

Part I: Afghanistan's People and History

For most of us, it is difficult to imagine what Afghanistan is like for the people who live there. Yet, as debates about Afghanistan's future continue, some fundamental questions deserve exploration. What is life like in Afghanistan? What is society like? How does history affect events in Afghanistan today? Part I of the reading provides a brief overview of the people and history of Afghanistan.

What is life like in rural areas of Afghanistan?

Afghanistan's population today is about thirty million people. More than 75 percent live in rural areas, most in small villages. Life expectancy is low, around forty-five years. Most rural Afghans are either subsistence farmers or pastoralists, which means they graze small herds of animals.

Life in rural Afghanistan is difficult for many people. Family members rise before dawn to begin working. Men typically labor on small, family-owned plots to sow and harvest wheat, barley, rice, fruit, or nuts, most of which are saved for family consumption. Women often manage the household, collect water and firewood, and take care of children. Electricity is extremely rare as is mechanical farm equipment. Except in the mountain regions, most rural villages depend on irrigation and are located near water sources. Farmers without irrigation depend on rainfall to water their crops.

Life for pastoralists also tends to be difficult. Pastoralists are nomadic, which means they migrate according to the season. By some estimates more than one million nomadic pastoralists live in Afghanistan today. They raise sheep and camels and move from pasture



Eric Kanaltzin/UNAMA

A farmer gathers wheat in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, August 11, 2009.



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Russell Lee Klika.

A bazaar in Kabul, Afghanistan, February 2009.

to pasture. Although the term nomad conveys the idea of wandering aimlessly, in fact these groups have set patterns of movement and play an important role in the economies of towns and cities. They sell meat, butter, cheese, and animal skins in city markets, and purchase grains and other goods from farmers and manufacturers.

Close social and economic connections between people are important in rural Afghanistan. Families, neighbors, and local communities depend on each other for survival. For example, communities maintain village irrigation systems and repair them after floods. These close ties have helped Afghans to weather the storms of political upheaval and invasion throughout their country's history.

What is life like in towns and cities in Afghanistan?

Today, life in rural Afghanistan is undergoing rapid change, particularly as many Afghans are migrating to Afghanistan's cities.

Currently, about 23 percent of Afghanistan's population lives in cities, but this number has been rising rapidly in the last decade. Life in cities in Afghanistan is less physically demanding than it is in the countryside. Education levels are higher, there are wide variations in levels of wealth, and a wide range of kinds of work.

The relationships between towns and cities, rural villages, and nomadic groups are close knit. Each depends on the others to procure the goods they need. For example, town and city dwellers depend on grain and agricultural products produced in the countryside. People in rural areas depend on the towns and cities for manufactured goods. All come together on "bazaar days" in towns, when goods are bought and sold at the markets. Afghanistan's cities are connected to neighboring countries and the global economy through trade.

The Regions of Afghanistan

The geography of Afghanistan plays an important role in the country's history and culture. There are two massive mountain ranges called the Paropamisus and Hindu Kush that dominate the center of Afghanistan. The mountain ranges' snowmelts are a source of water for rivers and irrigated agriculture throughout much of Afghanistan. None of the rivers have enough water year-round to transport cargo or connect to the sea.

Afghanistan is a land-locked country. The rugged terrain and the presence of few roads makes travel through the region difficult. The dramatic changes in altitude mean that there are wide variations in climate. Farmers in different regions can produce a variety of fruits, nuts, and other crops.

The mountain ranges divide Afghanistan into four regions, each with a main city and distinct characteristics. Each of the four regions have economic and cultural connections to bordering countries. In spite of the ruggedness of the terrain, over the centuries trade routes have gone through the mountains to connect countries and regions beyond Afghanistan.

Herat: In western Afghanistan the city of Herat lies close to the Iranian border. An ancient city, it may have once had a population as large as one million before it was annihilated by invading Mongols in the twelfth century. It was once part of the Persian Empire, and most residents speak Dari, a dialect of Persian (the language spoken in Iran today).

Qandahar: The city of Qandahar has been at the center of politics and economics in southern Afghanistan for over five centuries. Large portions of southern Afghanistan are desert and as a consequence the population is relatively small for such a large region. The land around Qandahar itself is very productive agriculturally, producing cotton and varieties of fruit. Today, it also is where most of Afghanistan's opium poppies are grown, essential for the production of the illegal drug heroin.

