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At the very beginning of this fine monograph Raghav Sharma posed his argument that the political history of Afghanistan had changed fundamentally arising from the conflicts during the period 1992 to 1996, when the Mujahideen gained power. New social groups challenged for inclusion in the new state. Of course, the seemingly endless war in Afghanistan and the twists and turns in the fortunes of the Taliban and the US and Western supporters of the government make for a pessimistic outcome of this sad situation. The resurgence of the Taliban and the expansion of the territory they control and the tough response by the current US president who has promised to send more troops to counter the Taliban have drowned out cries for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. However, a more moderate tone of the former secretary of state, Mr. Rex Tillerson, before his visit to South Asia, has given a small hope for diplomacy.

Raghav Sharma’s monograph on new ways to understand the present political situation is important in giving the diplomatic actors fresh perspectives and hope. In arguing for the significance of ethnicity, he still advised that we must interrogate the “old, neat categorizations to make sense of ethnicity as a living social reality.” After all, Afghanistan was a nation state in the making. First, a brief narrative of the context of the war is appropriate.

The long war has blinded all from knowing that Afghanistan had experienced a significant period of progressive social and political development under King Zahir Shah and by his cousin and Prime Minister, Daoud Khan, who served as his Prime Minister from 1953. Daoud Khan seized power when King Zahir Shah was visiting Italy in 1973. He introduced economic modernization, emancipation of women, and an Afghan nationalism built around the supremacy of the Pashtun ethnic group. In 1978 Daoud Khan and his family were assassinated and the socialist People’s Democratic Party came to power. The party emphasized socialist reforms like the abolition of arranged marriages, mass literacy, and land reform, reforms that undermined the traditional tribal order. In 1979 President Nur Muhammad Taraki, leader of the PDPA, was assassinated, as was his successor, Hafizullah Amin. Three months later, the Soviet Union intervened to support Babrak Karmal, leader of another faction of the PDPA. In 1987 President Najibullah replaced Karmal and some stability was achieved.
To counter the Soviet intervention, the USA and its allies, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, decided to encourage, arm, and use the religiously oriented, Afghan Mujahideen leadership and forces to fight against the Soviet intervention. This alliance brought Arab Muslims including Bin Laden to join them. The Soviet Union withdrew its forces in 1989. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Najibullah resigned in 1992, bringing an end to the PDPA. The government in Kabul fell to Mujahideen factions, and civil war started.

In 1994 Mohammed Omar, a teacher at a Madrassah in Pakistan, returned to Kandahar and formed the Taliban. Angered by the policies of secularization and the liberal movement, he sought to reverse the trend towards the modernization of Afghanistan. In August 1996, Bin Laden arrived in Jalalabad. He had founded the Al Qaeda in the late 1980s to support the Mujahideen war against the Soviet Union. Both leaders used Afghanistan to train and indoctrinate their fighters. The US did not have a clear policy toward Afghanistan but supported Pakistan which, under President Zia, sent arms to the Taliban. This changed in 1998 after the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Bin Laden was indicted for his part in the bombings. US and the UN placed sanctions on both Bin Laden and the Taliban. Ahmed Shah Masood, a Tajik nationalist, and Dostum created a United Front, the Northern Alliance, against the Taliban. It included Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Pashtuns. They pledged to work for an ethnically balanced Afghanistan under the exiled Muhammad Zahir Shah. They received support from Russia, Iran, Tajikistan, and India. The George W. Bush administration pledged support for the new alliance and Masoud, who called important leaders of the different ethnic groups to a Jirga to discuss their differences and resolve them. In early 2001 he and other leaders of the new alliance addressed European leaders, requesting humanitarian help in their struggle with the Taliban. On September 9, Ahmed Shah Masood was assassinated. The Al Qaeda attack on the US on September 11, 2001 was the direct origin of the long war in Afghanistan. Nineteen Al Qaeda men carried out four coordinated attacks on the US, causing some 3,000 deaths.

The US response, Operation Enduring Freedom, was launched on October 7, 2001. It was joined by forces from the United Kingdom and other countries. They drove the Taliban from power and built army bases. Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda retreated to the mountain regions and Pakistan. In December 2001, the UN created the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to help the Afghan government keep security. Hamid Karzai was selected to head the Afghan Interim Administration and later elected President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2004.
As the Taliban insurgency regained its force, having embarked on a policy of guerrilla warfare in 2003, NATO assumed control of ISAF. A coalition of some forty-six countries under a US commander faced the Taliban. There were many tactical victories but the Taliban was not defeated. The longer the war continued, it was almost predictable that its image as a just war would change from that of fighting terrorism to an imperial war reminiscent of the British-Afghan wars in the late 19th and early 20th century. News broke in 2007 that US marines had killed 12 civilians and injured 33; Polish forces had fired machine guns into a wedding. Angered by these deaths of civilians and by airstrikes, foreign fighters joined the Taliban. The US response to the resurgence of the Taliban was called the surge. In 2008 the number of US troops increased by 80%, bringing the total to 48,200. In 2009 there was a further increase of 17,000 troops. Accompanying news about the surge was the fact that the funds for development and reconstruction would be reduced.

