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Political Groupings in Divided Societies: A Review of Political Party Development in Afghanistan

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Abstract

This study provides a thorough historical analysis of the emergence, evolution, and transformation of political parties in Afghanistan. It reviews their establishment and development from early 20th-century reformist movements to the post-2021 Taliban regime. The study utilizes a historical institutionalist approach to understand the influence of indigenous socio-political dynamics, external interventions, and institutional legacies on the formation, organization, and function of political parties. The analysis indicates that Afghanistan's party system has been persistently shaped by the tension between local realities such as ethnic and tribal divisions and repeated foreign interference. This has historically resulted in persistent fragmentation, weak societal roots, and instrumentalization of ethnicity. Key historical periods reviewed in this article are the monarchical era and constitutional experimentation 1903-1973, the era of coups and internal conflicts between 1973 and 2001, and the post-2001 period marked by international engagement and democratization initiatives. The core argument is that despite intermittent legal and institutional reforms, Afghan parties have rarely achieved robust organization or ideological coherence. They have often functioned as vehicles for elite patronage rather than agents of national integration. Also, the Taliban's categorical suppression of political parties since 2021 marks a sharp regression in political pluralism. The article concludes that a sustainable inclusive governance framework in Afghanistan requires context-sensitive institution-building and overcoming historical legacies of fragmentation and exclusion.

Keywords: Party Politics, Political Groupings, Political Parties, Afghanistan, Divided Societies

1. Introduction

Political parties play a crucial role in political development, governance, and democratization by serving as fundamental institutions that facilitate democratic processes. They are instrumental in recruiting competent leadership, formulating cohesive policy frameworks, and ensuring public participation and accountability in governance (Katsina & Batsari, 2023; Reilly et al., 2008). They support political pluralism, participate in elections, and oversee government actions in accordance

with the law, thereby maintaining public trust in the political system (Yunita Nurul Arifah et al., 2024). Political parties play a vital role in ensuring transparency, participation, and accountability in the political process, which are key components of good governance. They integrate disparate groups and individuals into the democratic process, fostering inclusivity and representation. According to Weiner and LaPalombara, powerful and organized parties will have a precise impact on national integration, political participation, legitimacy of the government, and conflict management (Weiner & LaPalombara, 1966). However, challenges such as sociological origins and institutional capacities can undermine parties' effectiveness and cast different perceptions by observers. Political parties often struggle to establish strong social roots. In underdeveloped countries and fragile contexts, parties are fragmented along ethnic, tribal, or regional lines. For instance, in Jordan, tribalism has a significant influence on political activities, with parties often prioritizing tribal loyalty over ideological or policy-based agendas (Al-Majali et al., 2022). Similarly, in fragile states such as Nepal and Guatemala, political parties often lack strong social roots due to deep-seated divisions within society (Castillejo, 2015). In Western Europe, the rise of anti-political-establishment parties (APEP) has been driven in part by the perceived failure of traditional parties to address sociological changes, such as shifting voter values and economic inequality (Bértoa & Rama, 2020).

The scholarly discourse on the development of political parties in Afghanistan generally concurs that the process has been significantly impeded throughout the nation's history. A predominant theme in this literature is the tension between indigenous processes and external interventions. Some may hold that Afghanistan has not experienced the requisite indigenous development process for the evolution of political parties and has instead been persistently influenced by external interventions. However, this article argues that Afghanistan was introduced to political parties indigenously through an evolutionary process that has its roots in early reformists' ideas at the beginning of the 20th century. It was an evolutionary process because it went through different stages through which the dynamics of socio-political groupings were shaped. However, this argument does not refute the impact of external forces on the development process of political parties entirely.

Also, some scholars, such as Saikal (2004), Tadjbakhsh and Schoiswohl (2008), and Ibrahimi (2014) contend that externally driven democratization initiatives have struggled to establish

enduring institutions, with an excessive emphasis on emulating Western models rather than nurturing a political order that aligns with local dynamics. They argue that this approach has rendered Afghan citizens as passive beneficiaries rather than active participants in the democratic process, thereby fostering alienation and undermining legitimacy. To better understand this argument, this article aims to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of the emergence, evolution, and transformation of political parties in Afghanistan. The study is grounded in the perspective that understanding the historical roots and institutional dynamics of political parties is essential for assessing both the prospects and challenges. The article adopts a position that challenges the prevailing narrative, which attributes the weakness of Afghan political parties solely to external imposition or lack of indigenous capacity. Instead, it argues that Afghanistan's party system has been persistently shaped by the tension between local socio-political realities and the repeated interventions. The article contends that neither indigenous nor externally driven approaches alone have succeeded in supporting the formation of inclusive and sustainable party structures. Rather, the persistent fragmentation, instrumentalization of ethnicity, and lack of deep societal roots are products of both historical legacies and ongoing structural constraints.

2. Conceptual Framework

This article relies on historical institutionalism as the method of studying the development of political parties in Afghanistan. Historical institutionalism is a method used to analyze how institutions, in this case political parties, evolve over time within specific historical contexts (Fioretos et al., 2016). In the study of political parties in Afghanistan, this approach examines how past events, decisions, and institutional frameworks have shaped the current political landscape. It focuses on understanding the path dependencies and critical junctures that influence party development, considering both formal structures and informal practices (Fioretos et al., 2016). This involves analyzing historical texts, archival materials, and existing literature to understand the evolution of political parties.

