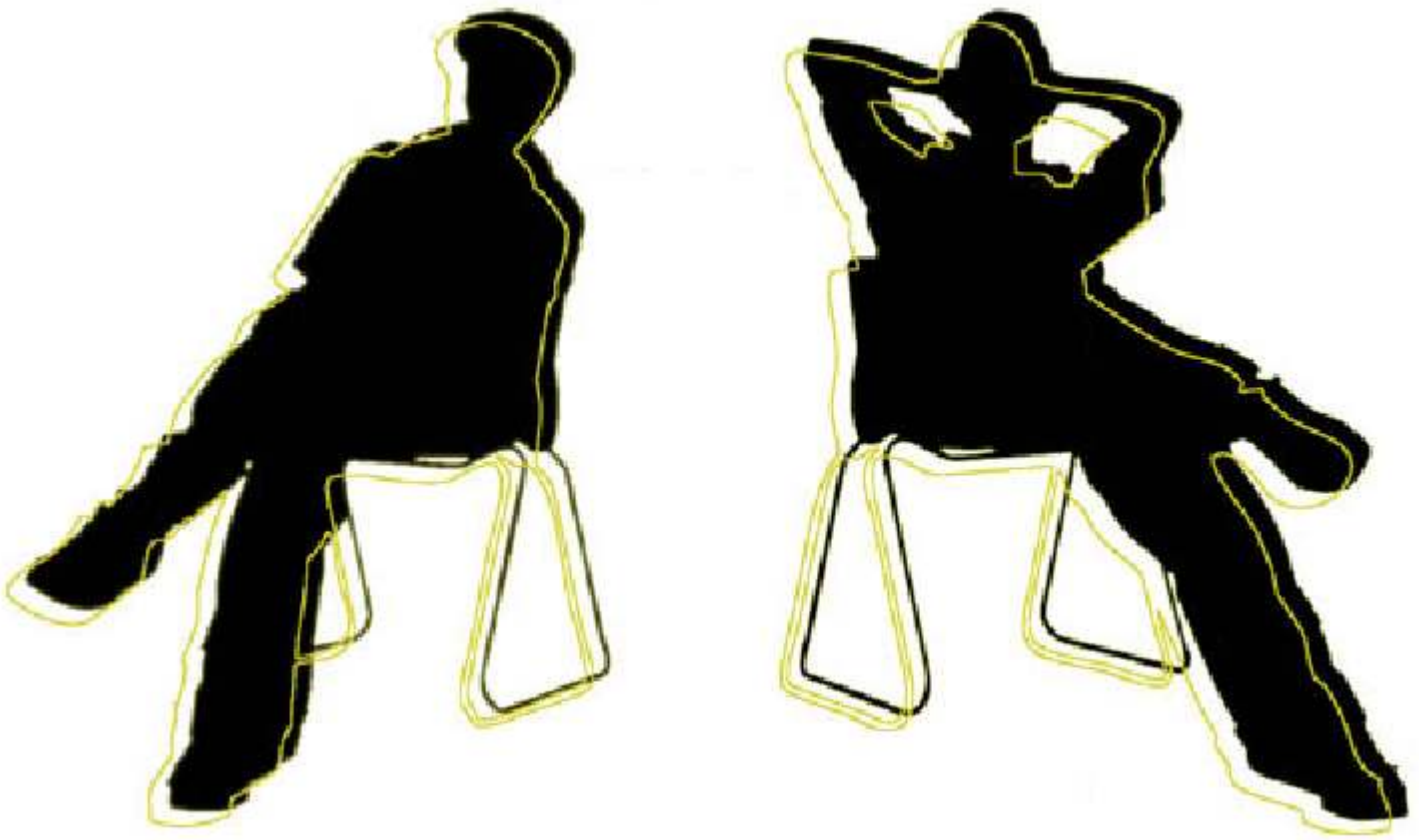


**Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Impact on the
Nature of Social and Political Relations
among the Pashtun Population**



Abstract

The prolonged conflict in Afghanistan has significantly transformed the nature of economic and political relations in the Afghan society. The massive displacements and other experiences of conflict have caused fragmentation of a large number of communities and ended their traditional isolation. In the process, a large number of people have acquired new occupations, learned new entrepreneurial skills and have become exposed to new influences and situations, particularly at the places of their new settlement or work. Besides, new political elites have emerged with diverse support bases, which may not necessarily be grounded in traditional tribal identities or affiliations. This has, on the one hand, contributed to de-traditionalising of Afghan society and, on the other, to re-composing of traditional social relations; both often happening simultaneously.

