where commercialization had begun. In these regions, the rural elites were losing their influence, and a power vacuum was emerging. It appears that the fundamentalists filled this vacuum by organizing the proletarianized peasants. When the coup occurred in 1978, the fundamentalists opposed the PDPA because they regarded it as "Godless," because the fundamentalists were not primarily interested in economic problems, and because the PDPA had been a longstanding rival. Without the rural proletariat, the PDPA had virtually no popular base.

The third factor undermining the Revolution was the weakness of the state in Afghanistan. The comparative literature (Skocpol, 1976; Moore, 1966; Tocqueville, 1955; Gramsci, 1971) suggests that centralized political systems are conducive to revolutionary change. In Afghanistan, the absence of centralization helped preclude revolutionary change. Lacking popular support, the PDPA seized state power and attempted to impose a revolution from above, but this strategy was totally unsuited to the decentralized conditions in Afghanistan. The rural upper classes had a long history of defying state power, and they were quite capable of defying the PDPA.

A fourth factor in the counter-revolution was, simply, chance. Obviously, the resistance would not have occurred if the PDPA had not seized power, but this takeover was a freak event, not an inevitable one. Harrison's account (1979) suggests that the coup resulted from a string of improbable events, the actual occurrence of which was only a small possibility. The unexpected nature of the coup also helps account for the PDPA's administrative incompetence and poor planning.²⁸ Thus, the insurgency is explained, in part, by this chance element.

In the introductory section this essay noted that the Afghan case—a national, counter-revolutionary, peasant insurgency—is a historical oddity. Why is Afghanistan the exception? Certainly, Afghanistan was not unique, among Third World countries, for having had a precommercial agricultural system, a decentralized political system, or a leftist opposition that was organizationally weak. These conditions have been present in other countries, without producing a counter-revolutionary insurgency. Afghanistan, however, was distinctive because of the *degree* of its commercial backwardness and governmental weakness, which were great even in comparison with other countries. Moreover,

Afghanistan's geographic features were exceptionally harsh and uncondusive to economic or political integration. In conclusion, the Afghan case should remind researchers that the peasantry is capable of playing a wide range of political roles—including that of counter-revolutionary.

NOTES

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1. Wolf (1969) indicates that the peasantry played an important revolutionary role in Algeria, China, Cuba, Mexico, Russia, and Vietnam.
2. It is true that nineteenth century Marxists, beginning with Karl Marx himself (1963: 124), held quite condescending views regarding the peasantry. By the twentieth century, however, Marxist views of the peasantry changed considerably.
3. There have, of course, been other rural rebellions against left-wing regimes—such as the Kurds in Iraq, the Tibetans in China, the Ovimbundus in Angola, and the Miskito Indians in Nicaragua—but they were simply local rebellions, confined to specific regions in each country. These rebellions focused on issues of minority rights, regional autonomy, or independence. The Afghan insurgency, in contrast, has occurred on a national scale, encompassing all regions and all ethnic groups. The only other recent example of such a counter-revolutionary uprising is the case of the North Yemeni civil war, during the 1960s. For an overview of North Yemen, see Halliday (1975: 93-162).
4. The only exception appears to be Moore's brief account (1966: 92-101) of the Vendee uprising during the French Revolution.
5. Some definitions are in order. This essay will regard the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan as a "revolutionary" party, to the extent that it was committed to radically restructuring the society. The peasant insurgency is termed "counter-revolutionary" because it violently opposed the restructuring. Strictly speaking, the events of 1978-79 do not constitute a revolution, since the government's program was ultimately thwarted. Therefore, the term "Saur Revolution" will be used as a proper name, not as a description. The term "peasant" refers to agriculturally-based populations in underdeveloped countries or regions. "Peasants" would not include, however, large landowners whose plots are farmed predominantly by persons other than the landowners themselves. "Rural proletariat" refers to peasants who are primarily involved in the money economy, while "traditional peasants" refers to peasants who are not primarily involved in the money economy.
6. This essay contains some information from a confidential report, written by a major economic development institution in 1978. When information from this report is mentioned, the citation reads "Confidential Source, 1978." The author will permit other researchers to look at this document, if they agree not to cite it.
7. Alternatively, the tenant could receive half of the harvest if he provided the seed, tools, and draught animals (Confidential Source, 1978).
8. Allen (1974: 116-117) reports similar problems in the Koh-i-Daman region, north of Kabul.
9. A confidential source (1978) notes that these figures contain a degree of imprecision. On the one hand, the figures understate the extent of land concentration, since large landowners typically under-reported their holdings. On the other hand, the figures overstate land concentration since large holdings tended to contain a greater proportion of unirrigated, and therefore less valuable, land. Overall, the skewed nature of land ownership in Afghanistan was noted by a World Bank study (1972: 11).
10. A Soviet writer (Gurevich, 1982: 165) indicates that the subsistence sector accounted for 65 to 70 percent of agricultural production. A World Bank (1972: 4) study notes that, "the vast bulk of [agricultural] production does not pass through commercial channels."
11. This view is implied by Chaliand (1982: 21-23), Hyman (1982: 89), and Wieselstier (1982: 32).