In *Oxford Handbook of American Election Law* (Mazo, 2024), political parties are conceptualized as broad coalitions or ecosystems comprising affiliated voters, donors, candidates, officeholders, interest groups, and donor-driven shadow party groups, in addition to the official party organizations and their officers. In this conceptualization, political parties are not mere official

organizations but a network that plays a central role in representative democracy. Considering that the definition of political parties is contingent upon the context, for Afghanistan context, a traditional minimal definition can be more relevant. Edmund Burke (1999) underscores the importance of a shared ideology, while William Nisbet Chambers (1975) accentuates the significance of structure and popular following. In a more minimalist approach, Giovanni Sartori (2005) defines a party as an entity that presents candidates for public elections. Scholars within the field of political science tend to categorize parties based on their objectives, structural organization, or their social bases. Typically, parties fall into one of three categories: elite or cadre parties, characterized by their loosely structured organization; mass parties, distinguished by their robust organization and strong ideological underpinnings; and catch-all parties, which aim to garner a broad appeal across various demographics.

In the preliminary stages of any historical analysis, it is crucial to emphasize certain unique aspects pertinent to the socio-political context of Afghanistan. The conceptualization of political parties in Afghanistan, even those of recent formation, may not align with the conventional understanding of political parties as observed not only in highly developed Western nations but also in Middle Eastern and certain Asian countries. Also, it is crucial to acknowledge the plethora of terminologies that have historically been employed to characterize political parties and political groupings, given the extensive diversity inherent in the discourse surrounding political parties. These terminologies, including "harakat, tehrik, nohzat, jombesh, and ghurdzang," translate to 'movement'; "jabha" and "mahaz" signify 'front'; "tanzim, sazman," or "kanun" denote 'organization'; "jam'iat" refers to 'society'; "majmu'a" represents 'association'; "groh" or "grup" conveys 'group'; "jerian" means 'current'; and "hezb" symbolizes 'party'. Each term provides an understanding of the political party and contributes to comprehension of their various natures.

3. EMERGENCE AND HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN AFGHANISTAN

A concise review of early 20th-century Afghan reformist and conservative currents shows that the seeds of organized politics were sown long before political parties formally emerged in the 1940s and 1960s. The early movements that started in this period were not in the shape of modern political parties, rather they were close circles coming out of elite groups who were well exposed

to the politics at the centre of monarchy. To understand the development of political parties in a linear path, we need to understand the socio-political dynamics, historical events, and the influence of both internal and external factors that shaped the political landscape. The following sections explore the three main stages of this evolvement and describe the early political groupings, more organized and militarized forms of political groupings in later parts of the 20th century, and finally a more institutionalized environment but chaotic party formations in the post-2001 era.

3.1.The Monarchical Era and Constitutional Experimentation (1903-1973)

Between 1901 and 1929, a reformist circle pushed for modernization via journalism, constitutionalism, women's rights, and secular education. Although this movement faced successive conservative uprisings (notably the 1924–25 Khost rebellion and the November–December 1928 Shinwari revolt) and ultimately the Bacha-ye Saqao coup of January 17, 1929, led by Habibullah Kalakani. The first *mashruta-khawahan* (constitutionalist movement; 1903-1909) was raised to replace the absolute monarchy with a constitutional one. "Liberal and reformist ulema" were the main elements in the front line (Sher Zaman, 1989, p. 5). However, this movement could not constitute any form of political party but it was the beginning of intellectual and political developments in Afghanistan (Mesbahzada, 2005, pp. 2–3). This could be considered an attempt to move toward establishing more systematic political groups. The prominent Afghanhistorian Mir Ghulam Muhammad Ghobar called them a party and named them *Jam'iat-e Sirri-ye Melli* (Subtle Political Organization) (Ghobar, 1967, p. 717). In 1909, seven of the group's leaders were executed by King Habibullah Khan's order and the rest were brutally suppressed. From 1911 onwards, a new generation of educated young Afghans took the banner of constitutionalists, under the leadership of Ottoman-educated Mahmud Tarzi, who took over the position of Foreign Minister of King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), they helped to trigger the reforms planned by the King. This group was known as *Afghanan-e Jawan* (Young Afghans) (Ghobar, 1967, p. 723). Borrowing Gregorian's words, Tarzi and the Young Afghans movement were "proselytizers of modernism" in Afghanistan (Gregorian, 1964, p. 163). The movement focused on the issues of independence, education, and reforms. After King Amanullah, a member of Young Afghans, took over the power in 1919, his first move was declaring the independence of the country which previously was taken as the cost that Afghanistan had to pay according to the 1879 Gandamak treaty.

In the 1930s, the first generation of Afghan intellectuals, who were the result of Amanullah's educational reforms, became the breeding ground for the re-emergence of the reformist political movement of the late 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. The reformists found their way to Parliament and created organizations and independent publications. Afghan author Zaher Tanin calls it the "First Democratic Period" (Tanin, 2004, p. 86). At this time, some of the younger members of the cabinet like Majid Zabuli and Sardar Muhammad Daud Khan, the then minister of defense, later the prime minister, and eventually the president of the Republic of Afghanistan (1973-1978), were impressed with the idea of establishing political parties. In 1949, they established *Hezbe Demokrat-e Melli* (National Democratic Party) also known as *Klup-e Melli* (National Club). Although the real founders were Abdul Majid Zabuli and Muhammad Daud Khan, in name, Sayyid Shamsoddin Majrooh was the president and Dr. Abdul Qayum served as the secretary of the party (Boyko, 2000, p. 201). *Klup-e Melli* attracted the attention of many from amongst the educated and intellectual strata at the beginning. After a short period, some issues surfaced among the members about including an article in its statute, which led to the separation of intellectuals and the disappearance of *Klup-e Melli*. However, the appearance and disappearance of *Klup-e Melli* had tworesults:: first, the emergence of parties led by intellectuals who divided themselves into groups (i.e *Wish Dzalmian, Watan* and *Khalq)*; second, the ruling class, including the monarch himself, considered establishing their political party in the future (Bezhan, 2013, p. 922).