Historically, Qandahar was a center of trade with India and the site of struggle

between the Indian and Persian Empires. Qandahar is also the site of the founding of modern Afghanistan. There, in 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani became the leader of a dynasty (a succession of family kings) that ruled Afghanistan until 1978. His successors moved the capital to the city of Kabul. Pashtuns make up the majority of Qandahar's population and speak the Pashto language. The Pashtuns are Afghanistan's largest ethnic group and have played a central role in Afghanistan's government for more than 250 years.

Mazar-i-Sharif: Mazar-i-Sharif is a city in northern Afghanistan. Because it is north of the Hindu Kush mountain range it was not influenced by Iran or India. Instead, it interacted more closely with the Turkish-speaking empires of Central Asia. Over thousands of years, countless Turkish speakers migrated to the region and assimilated with the Persian speakers who were already there. Today the region's inhabitants are ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks and who speak Dari and Uzbek. It is the site of a major Islamic shrine and is a center of pilgrimage for Muslims.

Kabul: Kabul is the largest city in all of Afghanistan and is the capital of the country. For thousands of years Kabul has connected the passes through Afghanistan's mountains with trade routes through India. Eastern Afghanistan is the most densely populated region of the country. Four to six million people live in the city of Kabul. This region is the most ethnically diverse region of the country. Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Hazaras are the largest groups in the region.

The geographic divisions of Afghanistan have always contributed to how the country is ruled. The central government in Kabul has had less control over remote regions. The different regions have often been dominated by different ethnic groups, and within ethnic groups by different tribes and clans (extended families).

What is the role of Islam?

Islam arrived in Afghanistan with invading Arab armies in 652 CE. As Islam gradually

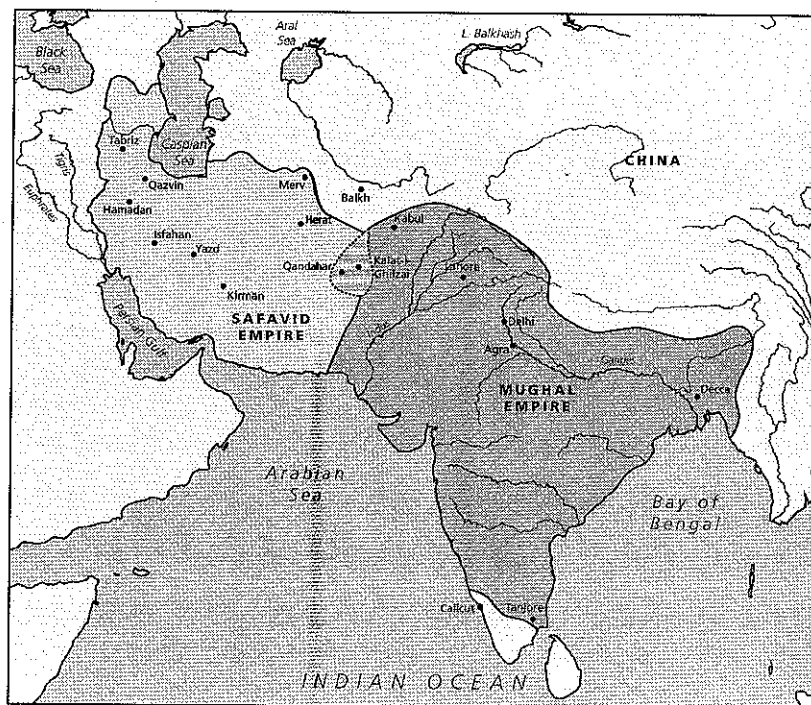
became the dominant religion, it created a common bond among the different ethnic and tribal groups. Today Afghanistan is an Islamic country, where religion is interwoven in the fabric of everyday life. Most Afghans practice Sunni or Shi'i Islam, the two most common interpretations of Islam among Muslims (see box below).

Yet being Muslim is just one aspect of the Afghan people's identity. Afghans have ethnic identities, tribal identities, and family identities. There also exists within Afghanistan a strong sense of national identity. Despite regional and ethnic differences and influences, Afghanistan's people are bound together by a sense of pride, and by the structure of a society that has created a high degree of interdependence and resilience in the face of hardship.

A Brief History of Afghanistan

The history of the people and lands of Afghanistan is extensive. What follows is a brief summary of events that can help you understand what is happening in the region today.

In the early 1500s, three great empires held the lands that would later become Afghanistan. The south and west, including the city of Herat, were part of the Safavid Empire of Iran. The east was held by the Mughal Empire of India, which made Kabul its first capital. And



The Safavid and Mughal Empires and the lands that would become present-day Afghanistan.

the lands north of the Hindu Kush were controlled by Uzbeks. The city of Qandahar in the south was contested by the Safavids and the Mughals and ultimately fell under the control of the Safavids.