1. Introduction

Over the last 25 years, the Afghan conflict has caused about one and a half million deaths, collapse of state and civil society institutions, and a massive displacement of populations, including about 5 million people who had to take refuge across the border in Pakistan and Iran. Today the Afghan society consists of a large number of widows, orphans and people who have become physically crippled and disabled as a result of war injuries or land-mines. The population displacements have shaken the Afghan society, which was earlier predominantly organised along tribal lines and which consisted of a large number of relatively isolated and autonomous village communities. These population displacements forced people in many instances to change their traditional family professions, besides exposing them to the different situations and influences in the places of their new temporary settlements such as urban centres and refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran.

The conflict also brought Afghan people as well as Afghan religious, political and mujahideen groups in contact with a broad range of international actors, including UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and Islamist groups in the Muslim world. The UN agencies and INGOs have been involved in relief work since the very beginning of the conflict, but with increased emphasis on development and peace-building programmes after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. In the refugee camps and in many parts of Afghanistan, they have almost worked as quasi-government, particularly in terms of relief and service provision. Islamist groups, on the other hand, have played more important role in terms of mobilising recruits for jihad as well as financial support for the mujahideen groups all over the Muslim world.

Against the above background, this paper seeks to study as to how the massive upheavals, the bloody conflict and the establishment of unprecedented linkages with international actors and movements have impacted the nature of social and political relations among the Pashtun population in Afghanistan. The sub-questions include: (1) Has the conflict led to the emergence of new political elite at the community level or among the Pashtun population in the broader regional or national context? (2) If yes, what is the support base of this elite in the Afghan society and how it engages with the social and political process as different levels? (3) How the conflict has impacted the nature of peoples' involvement in different economic activities? (4) How the changes in economic relations link up with social and political processes in the context of Pashtun population in Afghanistan?

2. Background

After the bloody Saur Revolution in April 1978, when a Soviet Union-backed Marxist party (i.e. Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan – PDPA) orchestrated a military coup¹ and captured power in Kabul, Afghanistan witnessed a massive uprising by the

¹ The then President of Afghanistan, Daoud, was killed in the coup.

‘traditional ruling elements’ (Gupta, 1986: 56), particularly on the issue of radical reforms introduced by the new regime. Most importantly, these ‘traditional ruling elements’ included the property-holders and clergy, who had grown increasingly unhappy with the land distribution and gender-related policies of the central government (Gupta, 1986: 56). Clergy considered these reforms as threatening to the traditional and Islamic values of Afghan people and raised the slogan of Jihad. The conflict became intensified when the Soviet forces moved into Afghanistan in December 1979 to protect the regime in Kabul, which was crumbling in the face of growing opposition, and hence the anti-reform uprising turned overnight into a struggle for national liberation. The conflict, which thus started, soon acquired international dimension in the Cold War context, and other external actors got involved to ‘check’ the Soviet ‘expansionism’.

Under intense international pressure, and after having failed to crush opposition forces, Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan in 1989 but the conflict continued. Various Afghan factions now got engaged in a bloody power struggle, as all the efforts to promote reconciliation and establishment of a broad-based government in Kabul failed. Later, after the terrorist attacks on 11th of September, an extensive engagement of international community led to the formation of a broad-based government in Afghanistan but there still exist defiant warlords and establishment of peace remains an unfulfilled objective.