Wish Dzalmian (Awakened Youth) movement was formed in 1947 as a loosely structured movement. Initially, it consisted of different cultural-political groupings. After a year, on May 27, 1948, this movement evolved into a political organization with defined objectives, established by 22 young writers, regarded as founding fathers from various regions of the country. The organization established protocols such as regular meetings and membership guidelines. Their manifesto advocated for constitutional monarchy, free elections, separation of power and civil liberties (Ruttig, 2006, p. 4). Simultaneously, facing mounting pressure from the expanding class of merchant capitalists, western-educated officials, liberal-minded/progressive intellectuals, and other professionals, the government commenced the liberalization of the political system. Consequently, 1949 witnessed certain political developments, including free elections for local and national legislatures. In 1951, the Law on the Press was enacted to authorize the establishment of privately owned newspapers and to eliminate prior censorship. Ultimately, it served as the

optimal platform for the political organizations to stamp out their goals and objectives by accessing national legislature and the media. On 18 October 1950, *Wish Dzalmian* emerged as the inaugural political group in Afghanistan's history, marking a shift towards a more systematic structure. The main objectives of this group at this stage were focused on matters pertaining to Pashtunistan and language. The policies followed by *Wish Dzalmaian* were more pro-government. By 1951, it was recruiting actively and had amassed 816 members across nine cities: Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Gardez, Baghlan, Jalalabad, Maimana, Mazar-e Sharif and Pul-e Khumri (Boyko, 2000; Wahedi, 2003). The second political group formed was *Hezb-e Watan* (Homeland Party), founded and led by Mir Ghulam Mohammad Ghobar in December 1950 or January 1951. It was followed by *Hezb-e Khalq* (People's Party) under the leadership of Dr. Mahmudi in early 1951. These two political groups had a pro-democratic stance, advocating for free elections, a national government, and functioning political parties. Nonetheless, *Hezb-e Khalq* conveyed a relatively more leftist agenda by incorporating the "fight against exploitation" and "social justice" into their democratic demands (Saikal, 2004). In 1949's *Wolesi Jirga* (Parliament's lower chamber) election, five representatives from *Wish Dzalmian* were elected and designated themselves as *Jabha-ye* Melli (National Front). Among the 120 members of parliament, 30 to 40 expressed sympathy and endorsed their reformist agenda. The liberal Press Law enacted in January 1951 constituted one of their achievements. In the 1950s, these various leanings led to formation of "Afghanistan's first political parties" which coalesced around "independent publications" (Ruttig, 2011, p. 3). These parties were considered as "proto-parties" or "party nucli" in some literature (Boyko, 2000, p. 196; Wahedi, 2003, p. 95). However, these political groups could not be legitimately designated as parties since the only legal document that incorporated and recognized the existence of political parties was the 1964 constitution.

The political climate of the day viewed the rise of organized political groupings as a menace to the power of the monarch. The royal family had grown discontented with the nascent opposition activities. Ultimately, Prime Minister Shah Mahmood Khan outlawed all organized political groupings, dissolved the Students Union at Kabul University, and forbade all independent periodicals (Saikal, 2004). Numerous notable intellectuals and politicians were incarcerated, including Mir Ghulam Mohammad Ghubar, Abdurrahman Mahmudi, General Fateh Mohammad and Babrak Karmal; Abdul Hai Habibi opted to withdraw from both the country and politics entirely (Saikal, 2004, p. 116). The end of Shah Mahmud's reign was characterized by the

increasing maturity of King Mohammad Zahir Shah and the political endeavors of Mohammad Dawud Khan.

The interval from 1963 to 1973 is renowned as the Constitutional Decade in Afghanistan's history. Prior to the enactment of the 1964 Constitution, the Political Parties Bill was formulated and allegedly approved under the interim government from 1963 to 1965. The parliamentary election was supposed to be predicated on it (Akhwan, 2004, p. 93). During a press conference on 10th August 1963, Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Yusuf Khan recognized the essential role of political parties in the effective operation of a parliamentary government. However, he opposed the multiparty system, asserting that a two-party system "would be best suited for Afghanistan" (Jafri & Jafri, 1969, p. 169).

