

Kabul 1978 — 1988: Communists and Islam

CHANTAL LOBATO

The relationship between communism and Islam has never been an easy one. If in the 1920s the Soviet authorities were convinced that the “reactionary” values of Islamic society would disappear under a progressive political regime, by the time of the invasion of Afghanistan they were aware that age-old traditions did not die easily.¹ Thus they encouraged the Afghan regime to pursue a religious policy that might give additional legitimacy to the PDPA (People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan), that is, to use an Islam that it could not ignore. Since it seized power in 1978 the PDPA’s religious policy has evolved through different stages — not necessarily coinciding with political leadership changes — throughout protesting its “respect for and preservation of Islam”.

Though Nur Muhammed Taraki and Hafizullah Amin did little to disguise their hatred for Islam, their period in office (April 1978–December 1979), dominated as it was by political infighting, witnessed minimal attacks upon religious institutions. Rather, the two leaders concentrated on land redistribution and literacy campaigns as weapons of social change.

Faced with the failure of the Khalqi government [the Khalq is one of two factions within the ruling PDPA — *Ed.*], the Soviet Union decided to act directly. Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan on 27 December 1979 and placed Babrak Karmal in power. From the beginning Karmal distanced himself from the anti-Islamic image of Taraki and Amin, and launched a vast programme for unity in which the religious factor was included. During this so-called “democratic and national” phase, the governmental structure was reorganised along the lines of Soviet institutions. Governmental organs in Kabul were constructed on a tripartite basis (the Party, the administration and the mass organisations), but power resided in party hands. Ten

¹ Yaacov Ro’i, “The Impact of the Islamic Fundamentalist Revival of the late 1970s on the Soviet View of Islam”, in *The USSR and the Muslim World*, edited by Yaacov Ro’i (George Allen and Unwin: London, 1984), pp. 149–77.

years later, these attempts at sovietising Afghan institutions are still limited to Kabul. The Afghan communists and the Soviets have tried hard, but with great difficulty, to increase their control in the countryside, "while avoiding damage to traditional society", and this is where the mass organisations, and in particular the religious ones, have a role to play. It is clear that the communists' desire not to destroy the traditional working of Afghan society does not stem from an ethical code, but from a policy of unity which aims above all at obtaining agreement with the tribal chiefs and leaders. The founding in 1981 of the National Front for the Homeland (*Jebah-ye melli-ye pada watan*) showed that the problem of the unity of the Afghan people had been recognised. The expansion of the sphere of action of the National Front of the Homeland, by including some theologians and creating the Supreme Council of *Ulema*, was tantamount to recognising that Islam cannot be marginalised in Afghanistan. The Muslim religion has always been omnipresent in Afghanistan, whether it be at the level of political, cultural or daily life. The Afghan and the Soviet communists could not, therefore, allow themselves to underestimate the religious factor.

At the beginning of January 1987, Karmal's successor Najibullah announced that a "new phase of the revolution has begun: the phase of national reconciliation". He thus broadened a policy which had been in operation since 1980. This announcement, together with the political recognition of the *mujaheddin* (no longer calling them "bandits" but "opposition forces") and the dissolution of the Revolutionary Council in 1988, implies that the Afghan and the Soviet communists are abandoning the idea of a country with a socialist orientation. This would give the Soviet authorities additional ideological justification for withdrawing their troops from Afghanistan. [A withdrawal that began after this article was written — *Ed.*] During the last two years (1987-88), the communists have sought more than ever to give themselves an Islamic legitimacy, by attempting to establish an official Islam along the lines of the Soviet *mufti*, in the hope of retaining power.

Religious Institutions and Official Clergy

1. The Institutional Framework

The religious policy conducted since 1980 is characterised firstly by the official recognition of Islam as the state religion. In 1980 Babrak Karmal reactivated the religious institutions of the old regime, which had remained silent, without being closed down, during the Taraki

and Amin period. One of the more noteworthy of the revived institutions was the Society of *Ulema* (*Jamiat-ul Ulema*), inaugurated in 1932 by Nadar Khan, which followed the Indian model; its members, civil servants, certified that the laws conformed to *shariat* and offered their Islamic backing to the king when he was making a political decision. From 1963 (under King Zaher) the function of the Society of *Ulema* decreased and was taken over by a department of the Ministry of Justice which united religious and lay lawyers, and by a Commission for Islamic Affairs attached to the Chamber of Deputies (*wolosi jirgah*). On the eve of the 1978 coup d'état the *Jamiat-ul Ulema* had only symbolic existence. Theologians and religious judges (*qazi*), trained in religious schools (*madrassahs*) and at the faculty of theology, had to face lawyers trained in western style at the faculty of law and political science. In 1982 (under Babrak Karmal), the *Jamiat-ul Ulema*,² which traditionally was answerable to the Ministry of Justice, was replaced by the Department of Islamic Affairs, attached directly to the Prime Minister. In April 1985, the Department of Islamic Affairs³ was changed into the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Religious Interests (*wezzarat-e Islami wa Awqaf*)⁴. It took over the functions of the former department: organising rites, subsidising mosques, helping to organise pilgrimages and "guiding the activities of the religious institutions". In 1982 Babrak Karmal created the Supreme Council of *Ulema* and Islamic Clergy of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (*Shura-ye ali-ye ulema wa ruhanyun*)⁵ attached to the Department of Islamic Affairs. But since 1983 this institution has been directly responsible to the National Front of the Homeland. This was an important change as it meant that the Council of *Ulema* became a mass organisation in the same way as the other organisations; the *ulema* and the government *mullahs* became a *unifying* force, as the National Front of the Homeland is a mass organisation, concerned essentially with recruitment of the militia and with uniting the population without demanding allegiance to the Communist Party.