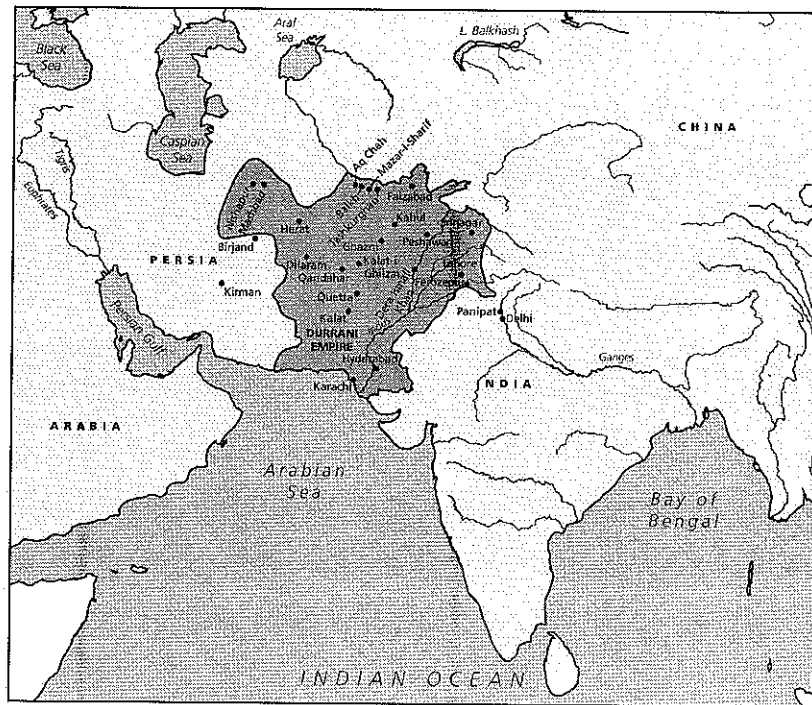
As the Safavid Empire and Mughal Empire weakened over time, they were able to exert less control over the lands of Afghanistan. This allowed the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in the region, to gain power. In a series of rebellions the Pashtuns expelled the Safavids from Herat, conquered the Safavid capital of Isfahan (today part of Iran), and killed the Safavid emperor. With groups trying to claim power after the fall of the Safavids, a man named Nadir Shah created an alliance of

Shi'i and Sunni Muslims

In general, Muslims attribute great importance to the life and times of the Prophet Mohammed, whose revelations from God became the basis of Islam. There are differences in interpretation of those events among the different sects of Islam, two of the largest of which are Sunni and Shi'i. Sunnis make up 85 percent of Afghanistan's population and Shi'a nearly 15 percent. There has been little violence between these groups throughout Afghanistan's history.

Iranian tribes and the Pashtuns, invaded India, seized large amounts of treasure, and weakened the Mughal Empire.

Nadir Shah's treasurer was a Pashtun named Ahmad Shah. When Nadir Shah was assassinated, Ahmad Shah became the king. He took the name Ahmad Shah Durrani (Durrani means "Pearl of Pearls"). He is considered the founder of the country of Afghanistan. Although he was Pashtun, he ruled over a multiethnic empire with a multiethnic government. (This would be true of Afghanistan's government until 1994.)



The extent of the Durrani Empire, 1762 CE.

When was Afghanistan founded?

In 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani became the first king of Afghanistan. His successors would rule Afghanistan until 1778. Ahmad Shah took control of the lands that make up modern Afghanistan and drove out the Uzbeks in the north. In the process, he formed political alliances, forged peace among ethnic groups, and created a central government. He even conquered portions of what is modern-day Pakistan and Iran. By conquering these lands he obtained wealth, which he used to support an army. He also distributed these riches to regional and local leaders in return for their loyalty to him and the central government.

How did Russia and Great Britain compete over Afghanistan?