The new constitution was a top-down initiative, however, it effectively represented the aspirations for which three generations of *Mashruta-Khahan* had struggled. It conferred legal authorization for political parties, explicitly stated in Title III of Basic Rights and Duties of the People, article 32, which reads as follows:

Afghan citizens have the right to form political parties, in accordance with the terms of the law, provided that:(1) The aims and activities of the party and the ideas on which the organization is based are not opposed to the values embodied in this Constitution. (2) The organization and financial resources of the party are open. A party formed in accordance with the provision of the law cannot be dissolved without due process of the law and the order of the Supreme Court. (Afghanistan Constitution, 1964, Article 32)

This article includes democratic principles that protect the right to establish and develop political parties. It emphasizes two key points. Firstly, parties must maintain transparency in their organization and finances to prevent misuse of funds and foreign interference. Secondly, the article stipulates that party objectives and activities, as well as their foundational ideas, must not contradict the values enshrined in the Constitution, including religion. This was to limit the expansion of leftist movements. The Constitution placed considerable emphasis on religion, safeguarding the monarchy's interest by designating the King as the protector of Islam's core tenets. This article also mandated the necessity of the Political Party Law. However, for various reasons, the monarch refused to endorse the legislation despite its passage by both chambers of parliament in 1970. Sayyid Shamsuddin Majrooh, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Yusuf cabinet

(1963-65) and the Head of the Constitutional Committee that prepared the 1964 Constitution, explains the reason why King Zahir did not sign the Political Parties Law as the King was concerned that moderate and democratic Afghan youth were not ready to form a cohesive political party while the leftists and Marxists had already structured themselves (Tanin, 2004). However, Dupree asserts that it was the king's close advisers who insisted that the law would strengthen the anti-monarchists (Dupree, 1979). Some other observers believe that the fact that "parties would form primarily along ethnic lines and thus add a new element of divisiveness to an already fragmented situation" scared the monarch from signing the law (Bezhan, 2013, p. 924).

The most plausible explanation is that King Zahir was unwilling to cede his authority to any subordinate political entity. He had already asserted his supremacy over two of the most formidable organizations that could threaten his authority by consolidating control over the military and forging robust alliances with tribal leaders. However, the government's failure to approve the law proved inauspicious, as it paradoxically disrupted the political order in Afghanistan. The primary and most significant consequence of the non-ratification of the Political Parties bill was the radicalization of political parties. The absence of a formal institutional framework to establish boundaries and regulate the perspectives of political parties compelled them to adopt radical and ideologically-driven stances in their competition with one another. The second consequence was that the leaders of these parties were unable to campaign openly for parliament. No structured opposition existed in the parliament, which, according to Prime Minister Nur Ahmad Etemadi, implied that the absence of a political party in parliament effectively resulted in confronting 216 parties (Bezhan, 2013). It is challenging to envisage any constructive collaboration between the legislature and the executive without the presence of formal political parties. The non-ratification of the Political Parties Bill may be regarded as the most significant deficiency of this era. A diverse array of "in waiting" political parties emerged, encompassing leftists, moderates, conservatives, and Islamists (Ruttig, 2006). Consequently, the majority of the parties initiated clandestine campaigning and covert recruitment, of which the public and the government were largely uninformed.

The monarchy's attempt to create pro-government political parties opened the door for other political-minded individuals to take advantage. It also enabled government officials like poet and historian Khalilullah Khalili and former prime minister Mohammad Hashim Maiwandwal to create

their own political parties. Khalilullah Khalili founded the first monarchist party. Wahdat-e Melli (National Unity) was Afghanistan's first monarchist political party, founded by poet and former official Khalilullah Khalili ahead of the 1965 elections. Though lacking political skill, Khalili aimed to use the party as a platform to become prime minister. Wahdat-e Melli attracted rural landowners and conservatives, requiring members to swear loyalty to the Koran, the king, and the constitution. It promoted conservative, pro-monarchy, and anti-socialist ideals, yet lacked organization and unity (Bezhan, 2013). Despite winning over 60 parliamentary seats, its members acted independently, weakening its influence. Lacking a clear agenda and effective leadership, the party quickly faded, especially after Khalili was sent abroad as ambassador—a sign of royal disapproval. Ultimately, the party's failure highlighted the limits of rural-based, unstructured parties in Afghanistan's evolving political landscape.

Mohammad Hashim Maiwandwal founded this party in 1966. Demokrat-e Motaraqi (Democratic Progressive Party) was as a pro-monarchy party promoting constitutional monarchy, secularism, democracy, national unity, and social democracy. While it aimed to unite Afghans under the king's symbolic leadership, it struggled due to limited royal support and criticism from all sides. To boost credibility, Maiwandwal brought in members of the former *Wish Dzalmian* group and emphasized parliamentary democracy leading to socialism (Dupree, 1979). However, internal contradictions—being both monarchist and oppositional—led to its downfall, especially after the *Wish Dzalmian* split in 1971. Despite being prime minister, Maiwandwal founded the party before political parties were legally sanctioned, likely with tacit royal approval. However, King Zahir Shah later withdrew support due to concerns over Maiwandwal's leadership focus, socialist rhetoric, and opposition from royal family members like Abdul Wali. Consequently, the party was marginalized and eventually suppressed. Another similar party to this was *Hezb-e Afghan Soseyal Demokrat* (Afghan Social Democratic Party), better known among Afghans as *Afghan Millat* after its newspaper's name found in March 8, 1966. It was created by Ghulam Mohammad Farhad, a German-educated Pashtun intellectual and former mayor of Kabul. Both these parties were nationalistic and social-democratic and had their roots in *Wish Dzalmian* movement of the 1940s. The main difference was that the latter advocated the greater Afghanistan including the region inhabited by Pakistan-based

tribal belt Pashtuns on the other side of Durand Line.[1] Afghan Soseyal Democrat had a Pashtun nationalist agenda because of advocating greater Afghanistan and the supremacy of Pashtuns over other ethnic minorities of the country. However, in the mid-1980s, the party experienced internal splits, leading to the formation of different factions. One faction, led by Mohammad Amin Wakman, became prominent, and in 1995, Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady took over its leadership. Under Ahady, the party attempted to broaden its appeal beyond Pashtun nationalism, seeking support among non-Pashtuns and positioning itself as a nationalist party.