The Legal Framework

In 1978 Taraki wished to eliminate all *ulema* and *qazi* (Islamic judges) and replace them with revolutionary judges. Initially, he restricted

² Directed in 1982 by *Maulawi* Sayed Afghani.

³ Directed by *Maulawi* Sayed Afghani.

⁴ On this occasion *Maulaw* Abdul Wali Hojjat was appointed Minister of Islamic Affairs and Religious Interests. He is from Takhar province. In October 1986 he was replaced by Abdul Jamil Zarifi, a native of the province of Balkh.

⁵ In 1987 the President was *Maulawi* Abdul Razaq, a native of Laghman.

himself to reappointing lay judges (trained since the 1960s at the faculty of law and political science), although that was not satisfactory, as these judges had received a legal training based on the western model. Since he was in power for a very short time, he was not able to reorganise the legal system completely. Since 1980 revolutionary tribunals dealing with political crimes have existed alongside civil courts, assizes and commercial tribunals.

In civil law, personal status (marriage and inheritance) has remained the business of the *qazi*. During the early days of PDPA government, and even less so during the period of "national reconciliation", Kabul could not allow itself to close the Islamic courts.

Religious Schools

The centres of religious education and the theology faculty were reorganised during Nur Muhammad Taraki's period in office. The *fiqh* department (Islamic law) was transferred to the law faculty and the Arabic department to the arts faculty. Only the *tafsir* department (commentary on the Koran) and the *hadith* department (traditions about Mohammed), that is to say the purely theological disciplines, remain in the theology faculty. This change has not been without serious consequences, for on the one hand it has considerably reduced the sphere of Islamic culture, and on the other has ended the training of Islamic judges. Under the communist regime the small number of students trained at the theology faculty have all become teachers of religion at one of the governmental *madrassahs*. On 21 February 1987 a Centre of Islamic Research was opened,⁶ and in March of the same year an Islamic University was founded, where disciplines are to be taught which were withdrawn from the theology faculty under Taraki.

Religious Personnel

As it has a very weak social base, the communist regime will encounter more difficulties in constituting an official clergy which includes theologians of repute. In 1980 Babrak Karmal avoided reappointing religious figures, such as Abdul Aziz, implicated in the government of Hafizullah Amin. Apparently nor did he reappoint members of the *Jamiat-ul Ulema* of 1980, such as *maulawi* Rahmatullah or *maulawi* Abdul Ghani Ahmed. Between 1980 and 1984, the *mullahs* and *maulawi* who held responsible positions were elderly people who had

⁶ *Kabul New Times*, 21/22 February 1987, p. 1.

not followed a course of higher education at Al-Azhar (University of Cairo) with the exception of *Maulawi* Sayed Afghani.⁷ There are, therefore, no senior Afghan religious figures in the Kabul government. They have either been executed by the various communist governments or were exiled to Pakistan at the beginning of the Taraki period.⁸ The *maulawi* of the regime, who are appointed leaders of mass organisations or of a provincial council of deputies, or made governors or members of the *loya jirgah* (the great assembly), take an active part in spreading Kabul's propaganda throughout the countryside. Since 1985 we have witnessed a renewal and expansion of religious personnel. New *maulawi*, some of whom have diplomas from Al-Azhar, have been appointed to senior positions: Deputy-Ministers for Islamic Affairs (Enayatollah Rashid, Ghulam Haidar Jamali), Advisory Ministers at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Religious Interests (Abdul Wajed, Sayed Ali Shah Sedaji), president or vice-president of mass organisations (Ghulam Sarwar Mansur, Sheikh-ul islam Mohammad ali Uruzgani), and Governor of the province of Bamian (Sheikh Mohammad Azim Ahmadi). Some of them joined the revolutionary council in January — February 1986, whilst other joined the *loyah-jirgah*.⁹ The authors of religious education manuals do not appear on the list, with the exception of Abdul Ghaffar Ruher who enjoyed a good image under the old regime and is now Advisory Minister at the Council of Ministers for Islamic Affairs. These *maulawi* appointed since 1985 either completed their studies at the University of Cairo, or did not have a "progressive" image under the old regime.