In November, 2009, Karzai made a plea for direct negotiations with the Taliban and made it clear that Obama had opposed him. When President Obama announced that the US would send 30,000 more troops, anti-war protests broke out. The year 2010 saw both an American – British offensive and Afghan peace initiatives. More troops were deployed and there was a six-fold increase in special force operations. More Taliban fighters were killed. General Petraeus commented: “We’ve got our teeth in the enemy’s jugular now and we are not going to let go.” In July 2010, the Wikileaks Organization made public 91,713 classified documents which showed the cover-up of civilian casualties caused by coalition forces, and Pakistan’s collusion with the Taliban.

On May 2, 2011 Osama Bin Laden was killed in a raid by the CIA and Navy Seals in Pakistan. On June 22 President Obama announced that 10,000 troops would be withdrawn by the end of 2011 and an additional 23,000 would return by the summer of 2012. NATO announced troop reductions as did Belgium, Norway, Spain and France. On May 2, 2012 President Obama and President Karzai signed a strategic partnership between the US and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and agreed to transfer combat troop operations from NATO to Afghan forces by spring 2013. Bilateral agreements were concluded that combat operations would end in 2014, and that all US forces with the exception of a normal embassy presence would be removed by the end of 2016. On Dec. 16, 2016, US troops withdrew from Afghanistan leaving behind 8,400 troops.
Ethnicity in Afghanistan, 1992-1996

For Professor Raghav Sharma, the challenge was to understand terms like “nation” and “ethnictiy” in the Afghan context. Like many developing nations, Afghanistan has struggled to make its multi-ethnic society a nation state. In the earlier narrative of its political history, the more modernist, progressive political parties have defined their state as more a secular republic; the more traditional preferred the title of Islamic. But ethnicity still played a major role historically in that the Pashtuns were favored by the monarchy. With the victory of the Mujahideen in 1992 and their rule from 1992 to 1996, Islamic identity became more “strident and aggressive.” Yet it was during this period that ethnicity became a “formidable political instrument of mass mobilization.” Earlier intervention by the Soviet Union and later by the USA and European allies intensified the sectarian, ethnic development to such an extent that a US diplomat, Robert Blackwell, argued before the Council on Foreign Relations that Afghanistan should be partitioned. Sharma admitted that ethnicity gradually became a more powerful force than Islam, but affirmed that “ethnicity’s ability to subdue the deeply shared adherence to Islam and shape the sense of legitimate Afghan nationhood testifies both to the dense historical entrenchment of social heterogeneity, as well as socio-political transformations engineered in recent years by conflict.”

What caused this development? The Soviet intervention of 1979 and the armed conflict that ensued undermined the old hierarchical social relationships. The withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989 and the overthrow of Najibullah’s government by the Mujahideen in 1992 led to a cycle of armed warfare between Islamic factions. The collapse of order and the ensuing violence “fostered a sense of discrimination and deprivations – perceived and real – determined by ethnic differences.”

Sharma presented early in his work the sources, both primary and secondary, that he used. This will be very helpful to scholars and students of the US war in Afghanistan. He mixed available primary and secondary sources with field research, interviews with individuals and focus group discussion sessions in the provinces of Kabul, Panjshir, Badakshan, Balkh, Jowzhaz, and Bamian. (pp. 7-9) Explaining his emphasis on the necessity of the distinction between the concepts of ethnicity and nation, he said that his intent was to bring “certain conceptual interventions into conversation with primary source materials and field research so as to tease out what constitutes the idea of ethnicity and nation in …Afghanistan’s still unsettled and unfolding encounter with modernity.” Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the relation between the ideals of the nationalizing state, its actual practice of favoring Pashtun ethnicity, and the consequent response by other ethnicities that the government in Kabul was an unfair nationalizing state.
There is an interesting section on the changing conceptions of the Afghan “nation.” The first constitution, promulgated by King Amanullah in 1923, affirmed the equality of all Afghans with equal rights and duties. It was the exemplar for later constitutions of Afghanistan. Sharma argued that it was the sense of the heroic struggle in the three Afghan wars against the British – 1839-1842, 1878-1880, and 1919- that inspired the first constitution. Following his European tour in 1928, King Amanullah proposed reforms in marriage laws, taxation, and other modern reforms, action that provoked anger among the tribal leaders who saw the reforms as a threat to their power and prestige. Article 4 of the 2004 Constitution declared: “National sovereignty in Afghanistan shall belong to the nation…the nation of Afghanistan shall be comprised of Pushtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkman, Baluch, Pachaie, Nuristani, Aymaq, Arab, Qirghiz, Qizilbash, Gujur, Brahwui, and other tribes. The word Afghan shall apply to every citizen of Afghanistan.” Almost all the many constitutions emphasized the social heterogeneity of Afghanistan. But, since its history was not shaped by European imperialism, it escaped colonial rule. “Its traditional Islamic faith remained strong and modern capitalism remained distant.”