The leftist partis had two major currents. One was described as Maoist because of its affiliation to Mao Tse's teachings in China. The second one was mostly indoctrinated in Moscow and had a Pro-Moscow agenda. A range of Marxist study circles that initially sprung up in the early 1960s merged to shape *Hezb-e Demokratik-e Khalq-e Afghanistan* (PDPA) on January1, 1965. Noor Mohammad Traki led the Central Committee with Babrak Karmal as his deputy. However, this group could not publicly identify itself as a party due to the absence of laws governing political parties. They used the term *Jerian-e Demokratik-e Khalq* or People's Democratic Current. The PDPA, from the beginning of its formation, did not enjoy internal unity and was divided into *khalq* (the people) and *parcham* (the flag) factions, the two main former study circles. In 1968, Taher Badakhshi made another fraction to the party and formed *Settam-e Melli* (National Oppression) with more focus on mobilizing the rural citizens and ethno-nationalistic rhetorics (Ruttig, 2006).

Shola-ye Jawed (eternal flame) started as a current and described itself as Maoist. Among Afghans, they are famous as *Shola'i* after their publication named *shola-ye jawed* (eternal flame) among afghans. Abdulrahim and Abdulhadi Mahmudi, the close relatives of Dr. Abdul Rahman Mahmudi, the founder of *Hezb-e Khalq*, formed this current with the help of two brothers, Akram Yari and Seddiq Yari. Originally forming the Sazman-e Jawanan-e Mutaraqi (Progressive Youth Organization) in 1965, the group advocated Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought and opposed both the Afghan monarchy and the pro-Soviet Khalq faction. *Sazman-e Jawanan-e Mutaraqi* (The Progressive Youth Organization) never successfully become public until 1972.

[1] The Durand Line is 2,640 kilometers border between Afghanistan and Pakistan established in 1893. Afghanistan ceded various frontier areas by a 100 years contract to British India to prevent invasion of further areas of the country.

The Islamic circles were mostly established as a reactionary force to the advancement of leftists. Most of the groups were inspired by Muslim Brotherhood as the leaders, who were predominantly university professors who had studied at Al-Azhar in Cairo. In 1957, the first Islamist circle gathered around Ghulam Mohammad Niazi, the dean of Shariah Faculty of Kabul University. The student wing of this group under Abdul Rahim Niazi formed *Nohzat-e Jawanan-e Musalman* (Muslim Youth Movement). They evolved into a more organized group with regular membership and changed the name to *Jam'iat-e Islami* (Islamic Society). The famous individuals among the Mujahedin were all gathered around this organization such as Burhanadin Rabbani, Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayyaf, Golbeddin Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Massoud. Although, later Golbeddin Hekmatyar with Qazi Mohammad Amin Waqad formed their own *Hezb-e Islami-ye Afghanistan* (The Islamic Party of Afghanistan). While most of these groups were followers of Sunni Islam, the formation of Shia groups goes back to "cultural renaissance" movement started by Sayyed Muhammad Ismail Balkhi, a religiously educated intellectual from Jauzjan province. After the 1973 coup, some groups were inspired by him and turned into resistance organizations among which the most important one was led by Maulana Muhammad Attaullah Faizani as *Islam Maktab-e Tauhid* (Islam School of Monotheism) (Ruttig, 2006).

3.2.Coups, Conflict, and the Rise of the Taliban (1973-2001)

The model of parliamentary politics had been discredited during the later years of King Zahir's rule. The leftists and centrists were preparing themselves for the 1973 election, which never took place because of Mohammad Daud Khan's coup, hoping that parliamentary politics would finally take stage and succeeded in its path. However, as Giustozzi states, the transition from monarchy to republic "did not represent a sea change per se in terms of political organization [….] The republic had monarchical character" with Mohammad Doud Khan solidly at the top (Giustozzi, 2013a, p. 325). In July 1973, Mohammad Daud Khan carried out an almost bloodless coup with the help of servicemen from the *Parcham* faction of PDPA in the armed forces. *Parcham* could be the first political party in Afghanistan's history to considerably involve in a coup. When Mohammad Daud Khan announced his Cabinet after establishing the republic, half of his 14 minsters were *Parchamis* (Arnold, 1983; as cited in Saikal, 2004, p. 173).