3. Pashtun Population: Pre-1978 Situation

Pashtuns,² the principal ethnic group, constitute about 50-55 percent of the total population of Afghanistan. In the Afghanistan context, they are broadly divided into Eastern Afghans (i.e. Yusufzais etc.) and Western Afghans (i.e. Abdalis who are now called Duranis and Ghilzais). Historically, the Eastern Afghans have been under greater Persian influence and were more strongly linked with the Safavid Empire in Iran, while Herat and Kandhar were their cultural and political centres. The Eastern Afghans, on the other hand, were less amenable to the Persian influence or traditions, and were more closely attached with the Mughal Empire in Delhi. Their cultural centres included Peshawar [now in Pakistan] and Kabul (Caroe, 1958, xiv-xv). Jalalabad is the major city in Afghanistan, which is now associated with the Eastern Afghans.

Pashtuns population is generally termed as peasant-tribal in its social structure. Dupree (1973: 249-50) considers lack of occupational, political and social mobility as an important factor in the social organisation of peasant-tribal society of Afghans. The other important factor in his opinion is that a typical Afghan village builds around it what he calls “mud curtain” in order to protect itself against the outside world. In Dupree’s explanation, it is because the village communities in the past have rarely had sustained and pleasant relations with the outside world—“for outsiders usually come to extract from, not bring anything into, the village...”. As for religion, Dupree suggests that “locally oriented religious beliefs serve not only as rationale for existence, but

² They are also called Afghan, Pakhtun or Pathan. It is important to note that in the Afghanistan context, Afghans are distinguished from Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks, as the term is basically considered as synonymous with Pashtun, Pakhtun or Pathans (See Gregorian, 1969).

justifications for the perpetuation of a pre-deterministic status quo, in which a man who performs his given (not chosen) roles in society can expect Paradise as a reward.” On the basis of these attributes of Afghan society, Dupree characterised it as an “inward-looking” society—a society in which a man is born into a set of answers.

In the Pashtun tribal system, maliks and khans had traditionally the leadership role. The sub-tribes would elect maliks, and they in turn would elect khan – the leader of the tribe. This, however, started changing when maliks and khans established feudal ties with Safavid and Mughal emperors and later with the ruling dynasty in Kabul. Now the choice of khan was to be sanctioned by the feudal lords. With the passage of time, khans became hereditary and more powerful in certain tribes, which maintained more strong ties with the feudal lords. Traditionally, the institution of jirga was central to Afghan tribalism. Based on the concept of ‘communal authority’, it could over-rule khans in important decisions. Gradually, however, as khans in certain tribes (e.g. Durranis and Khattaks) became hereditary and more powerful, authority of jirga got weakened. Among Yousafzais, however, the feudal ties remained largely interwoven with ‘patrimonial ties’. Waziris and Afridis were on the other end of the spectrum with few feudal ties and hence less prone to the establishment of ‘tribal aristocracy’ (Gregorian, 1969: 40-43).

In the 20th century, certain Afghan governments embarked upon modernisation of Afghan society but it almost invariably provoked massive criticism and uprisings in the rural Afghanistan. King Ammanullah (1919-29) was the first Afghan ruler who attempted a modernisation programme by introducing, among others, Western dress codes and co-education. This, however, provoked armed revolts by the Pashtun tribes, and soon he was overthrown by Bacha-e-Saqqao, a Tajik, who led the rebel forces. It is against this background that the following governments were often cautious and their efforts produced only marginal successes and those too primarily in certain urban areas like Kabul. Rural communities were not much bothered about measures being taken in the cities like Kabul, as long as they were left alone by the central government.

In late 1950s, struggle started between Islamists and Marxists with their different visions for Afghanistan. Both were anti-status quo and anti-Western, and had very small support base within the Afghan society, but they wanted to radically transform it in their own vision. Their following mostly came from amongst the students of Kabul University.³ Nonetheless, these two groups were to form the new political elite in 1960s and 1970s, although their role remained marginal to “the established ethnically stratified hierarchy led by Mohammadzais”⁴ (Fielden and Goodhand, 2001: 7). This new anti-status quo elite included members of PDPA and of Jamiat-i-Islami and Hizb-i-Islami – two Islamist parties – which sought to oppose the increasing Marxist influence and establish Islamic system of government in the country. In the following years, the struggle for power and influence between the Marxist and Islamist groups was to become intensified.

³ It is in the 1960s that the first generation of modern students, largely through the Kabul University and other colleges in provincial capitals, appeared. By then, there were about 4,000 students studying in the Kabul University (See Roy, 1989: 40-41).