Returning to the theme of the importance of ethno-political salience in the advanced industrial and the developing world, he argued that although it seemed to confirm the power of ethnicity in the making of a nation, the truth was that many multi-ethnic states have managed to function humanely. Taking the Tajiks as an example, he said that although the Tajiks were considered the dominant minority against the Pashtun majority, yet a unified identity of Tajiks has been weak. Indeed, the category of ‘ethnicity’ did not exist in Afghanistan history until 1937. Citing the scholar Anthony Smith, Sharma affirmed that the foremost attribute of a nation rests on the notion of common rights and duties. Sharma gave a thoughtful analysis of the relation between the notions of nation and ethnicity. Mere belief in a common ancestry did not necessarily translate into the fact of nationhood.

According to Sharma, the cycle of violence since 1978 has strengthened the idea of Afghan nationhood. Nearly six million refugees to Iran and Pakistan were confronted by an alien culture and environment. When asked about their identity, “most Afghans gave an answer referring to their Afghan origin, to the whole of Afghanistan, and rarely to a province, a tribe, an ethnic group, or town.” This feeling was not restricted to the refugee community. Describing an interview he had with an elderly villager from Bamian about his identity, the stranger replied: “I am an Afghan by nationality but I am Tajik by ethnicity. Within Afghanistan my Tajik identity is stronger, but outside the country my identity as an Afghan national is stronger.” For Sharma, the term ‘nation’ means citizenship with a common set of rights and duties within a constitutional framework, a clearly defined territory, and a “subjective sense-feeling of belonging to one nation with a belief in a shared past and common future.”
He warned that ethno-political conflict is not necessarily a battle unto death. If that were the case, he asked, how can one account for the support Ahmad Shah Masood’s Jamiat-i-Islami party had among the Dari speaking Pashtuns? Or the support enjoyed by General Dostum’s Uzbek jumbish-i-Milli among Turkmen and Arabs? He added in a footnote that during his research in Afghanistan Hindus and Sikhs who settled in Afghanistan for four generations were not only recognized as citizens of Afghanistan but were constantly referred to as “Afghan Hindus” and “Afghan Sikhs.”

In conclusion, Raghav Sharma reiterated that the prolonged conflict has changed the dynamics of social and political relationships. He argued that the presidential elections of 2014 were significant in that they marked Afghanistan’s first ever peaceful transition of power through elections and the socially heterogeneous composition of political alliances. He wrote with a sense of hope that “nation and ethnicity in discourse and as operational living realities did not negate ethnicity but seeks to transcend it beyond and above ethnicity.” He dismissed the comments that the alliances were cynical and opportunistic and asked that we take note that leaders who had fought each other in the recent past were now attempting to work together within a common political framework. He emphasized the importance of the ethno-political key to open our eyes to the changed political-social climate and understand the present conflict and its challenges. There was a shift from the “cardinal pillars of tribe and Islam towards ethnicity.” Looking back at the political stance of the Marxist Left tradition in Afghanistan, represented by the PDPA which split into two factions, Khalq and Parcham, of which the latter came to dominate the state from 1980 to 1992, he felt that tribe and Islam were “pillars of legitimacy,” as were the Mujahideen when they were in power. Raghav Sharma has built a strong case for the socio-political importance of the changing role of ethnicity in understanding the long, violent conflict in Afghanistan. But will this new lens help all the leaders and people of Afghanistan, and external actors like the USA, put down their guns and return to their ploughshares and tables to hammer out a peaceful agreement? In praising the peaceful election of President Ashraf Ghani in 2014 and the National Assembly in 2010 as evidence not only of the value of the new socio-political role of ethnicity in establishing a democratizing tradition to resolve conflict, but he offered hope that the long war in Afghanistan that has cost so much blood, destruction, suffering, and death to the people of Afghanistan, the USA, and the many countries that sent their soldiers to fight in Afghanistan might be heading towards a diplomatic solution.
Raghav Sharma is a young scholar and Assistant Professor of South Asian Studies at the Jindal School of International Affairs, India. He received his Doctorate from the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, University of Erfurt, Germany (2013); MA in International Relations from the Central European University, Budapest, Hungary (2008); BA (Hons) from St. Stephens College, University of Delhi (2004). He published a book, *Pakistan as a Nation State and Flag Bearer of Islam*, Verlag: Germany, 2009. He has also published several articles in edited volumes.