This process was continued into 1988 by Najibullah who, in March of that year, announced the setting up of a Consultative Islamic Council attached to the President's Office. The aim of all these policies is uniting more of the population behind the regime. To this end official speeches represent the clergy as a social group just like any other, with its own legitimate interests and rights of participation in various public bodies. Simultaneously the regime is attempting to bureaucratise religious personnel by turning them into state employees and by setting up religious institutions responsible to governmental bodies.¹⁰ Yet by so doing it is in danger of removing any real spiritual

⁷ A graduate of Al-Azhar, renowned, so the story goes, for translating someone else's thesis from Arabic into Persian, and claiming it as his own. He is from the province of Nangrahar.

⁸ The exiled *ulema* are members of the resistance. See Olivier Roy, *L'Afghanistan, islam et modernité politique*, (Seuil: Paris, 1985), p. 103.

⁹ The Shi'ites are overrepresented, bearing in mind the percentage of Shi'ites in the overall population of Afghanistan.

¹⁰ Under the monarchy 95 per cent of the *mullahs* and *maulawi* received their education and funding from outside the state system.

authority from those involved who, in any case, are a minority when compared to those clergy working with the resistance.

Another feature of this "unity" policy is the attempt to win the allegiance of the tribal chiefs. Traditionally in the tribes religion has lain outside the political field. Thus a tribal chief, politically speaking a secular person but personally a pious Muslim, could talk to a politically secular regime (as under King Zahir), but not to an anti-Muslim one. Hence the apparent inclusion of clergy in the political counsels of the PDPA is seen as a means of reducing the hostility of these traditional leaders.

The new religious institutions allow the Kabul government to appear respectful towards the fundamental principles of Islam, but they also serve to present it in a traditional and often rather formalistic light. These organisations apparently regulate the personal affairs of the population through Islamic courts, apparently provide the opportunity to follow a university course in law and theology, and broadcast religious programmes on radio and television. In official publications considerable emphasis is placed on the restoration of mosques and the maintenance of *ziarat* (places of pilgrimage) as historical sites. Kabul's policy is to encourage a conservative Islam¹¹ which will not threaten government legitimacy and which will not actively oppose the secularisation of Afghan society.

Reversal of the Official Line Since 1985

Between 1980 and 1985 official declarations were limited to recognising Islam as the state religion. Soviet Muslim leaders who came in numerous delegations to Kabul always justified the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan "in the name of Muslim solidarity". And conversely, delegations of *mullahs* from the Kabul government to Tashkent were reminded "that in the Soviet Union Muslims are free to follow their religion". Up to 1985 the Afghan communists tried to create an institutional framework for an official Islam but did not attempt to present themselves as religious.

Since 1985, and therefore independently of the change in general secretary of the PDPA, Kabul propaganda against the *mujaheddin* has intensified. Since then regime spokesmen have declared that they are the true Muslims, and that the activities of the counter-revolutionaries should be condemned in the name of Islam. Afghan communists more than ever wish to appear "respectful" of Islam and

¹¹I use the term "conservative Islam" to contrast it to Islam with a political ideology, that is to say Islam used as a framework for the construction of a future society. See the Afghan resistance parties, Roy, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-106.

now even call themselves Muslim. In February and March 1986 delegations of lawyers from the Kabul regime visited India and Iran "to become acquainted with the legal institutions" of these two countries. Still within the framework of "the policy of national reconciliation", five "new parties" have been created, one of which is an Islamic party. In June 1988 a *fatwa* (legal judgement pronounced on a specific issue by a senior religious judge) condemned the continuation of the war, and the part played by Iran and Pakistan. In this way the PDPA denounced the Pakistani desire to constitute a transitional government composed uniquely of parties from the resistance, and yet appeared to accept that post-Soviet Afghanistan need not necessarily be a country with a socialist orientation.

All efforts of the Kabul regime to bring peace to the country have ended in failure, even though it has resorted increasingly to religious rhetoric. The January 1988 announcement of the "policy of national reconciliation" had a doubly negative effect. On the one hand, as we witnessed on a trip to Afghanistan in the summer of 1987, groups such as the militia which had served the regime feared what might happen to them after any Soviet withdrawal and were thus putting out feelers to the resistance; on the other, the announcement did nothing to encourage support for the regime on the part of the population. The reforms undertaken by Kabul, whilst paying lip service to Islam, are effectively aimed at "de-Islamisation" of society. Faced with an Islam which takes the place of political ideology in the resistance, the ritualistic and conservative religion put forward by Kabul can receive only limited support amongst the population. This type of conservative Islam is an artificial construction which has little chance of surviving the political upheaval likely to follow the Soviet withdrawal.

Translated from French by Hannah Jackson