⁴ Mohammadzais is a sub-branch of Abdalis, who are now called Durannis, largely based in Western Afghanistan.

It is, however, important to note that the new elite could emerge only from amongst the university students in the urban areas. There was no such visible development in the rural Afghanistan, which accounted for over 90% of the population,⁵ most of them either farmers or herdsmen, or a combination of the two. Besides, the overall literacy rate was very low (e.g. less than 5%--see the Table 1), and it is hard to expect that the Marxist or Islamist parties retained any significant potential to increase their support base in the short-run. None of the Marxist strategy and effort to mobilise peasants succeeded and, instead, the Marxist regime was to later confront a massive uprising against its reforms and the steps which were perceived as anti-Islamic and an affront to Afghan traditions and culture.

Percentage of Literate Population (1960-61)

Province	Literacy rate (%)
Kabul	5.9
Qandhar	0.9
Heart	3.0
Mazar-I-Sharif	3.4
Ningarhar	2.1
Paktya	0.8
Qataghan	3.4
Ghazni	3.3
Girishk	1.3
Farah	3.6
Maimana	0.7
Shibarghan	-
Badakhshan	2.6
Parwan	1.5
Bamiyan	3.8
Uruzgan	0.6
Ghor	3.1
Weighted average for all provinces except Shibarghan	3.1

Source: *Population and Agricultural Survey of 500 Villages*, Research and Statistics, Ministry of Planning, Kabul, 1963. (As quoted in Dupree, 1973: 248)

On the other hand, Islamists too were unacceptable to the larger Afghan population. Their emphasis on puritan Islam and reforming Afghan society of its so-called un-Islamic customs and traditions was as much unacceptable to the village clergy as the Marxist reforms and ideas. The village clergy was fully imbibed in the Pashtun customs and traditions, and would often interpret Islamic law against the background of Pashtunwali (Pashtun tribal code) and rawaj (customary law). Dupree (1973: 107-8) describes village clergy as:

⁵ For this figure, see Dupree, 1973: 248.

“...often non-literate farmers, often function as part time religious leaders...At times informal, but often formally associated with the power elite, ‘ulema (bodies of religious leaders) assisted the rulers of city-states, tribal groups, or empires to maintain control over the masses, and interpreted the law. Thus the essentially non-Islamic belief of the non-literate Muslim that Allah planned all in advance excuses tyranny, and prepares men to accept whatever fate hands them”.

But Islamists wanted to challenge the established monopolies and did not believe in the concepts like predestination, which would excuse tyranny or status quo. They were opposed to monarchy, took up issues like social justice, and used modern technology and print media to, on the one hand, counter Marxist influence and, on the other, to reform the traditional society so that Islamic system of government could be established. Gupta (1986: 61-62) makes this point emphatically:

‘The Islamic fundamentalists are revolutionaries of a different hue from the Marxists of the PDPA. They want a radical restructuring of the Afghan society based on an unequivocal and explicit Islamic mandate‘They want a new order based on authentic brotherhood and the equality of all nationalities‘They reject the restoration of the monarchy.’

The differences between Islamists and traditional clergy, however, were over-shadowed in the face of Marxist threat, particularly in the years that followed the Saur Revolution in 1978.

4. Impact of Conflict on Social Relations among Pashtuns (1978-2002)

4.1. Political Relations

Until 1978, Mohammadzais, which is a branch of Abdali or Durani tribe, constituted at a broader spectrum the aristocracy of Pashtuns, and dominated political power in Kabul. This aristocracy, however, operated and exercised control through traditional community leaders, including maliks, khans and village mullahs, in various tribes and regions. The ruling elite in Kabul generally refrained from intervening into the village or tribal communities, and hence these were left to local power elite, which managed their local affairs under the guidance of a combination of tribal code (Pashtunwali), local customs, and Sharia (Islamic Law), as interpreted by the village mullahs. The village and tribal elite, although autonomous in most situations, was very much integrated with the national power structure through a system of patronage, mutual recognition and jirga (largely comprising the same traditional elite), which would be occasionally convened to discuss and approve important policy decisions. In addition, there existed the Afghan Jam‘iyat ul-‘ulma, founded in 1931 by King Mohammad Nadir Shah, which provided a parallel structure of integrating ulema in the power structure. In its heyday, the members of the Jam‘iyat advised the government on Islamic matters (Dupree: 108).