12. There was some regional variation in these arrangements, according to Male (1982: 80-81). In certain areas, the malik, rather than the khan, served as the village chief.
13. The religious order had some manipulative qualities. Dupree (1980a: 151) observes that: "Little beyond the landlord's own personal integrity curbs his exploitive tendencies. Largely immune to social pressures and far from being restrained by Islamic ethics (as interpreted by conservative religious leaders), he often uses them to manage more effeciently his God-fearing, predeterministically-oriented tenants."
14. The jirgah apparently had certain egalitarian features, although it was generally dominated by the upper class (Male, 1982: 80).
15. Kakar (1974: 15) claims that certain groups, such as the Tajiks, were not organized along tribal lines.
16. A USAID report (Baron, 1973: 3/8) draws similar conclusions regarding the social impact of land concentration.
17. The fundamentalist movement has been studied by Roy (1982) and Amin (1982 and 1984).
18. Tahir Amin, in discussions with the author, stated that his research showed that the fundamentalists were most influential in the commercializing areas. Roy (1982: 12) mentions that the fundamentalists have become dominant in areas where the traditional leaders "have disappeared." Roy also notes (1982: 13) that the fundamentalists' hostility towards the idea of usury was popular with the peasantry. This essay has already shown that debt was a cause of discontent primarily in the commercializing regions.
19. A USAID report on the Helmand region (1973: 103) illustrates the relationship between the government and the peasantry.
20. Technically, all members of the Wolesi Jirgah were ex officio members of the Loya Jirgah (*The Middle East and North Africa*, 1970: 139).
21. There is some suspicion that the Parcham had opportunistically supported the monarchy before the 1973 coup. In 1973, however, Parcham then collaborated with the Daoud government until 1975, when Daoud began to distance himself from the left (Dupree, 1979: 38-39; Harrison, 1979).
22. One may wonder why the government even bothered to legislate a land reform law, if virtually every group in the country opposed the idea. The most likely reason is that Daoud wanted to impress the international aid community, elements of which (the International Labor Organization, for example) supported land reform.
23. This intervention had some ambiguous effects, however. While government aid made agricultural modernization possible, the government policy of holding down agricultural commodity prices tended to slow the progress of commercial agriculture. (Fry, 1974: 50).
24. According to Amin (1984: 380) the revolutionary regime formed cooperatives "on the communist pattern." This seems doubtful, however, since the cooperatives were being formed with the assistance of the United Nations Development Program and the Food and Agriculture Organization (1981: 1); the cooperative program began ten years before the Revolution.
25. The six groups in Peshawar include the following: the three fundamentalist organizations, which were established several years before the Marxist coup in 1978, and three traditionally-oriented Islamic groups, which were organized after the coup (Amin, 1984: 382-384). There are, reportedly, two Maoist groups operating against the government (Dastarac and Levant, 1980: 10), but their influence appears to be quite limited.
26. The repression against the peasantry was indeed atrocious, and it undoubtedly caused the insurgency to spread more quickly. However, this repression was undertaken *in response* to the resistance—and therefore could not have been the original cause if the resistance.
27. Moore adopts a somewhat different position regarding the causes of peasant revolution. According to Moore (1966: 469-471), peasants are most likely to support revolutionary movements when their landlords cease to provide them with essential services. In Afghanistan, the relative absence of this problem, at least in the precommercial regions, partly accounts for the counter-revolutionary tendencies of the peasantry.
28. The PDPA's poor administration and the resulting decline in crop output certainly contributed to the insurgency. It may be argued, therefore, that the land reform failed because it was poorly implemented, rather than because of any underlying social or economic factors. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that this explanation is not sufficient. The PDPA's administrative incompetence only exacerbated what is normally a very difficult and complex undertaking. In many cases, such as Cuba (Gonzalez, 1974: 129), agrarian reform

entails considerable disorganization, during which crop output declines for a period of time. Yet, in Cuba, the peasantry continued to support the revolutionaries, despite the short-term difficulties. To understand why the peasantry was not so patient in Afghanistan we must examine longterm social and political factors.

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