After the suppression campaign of the government against Islamists and *Sho'la-ye Jawed* (Eternal Flame), closing down their publication and capturing the leaders (Saikal, 2004), the main protagonists of Islamists fled to Pakistan which was later used as counter balance against Mohammad Daud Khan's policies regarding Pashtunistan and Bluchistan. It was there, between 1975 and 1977 that Islamists suffered from a series of splits, which eventually led to the establishment of *Hezb-e Islami* under Hekmatyar along with Rabbani's *Jamiyat-e Islami.*

Mohammad Daud Khan's foreign policy took a new direction as a result of the shift in the world order and politics that occurred during the time of the cold war. Within the context of President Daud's stance to the West and the Soviet Union, the domestic policy of the government underwent significant transformations in addition to all other associated effects. It was sufficient for President Daud to be concerned about the influence of the Soviet Union as well as an attack organized by Parcham against him. In an effort to maintain a safe distance from communists, he made several structural adjustments. At the same time, in 1975, the ongoing campaign of retaliation against pro-Soviet groups, including the Khalq and the Parcham factions, got underway. In accordance with the principles that Mohammad Daud Khan had implemented, a new Constitution was presented to the people in January of 1977. At the same time as it mandated a one-party system, the Constitution reserved the powerful role for the executive branch. The aim was to gather all under the umbrella of *Hezb-e Engelab-e Melli* (National Revolutionary Party) led by Mohammad Daud Khan himself. President Mohammad Daud Khan's legal framework excluded Parcham and Khalq. Although Mohammad Daud Khan did not initially consider the Parchamis, they eventually rejected NRP and the Khaliqis. In December 1977, Mohammad Daud Khan intensified the Khalqi and Parchami purge. In Chaffetz's word, the new efforts of Mohammad Daud Khan were "more far-reaching and final in its intent than that of 1975, gave the *Khalq* and the *Parcham* the choice of liquidation or revolution" (Chaffetz, 1980, p. 20).

As a result of Mohammad Daud Khan's policies toward the Soviet and Pro-Soviet elements in the country, *Khalq* and *Parcham* factions of PDPA found it necessary to unite under the umbrella of their original People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to stand against their common enemy, Mohammad Daud Khan. This led eventually to the bloody but successful Sour Coup of 27 April 1978 and the elimination of Mohammad Daud Khan and his entire family. The communist era was marked by two main policies followed by the government. First, it was the single-party

system prescribed in the aftermath of Sour Revolution against Mohammad Daud Khan and followed until the government of Dr. Najibullah. The second was the policy of National Reconciliation implemented by Dr. Najibullah, which allowed a multiparty system in the country.

The single-party system, with PDPA as the only legal party, was mainly dominant over the country during the rule of Noor Mohammad Taraki, Hafizullah Amin and Babrak Karmal. In this time, "five groups were declared enemies: the Parchamis, the Islamists, the Maoists, the Settamis … and Afghan Millat" (Halliday & Tanin, 1998, p. 5). Government started the revolutionary filtration of intellectuals and anti-Khalqis. Many of them were killed and arrested, of which Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf was among the few lucky ones who were released and escaped. "The purge within the party against *Parchami,* and later against *Khalq* when *Parcham* came to power, perpetuated the split between the two major factions" (Ruttig, 2006, p. 13).

The Islamist parties rained popularity mostly following the 7th Sour Coup (27th April 1978) and more specifically after the Soviet troops entered the country. Pakistani intelligence service (ISI) coordinated the funds and aids which were flown from the United States and Saudi Arabia. The commencement of the resistance war witnessed the division and split among various Islamist *Tanzims* (organizations). The Islamists were unified around two cores, the "Peshawar Seven", which were predominantly Sunni groups and the "Tehran Eight", which were the Shiites. The group of Peshawar Seven parties included *Hezb-e Islami* under Younes Khalis, *Hezb-e Islami* under Hekmatyar, *Jamiat-e Islami* under Burhanuddin Rabbani, *Ittehad-e Islami Baray-e Azadi-e Afghanistan* (Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan) under Sayyaf, *Mehaz-e Melli-e Afghanistan* (National Islamic Front for Afghanistan) under Gailani, *Jebhay-e Melli-e Nejat-e Afghanistan* (Afghanistan National Liberation Front) under Mojaddedi and *Harkat-e Inqlab-e Islami-e Afghanistan* (Islamic and National Revolution Movement of Afghanistan) under Mowlawi Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi (Amin, 1984). The Tehran Eight included of *Hezbullah-e Afghan* (Afghan Hezbollah) led by Karim Agmadi Yak Daste, *Sazman-e Nasr* (Nasr Party) also known as Islamic Victory Organization of Afghanistan led by Muhammad Hussein Sadiqi, Abdul Ali Mazari and Shaykh Shafak, *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Inqlab-e Islami* (Corps of Islamic Revolution Guardians of Afghanistan) led by Sheikh Akbari, *Harkat-e Islami-e Afghanistan* (The Islamic Movement of Afghanistan) led by Muhammad Asif Muhsini, *Shuray-e Inqlabi-e Ittefaq-e Islami* (Committee of Islamic Agreement) led by Sayeed Ali Beheshti and Sayeed, *Junbesh-e Inqlab-e*

Islami (Islamic Revolution Movement) led by Nasrullah Mansur, *Ittehad-e Mubarezan-e Islami* (Union of Islamic Fighters) led by Mosbah Sade and finally, *Hezb-e Ra'd-e Afghansitan* (Thunder Party of Afghanistan) led by Abdul Jaffar Nadiri and Sayeed Ismail Balkhee. Most of the Shiite parties joined *Hezb-e Wahdat*, which was intended as a united Shiite political front (Amin, 1984).

Conversely, the Maoist factions persisted in their guerrilla warfare against the new regime. Settam-e Melli and Sazman-e Azadibakhsh-e Mardum-e Afghanistan (People's Liberation Organization of Afghanistan (SAMA)) were the most prominent organizations. Subsequently, following Babrak Karmal's ascension to power from the Parchami faction of the PDPA, Setam-e Melli gradually vanished. SAMA, established by Abdulmajid Kalakani in 1979, transformed into a broader coalition known as Jabha-ye Muttahed-e Melli-e Afghanistan (National United Front of Afghanistan; NUFA) by uniting former Settami and ex-Shola'i factions, various religious leaders, and leftist Pashtun nationalists. It disbanded shortly after Jam'iat and Hezb-e Islami exerted pressure, leading to the capitulation of several of its leaders to the government (Ruttig, 2006, p. 12).