The power of traditional political elite, however, remained largely intact because of the

relatively isolated and static economic and social structure of the village communities. Over the period, the village communities had jealously and vigorously guarded their autonomy, and had resisted efforts by certain 'modernising' governments to launch reform or educational programmes in their respective areas. As pointed out earlier, there were limited opportunities of social or economic mobility, and most people retained their traditional occupations such as agriculture, farming or herding. This, however, was not to remain the same as a result of the conflict.

First of all the conflict forced people to move out of their traditional habitats either to seek safety and basic needs for themselves and their families, or to fight as dictated by the exigencies of the war. This was an end to the isolated character of many, if not all, villages in Afghanistan. In many instances, only a part of the village community migrated; sometimes to the same destination, where it would try to reproduce its village structure and patterns, within of course the limitations imposed by the new social and political environment. But it was not always the case. In some instances, families moved to different destinations — some within Afghanistan, and others to Pakistan or Iran — as dictated by economic needs and opportunities or by the pre-existing familial ties and relations with people living at various places within Afghanistan or abroad. In such cases, it was not just an end of the isolation of these village communities, but also their fragmentation.

The families or extended families, thus separated from their traditional communities, often had greater space to manoeuvre, by compulsion if not by choice, in the new places of their settlement. Many had to change their family professions in this process; while others would establish new political identifies and affiliations, not necessarily through or as part of their village community — a significant break from the traditional and rural Afghan patterns. This was certainly not a common pattern, as a large majority of people would still like to move and resettle in communities, but what is important is that diversions from the normal traditional patterns were significant and unprecedented in numbers. Again if not by ideological bondage, by mere economic compulsions, a large number of individuals thus separated from communities would join either government in Kabul or the non-traditional Islamist parties, like Hizb-i-Islami, which otherwise had a small support-base in Afghan society. Both the Kabul government and Hizb had enough resources flowing in from their respective supporters abroad (Soviet Union in the case of Kabul government; and USA, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the case of Hizb etc.) to meet the basic economic needs of their active supporters.

Another aspect which is worth noting is that the conflict had destroyed economic and agricultural activities in many parts of country, particularly affecting the Pashtun areas where fighting was generally more intense. This made these village communities dependent on external support the way it was never the case before. In this situation, those who could provide or help provide access to basic needs for these communities became more important, and gradually appeared as new elite. Although this is a familiar pattern in Afghan society to throw up leadership, which could deliver in the times of crises, this new elite was diverse and distinct in a number of ways.

The new elite included commanders, who had established their military credentials, and who had contacts with one of the seven mujahideen parties or Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Pakistan. As these commanders were recipients of significant financial support from abroad, they were to establish and consolidate their personal power, sometimes significantly autonomous of respective communities, traditional elite or jirga.⁶ In some ways and instances, this perpetuated, and even expanded, the tribal aristocracies, which had got established as a result of sanction and patronage of some tribal leaders by Mughals and Safavides, albeit this time with different sources of sanction. This aristocracy needed to establish patron-client relations in the communities to perpetuate their power and status, which would amount to a deviation from the essentially egalitarian and communitarian tribal system.

The new elite also include the leaders of Afghan NGOs and relief agencies, as well as Afghan staff of INGOs and UN agencies, working in Afghanistan or in the refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran.⁷ As stated earlier, these organisations almost constitute a quasi-government, as they employ thousands of part-time and full-time staff and are an important source of meeting the basic needs and provision of a range of services to the local communities. Goodhand and Chamberlain (1996) made this point by suggesting: “NGOs are occupying the space left by the collapse of the State, and so wield great influence in the absence of effective government institutions.”