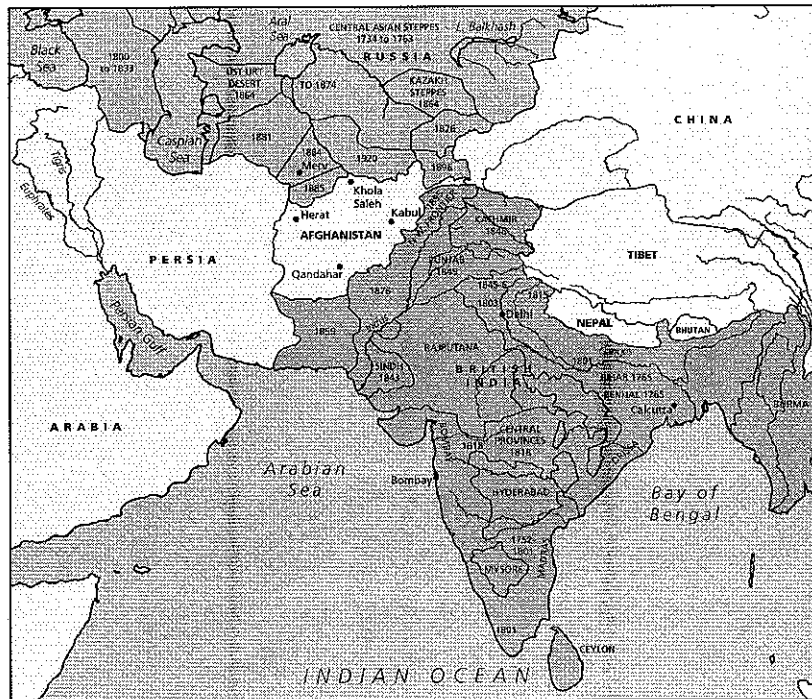
Ahmad Shah Durrani's successors were not as powerful as he had been. The Durrani empire grew divided and weakened because they competed for power amongst themselves. By 1826, the Durrani Empire had lost its lands in India and Persia and with them an important source of wealth. This loss of wealth led to a loss of power and influence. It also made the

Afghan government more vulnerable to outside forces.

At about this time, the British and Russian Empires began to play a more significant role in Afghanistan as they tried to dominate the region. The interventions and rivalries of these two imperial powers would have a powerful effect on Afghanistan for the next century. Afghanistan's rulers would struggle to manage Afghanistan's role as a small and relatively poor country stuck between two competing, powerful empires. For the Afghan people, one-hundred years of foreign interventions fostered a sense of unity and resistance to outsiders. Afghanistan's political leaders learned to exploit the competition between the empires in return for money and weapons.

For their part, the British and Russian Empires saw Afghanistan as key in protecting their lands and colonies. As Afghanistan weakened in the 1820s, Britain worried that the Russian Empire would threaten its wealthy colony of India. With the idea of blocking any Russian move towards India, Britain invaded Afghanistan in 1839 and forced King Dost Muhammad to step down.

The British occupiers wanted to establish a government that would reliably serve the interests of the British Empire. Britain's plans for controlling Afghanistan did not go smoothly. Afghan resistance due to anger at British policies forced a British withdrawal. During the retreat, nearly all of the British forces were wiped out. Britain sent another army to exact revenge, burning large parts of Kabul, destroying shrines and villages, and massacring inhabitants. Afterward, the British army withdrew from Afghanistan.



The Russian Empire and British India's borders with Afghanistan. The dates represent when Russia or Britain first controlled the territory.

Why did Britain make Afghanistan a protectorate?

Britain sent another unsuccessful military expedition in 1878 in response to concerns about Russian influence and the murder of a British diplomat. The campaign was so violent and brutal that even Britain's own government criticized the military's behavior. Among Afghans, it fostered enduring hostility towards Britain that lasted for generations.

“Every Afghan brought to death I shall regard as one scoundrel less in a nest of scoundralism.... Anyone found in arms should be killed on the spot like vermin.”

—Lord Lytton,
British viceroy of India, 1878

Britain put a new king, Abdur Rahman Khan, on the throne and in 1879 made Afghanistan a colonial protectorate. This arrangement gave control of Afghanistan's foreign policy and budget to the British colonial authorities in India.

The British government had decided that it was easier to buy cooperation from Afghan leaders than it was to fight them. Britain supplied weapons and money to Abdur Rahman in return for his loyalty. They also insisted that Afghanistan have no relations with any country but the British colonial government in India. This helped the king stay in power, but it also made him dependent on Great Britain.

“[A]n independent Afghanistan, friendly to us, would be infinitely more valuable in every way than a dependent or conquered Afghanistan.... [The Afghan ruler] must realize our view of his position as a weak power between two enormously strong ones—an earthen vessel between two iron ones....”

—Sir Bartle Frere, British colonial administrator, 1876

Britain's leaders cared little about how Afghanistan's king ruled his subjects, as long he did their bidding. Rahman, whose nickname

was the Iron Emir, was ruthless. He established a secret police, executed his opponents by the thousands, suppressed rebellions and uprisings, and used torture to keep his subjects in line. He asserted control over the regions of Afghanistan by replacing local leaders with ones he had chosen himself. He could not have done this without money and weapons from Britain.