Najibullah was the latest communist president who introduced the *Seyasat-e Ashty-e Melli* (National Reconciliation Policy) and initiated a controlled political liberalization. He assumed power during a critical juncture as the nation experienced strong political turmoil. After Soviet withdrawal, his administration endured only for another three years. As the country's social and political situation changed, the PDPA changed its name to Hezb-e Watan, which means "Homeland Party." It also started a new policy to increase democracy, make the political system stronger by having more parties, and set up coalition governments in the center and on the peripheries. Accordingly, a new law on political parties was ratified and seven new parties were registered by 1988. *Ittehad-e Melli Baray-e Azadi Wa Demokrasi* (National Union for Freedom and Democracy) was formed by liberal-minded intellectuals who came back from long years of exile under the leadership of former president of Kabul University Professor Muhammad Asghar. *Sazman-e Enqelabi-ye Zahmatkashanha-ye Afghanistan* (Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of Afghanistan; *SAZA*) led by Mahbobullah Kushani and *Sazman-e Zahmatkeshan-e Afghanistan* (Organization of Afghanistan's Toilers; *SeZA*) led by Hamdullah Gran joined PDPA but kept criticizing it for not giving up the monopoly of power (Bezhan, 2013). *Afghan Millat* and *Hezb-e*

Edalat-e Dehqanan-e Afghanistan (Peasants Justice Party of Afghanistan; *HADA)* were also registered but the latter was only an observer in PDPA.

The collapse of Dr. Najubullah's Soviet-supported government in the capital and the arrival of the Mujahideen to the presidential palace initiated a new distressing chapter in Afghanistan's history. Essentially, there was no real political organization and systematic political process during this era. The conflict initially commenced with military confrontation among various Mujahideen factions and culminated in an escalated war between the Taliban movement and *Jabha-ye Muttahed-e Islami Baray-e Nejat-e Afghanistan* (United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan) commonly referred to as the Northern Alliance. No substantial efforts was made to unify all factions and loosely structured parties together around a national cause. It was a battle over the power vacuum that had emerged from the collapse of Dr. Najibullah's government.

None of the political groupings and parties during this period thought about evolving into a more organized and structured formation to get involved in more civil politics rather than military activities. All of the parties relied on foreign funds and support that ultimately made them dependent and non-autonomous in their policies and activities. In addition, most of these self-proclaimed parties lacked a concrete agenda for future. The continuous war, the public frustration and the scale of damage brought to the country destroyed the public support for many of these factions and groups.

3.3.Democratic Aspirations and International Engagement (2001-2021)

The new epoch in Afghanistan's history commenced following the collapse of the Taliban in 2001. This era was marked by democratization, constitutionalism, and state formation. The elections were conducted to select the President and the representatives for Parliament and local councils. This marks the ratification of the Political Parties Law, rendering the institutionalization of political parties more concrete.

From 2001 to 2021, Afghanistan's political party landscape experienced swift proliferation, fragmentation, and minimal institutionalization. In the immediate post-Taliban period, numerous parties registered under a new legal framework designed to promote inclusive, cross-ethnic organizations. The Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) electoral system and widespread clientelism obstructed party consolidation and the programmatic development (Loyn, 2019).

Parties with strong ties to former mujahidin leaders, such as Jamiat-e Islami and Hezb-e Islami, dominated electoral outcomes, while newer parties (sometimes they are titled as New Democratic Parties) struggled to establish coherent platforms and grassroots networks (İNaç & Muradi, 2023). Reforms aimed at strengthening governance and party regulation, including thresholds for membership, founders, and provincial offices, had limited effect due to weak enforcement and lack of incentives for genuine cross-ethnic cooperation (Mobasher, 2019). Security concerns, endemic corruption, and the centripetal design of the political system further marginalized parties as vehicles for representation, rendering them more akin to patronage networks than programmatic actors (Condra et al., 2019).

The 2009 Political Party Law established three key non-ethnic thresholds including having at least 10,000 members, 35 founders from at least 20 provinces, and offices in 20 provinces, to implicitly foster cross-ethnic party nationalization (Condra et al., 2019). Despite these aggregating regulations, parties often met the letter but not the spirit of the law, opening nominal offices and recruiting members without genuine organizational depth or inter-ethnic cooperation (Condra et al., 2019). Afghanistan's use of SNTV for parliamentary elections prioritized individual candidates over party affiliation, discouraging voters from aligning with parties and reducing incentives for parties to mobilize cohesive electoral bases (Loyn, 2019). This fragmented vote-to-seat translation reinforced the dominance of local notables and mujahidin patrons, undercutting party institutionalization.

By 2021, over 70 parties were registered, with more than half founded by young activists; yet most lacked coherent ideologies or organizational capacity, limiting their ability to contest elections effectively or influence policy (Kalinovsky & Giustozzi, 2017). The mandatory thresholds spurred registration but did not translate into substantive party development or programmatic platforms. Parties founded by or affiliated with former mujahidin commanders consistently outperformed newer entrants due to established patronage networks, financial resources, and grassroots linkages. Their electoral success underscores the enduring power of wartime affiliations in peacetime politics.