Most of the people working with these organisations belong to the educated and urban middle classes. The nature of their work sometimes require them to stay for extended duration in the areas of their work; thus opening up opportunities for significant interaction with the local communities. Given the significant resources at their command, or their ability to negotiate with the international donors on specific projects, they are considered as important actors. In 1989, just the US provided funding for such NGOs totalled US\$ 112 million (Nicholds and Borton, 1994). This elite not only constitutes an educated and prosperous group in itself, but it also interacts, on the one hand, with the international staff of UN and INGOs and, on the other, with the local communities, and hence transmit modern influences, as well as new techniques of agriculture and business etc. It has been argued that Afghan NGOs “claim to be apolitical, but have a core agenda of supporting democratisation and peace” (Goodhand and Chamberlain, 1996: 200).

In the broader political context, the conflict has ended the ruling elite status of Mohammadzais.⁸ Many of the existing political actors do not favour restoration of monarchy; while the non-Mohammadzais mujahideen parties, which played more

⁶ In June 2002, international media reported that warlords in Afghanistan were threatening potential participants in the tribal jirga, and were exercising influence to ensure participation of their favourites (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

⁷ Some of them later acquired important portfolios in the Interim Government of Hamid Karzai in Kabul. One of them was Saima Samar, who became minister for women. She had earlier been working with different NGOs working among refugees in Pakistan.

⁸ The tribal jirga, which was convened under the Bonn Agreement, in June 2002, did not restore monarchy. It is partly because the former King Zahir Shah, who belongs to Mohammadzai tribe and who had earlier returned to Afghanistan from his exile in Italy, had himself said that he did not want restoration of monarchy — perhaps in realisation of changed political situation.

prominent role during the Afgha jihad, seek share for themselves and their respective communities in the power structure. This has opened up a relatively more open space for political contest, which so far has only contributed to intensification of conflict, but in the long-run may provide a basis for more democratic Afghanistan.

4.2. Economic Relations

The conflict forced about 6 million people (almost one-third of its total 20 million population of the country) to migrate, largely to the neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, although many also moved to India, Middle East, Europe and North America. About 3.5 million of them settled in the refugee camps as well as in the urban centres like Peshawar, Quetta and Islamabad in Pakistan. A vast majority if them consisted of Pashtuns. Another over 2 million moved to Iran, where, unlike Pakistan, they were strictly confined to refugee camps. In addition migration abroad, the conflict also caused massive internal displacement. In particular, the Afghan urban centres witnessed vast increases in populations as people moved to towns and cities to survive economically, although this process was to be later reversed, after the fall of Najib government in 1992. It is because the urban economy in Afghanistan had remained sufficiently buoyant until 1992, as a result of subsidies and support received from the Soviet Union (Marsden, 1998: 9). Later, however, financial flows from abroad dried down, and the civil war engulfed some of the cities, which had by then remained relatively peaceful.

As the Pashtuns are mostly settled in areas contiguous to boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan, their preferred country of migration has been Pakistan. It was also for the reasons that Pakistan already hosted a significant Pashtun population, with common cultural and language, and that Pakistan allowed them a freedom of mobility and work outside the refugee camps. Taking advantage of this freedom, the Afghan refugees could go to anywhere in the country, and were soon to be seen working in all the major cities, including Lahore and Karachi. They, however, remained primarily and largely concentrated in and around the border cities of Pakistan like Peshawar and Quetta.

Most of these people had come from rural background, where the traditional family occupations included farming and herding. But in Pakistan, a large majority of them had to change their family professions, if they were to work. The possibilities included daily-wage labour, and small trades and businesses; and they readily grabbed them – causing increased labour supply and thus suppressing daily wages to the resentment of local labour force. Gradually, however, many of them moved from daily labour to small trade and even further up in economic terms; and by the later years of their stay, they were controlling sizeable businesses and share in the economic activity in Peshawar and Quetta. They almost totally dominated the local transport, property business, vendor shops, vegetable and fruit stalls, restaurants, as well as trading in lots of others commodities ranging from cloth to smuggled electronic goods. A news report suggests that Afghans controlled almost 95 percent of businesses in Peshawar (Price, 2002). There is no denying the fact that many of the refugees involved in these businesses and trades had no such background in Afghanistan. A sizeable number of them were children, when their parents had migrated to Pakistan — others were born in Pakistan.

Even within Afghanistan, the conflict forced people to seek non-traditional professions and occupations. Again, it was because the traditional opportunities of subsistence farming had either been destroyed or restricted,⁹ or internal displacement had moved people to towns where it was easier to find jobs in view of greater emphasis of the Marxist regime on job creation with the help of Soviet subsidies. A lots of government jobs were available in all different departments, ranging from armed forces to a large number of schools that were opened up to increase literacy. Besides, there existed opportunities for small businesses in the towns and cities that had attracted a lot of people, who fled the war and Soviet bombing in rural Afghanistan. This, however, changed after the fall of Najib government in 1992, particularly in relation to job opportunities but, since many of these people had no option of going back to destroyed village economies, they were to find other occupations within towns or to migrate abroad.

In the rural Afghanistan, the mujahideen groups were the biggest employers. These groups received sizeable aid and funding from countries like the USA and Saudi Arabia, as well as from non-governmental sources in the Muslim world. With these financial inflows,¹⁰ these groups could maintain party organisations, comprising paid employees, and engage sizeable number of people to fight against the Marxist forces. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops, when external financing was drastically reduced, these group had to either down-size or find out alternative sources, which included rent-seeking and greater reliance on revenues earned through drug-trafficking and smuggling.

The opportunities for business and commercial activities increased in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops and later the breakdown of Soviet Union.¹¹ After the withdrawal of Soviet troops, relative peace had returned to most parts of the country, particularly Eastern Afghanistan, where Ismail Khan, a former Afgha army officer and a Tajik warlord of Jamiat-i-Islami, had established an efficient administration. This opened up the trade route between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan and, as a result, the following years were to witness increased economic activity between Herat, Kandhar and Quetta. This increased even further when the so-called 'iron-curtain' fell with the demise of Soviet Union and independence of Central Asian Republics. It can safely be assumed that, given the magnitude this trade, it involved a sizeable number of Afghan people. The people involved in this trade included big businessmen, who often had strong ties with the warlords along the trade route. Warlords would get their share of revenue and in return allow the trade to continue uninterrupted --- although in later years, the related businessmen and transport 'mafias' became increasingly impatient by the existence of too many barriers by different warlords as these were perceived as obstructive and inefficient.

⁹ It has been suggested that Soviet forces deliberately destroyed rural subsistence economies during the 1980s to cow the people (see Goodhand and Chamberlain, 1996: 197).

¹⁰ It is believed that Hikmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami alone received more than half of the \$6billion in armaments and cash (Griffin, 2001: 21).

¹¹ A World Bank study in 2001 suggested that Afghanistan's exports and re-exports were substantial – in the order of US\$ 1,227 million in 2000, of which nearly \$1,100 million were smuggled goods (www.worldbank.org).

5. Conclusions

Over 25 years of conflict since 1978 has substantially changed and redefined the nature of political and economic relations among Pashtuns in Afghanistan. On the one hand, massive dislocations caused by conflict broke the 'isolated' character of rural Afghan society and exposed large sections of society to new situations, ideas and influences. Many of them acquired new professions in the urban centres of Pakistan and Iran. Those who stayed in Afghanistan also had to either work with the Soviet-backed Afghan government or with Mujahideen groups, who offered sizable employment opportunities to support their war campaigns. Such employment within Afghanistan also carried opportunities for a different kind of exposure and learning for Pashtun people, especially involving education of political Islam and increased understanding of global politics. In political terms, commanders emerged as new elite with significant power and resources at their disposal. Similarly, people working with NGOs, which had extensive involvement in terms of relief work or service provision during the conflict, began to exercise significant influence in Afghan society. Resistance to external influences remained strong but the pace of change in social and economic relations during the conflict was nevertheless unprecedented. Almost every Afghan village today hosts individuals and families, who have got significant exposure to urban life in Pakistan, Iran or elsewhere, and hence provide a basis to lead and support modernization and development work in their areas. This is unlike the situation before the conflict when Pashtun villages were almost totally isolated and the local populations were highly resistant to any outside development interventions. To say, therefore, that Afghanistan has not changed at all in terms of social and political relations is only a myth.

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