Investigating the role of elections in post conflict government building, and looking into 2005 Afghanistan election, Bjornlund et al. (2007) believe that the electoral system in Afghanistan, as it was suggested and shaped by the international community, sidelined the role of political parties

to form democratic outcomes. They conclude that the international community failed to address the issues of electoral system design and political party development. Giustozzi (2013a) also suggest that international involvement has marginalized political parties, with a disproportionate focus on short-term patronage politics at the expense of long-term strategic agendas. Examining the rapid modernization trend that began in the 1960s and the post-Taliban era, he contends that the inflow of substantial resources following international intervention in 2001 changed the course of Afghanistan's political system's development from that which had been initiated domestically by progressive reformists in the 1960s. He notes that the primary focus of citizen support mobilization in the years following 2001 was either distributing patronage or taking part in elections. Securing as much as possible from patronage resources made available by international intervention had been the main focus of party leaders' obsessions. The best listen learned from this period in Giustozzi's word is that "premature focus on participation in the electoral process contributed negatively to political-party development" by dispiriting the parties from supporting "radical causes" or "expressing deep popular grievances" (Giustozzi, 2013b, p. 323).

4. Conclusion

The historical development of political parties in Afghanistan illustrates a complex growth of politics. It is characterized by the multifaceted interaction of indigenous processes, foreign interventions, and socio-political dynamics. The evolution of political parties in Afghanistan has been a continual process. This process is influenced by numerous elements, including tribalism, ethnic divisions, traditional values, external influences, and socio-political developments. One of the key narratives that emerges from this historical review is the tension between indigenous political processes and the effect that external interventions had over national politics. The tension in question has taken different shapes, such as the difficulty political parties face when trying to establish solid social roots amidst ethnic, tribal, and regional divisions. Additionally, it is seen in the challenges brought about by external interventions. These interventions often involve the structuring of significant policies and the setting of countries' future political development agendas. Furthermore, they include democratization initiatives, the bold example is the period between 2001 and 2021, which frequently favors the imitation of Western models rather than fostering a political order that is in harmony with local dynamics. The last form of this intervention

can be seen in Doha deal of February 2020, which is famous as US- Taliban Agreement. While the agreement is purported to facilitate the withdrawal of US soldiers from Afghanistan and is regarded as a catalyst for intra-Afghan talks aimed at maintaining peace, the actual political consequence of the pact was the abandonment of the whole populace to the discretion and complete control of the Taliban.

The Taliban have imposed stringent regulations on political parties and non-governmental organizations. During their initial government (1996–2001), they prohibited all political organizations and centralized international NGOs within a single edifice in Kabul, leading many to relocate to Pakistan. Since regaining power in August 2021, almost all of Afghanistan's 120 registered political parties and 1,200 NGOs have either suspended activities or departed the country, with just Hezb-e-Islami remaining operational. In 2024, Taliban Ministry of Justice officials reviewed the work of hundreds of social organizations and in line with their longstanding policy, they have repeatedly declared all political parties illegal under Taliban rule (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). Taliban Minister of Justice reaffirmed in Kabul that even mentioning a political party constitutes a crime and announced the ban of two political parties including Hezb-e-Islami and 75 social organizations, referring their leaders to security agencies on charges of illegal activity. Under Taliban law, violations will incur legal and Sharia-based penalties. In April 2025, the Taliban judiciary disclosed that three individuals in Kandahar faced military trials for political activities—two received 15-year prison sentences and the third was sentenced to 30 lashes plus additional jail time (Gul, 2024). This marks the first public acknowledgment of political trials under the current regime. Critics argue that the Taliban's refusal to allow diverse political expression is intrinsic to their authoritarian and sectarian worldview. Observers argue that while the Taliban circle in Kandahar and the Haqqani Network function as de facto political parties, they deny others the same rights to preserve a monopoly on power.

As a conclusion, despite intermittent periods of political opening and institutional experimentation, Afghan parties have rarely achieved the robust organization, ideological coherence, or societal rootedness necessary for sustainable democratization. Instead, the party system has been repeatedly shaped and destabilized by shifting alliances among elites, the instrumentalization of ethnicity and patronage, and the imposition of externally derived models that often failed to resonate with local realities. That maybe is the main concern even within the post-2021 de facto

Taliban government when it comes to opening the sphere for activities of political parties. The traditional believe is parties would further lead to divisions rather than bringing more inclusion. This can be one of the main reasons that governments with fragile stability are not showing strong interest in organized political activism in form of political parties or any other form of political groupings. The post-2001 era, while initially promising in terms of legal frameworks and electoral processes, ultimately reinforced patterns of fragmentation and clientelism, with parties functioning more as vehicles for personal or factional advancement than as agents of national integration. The Taliban's return to power and their suppression of political parties marks not only a regression in political pluralism but also a stark repudiation of the very notion of organized opposition. Yet, this can again be attributed to the fractured political situation and favouring stability in governance and authority. This review underscores the critical importance of context-sensitive institution-building, the dangers of externally imposed blueprints, and the enduring challenge of reconciling Afghanistan's rich diversity with the imperatives of national unity. Until Afghan political parties can transcend their historical legacies of fragmentation, external dependency, and exclusion, the prospects for genuine democratization of politics and stable governance framework will remain precarious, and the promise of political pluralism will continue to be deferred.

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