“Every priest, mullah and chief of every tribe and village considered himself an independent King, and for about two hundred years past, the freedom and independence of many of these priests were never broken by the sovereigns.”

—Adbur Rahman Khan

At the same time Rahman was relying on British money, he was rallying public support and stoking national pride by criticizing Britain's role in Afghanistan. Rahman saw himself as a promoter and defender of Islam and warned that Islam and Afghanistan were under threat from outsiders who wanted to destroy Afghanistan's culture and independence. Rahman called the struggle a *jihad* (a struggle against the enemies of Islam). This religious concept was one that Afghans rallied behind and that unified their feelings towards Great Britain and also Russia.

How did British influence hinder Afghanistan's economic and political development?

Britain's role in Afghanistan profoundly influenced Afghanistan's economic and politi-

cal development. For Afghanistan's future leaders, the Iron Emir provided a model of how to control Afghanistan from Kabul. Afghanistan's rulers depended on funds from British colonial authorities to stay in power. At the same time, they ruthlessly repressed internal dissent, tried to limit outside influences, and restricted foreign businesses and investment, all in the interest of remaining in power. These policies limited Afghanistan's economic growth and made its rulers dependent on external support. (During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Afghanistan's rulers would continue to depend upon outside aid to prop up the government.)

How did Afghanistan evolve in the early twentieth century?

The resentment and humiliation of being a British protectorate fueled strong feelings of nationalism. In 1919, King Habibullah was assassinated because he was unwilling to declare independence. The following year, after a series of battles against the British army, his successor declared independence from Britain. King Amanullah Khan also introduced reforms he hoped would modernize Afghanistan. He emphasized education and increased educational opportunities for girls, reformed the justice system, built roads, and attempted to modernize the economy. The reforms produced resistance within Afghanistan for several reasons. First, they challenged the values that many held (particularly in rural areas), including values about the role of women in society. Second, these modernization efforts threatened the power of rural religious and tribal leaders. Finally, these programs cost money, and the new taxes they required were

The Durand Line

In 1893, Britain established what became known as the Durand Line. Named for Mortimer Durand, the British foreign secretary of India, it is the modern day border of Afghanistan and Pakistan and is about 1,600 miles long. At the time, the border divided British India from Afghanistan. The Durand Line bisected the region where Pashtuns live. British India became responsible for the tribes to the east, Afghanistan for the tribes to the west of the line. In the years to come political leaders in Afghanistan would argue that the Durand Line had given lands that should belong to Afghanistan to Pakistan. To this day, it remains a source of tension between the two countries.

a source of resentment. Amanullah was forced from power in 1929 and sent into exile.

Afghanistan went through a period of violence and political uncertainty as Amanullah's brothers struggled for power. These struggles made Britain and the Soviet Union uneasy. Both preferred a stable buffer state on their border and were sure that the other would take advantage of the chaos in Afghanistan.

In 1933, nineteen-year-old Zahir Shah became king of Afghanistan. He ruled for the next forty years. Members of his family occupied important positions of government as well. The new government repealed Amanullah's reforms, which were resented in the more conservative rural areas and a source of unrest and rebellion. Afghanistan, which had been at the forefront of reform among Islamic countries under Amanullah, was no longer a trendsetter.

How did the Second World War affect Afghanistan?

During the 1930s, ongoing mistrust of Britain and the Soviet Union led Afghanistan's government to seek assistance from Germany and Japan. Germany sent a handful of economic advisers to Afghanistan.

During World War II, both the Soviet Union and Britain demanded that Afghanistan expel all German citizens. Worried that the Soviets and the British would occupy Afghanistan as they had occupied Iran a few months earlier, Afghanistan's leaders forced German diplomats to leave and proclaimed a policy of neutrality. Afghans resented this neutrality policy because of their strong dislike for the British.

The end of World War II in 1945 led to significant changes in international politics that had profound effects on Afghanistan. Afghanistan's northern neighbor, the Soviet Union, emerged from the war as a world power. Despite their enormous war losses, the Soviets had built up an army of twelve million soldiers to defeat Hitler's armies. At the same time, the United States stood unrivaled as the strongest nation on earth. Unlike the combat-

ants of Europe and Asia, the United States had escaped the devastation of war. Moreover, in 1945 the United States was the only country to possess nuclear weapons.

Following the defeat of Hitler in 1945, Soviet-U.S. relations began to deteriorate. The United States adopted a policy of containing the spread of Soviet communism around the world.

During this period both the Soviet Union and the United States devoted vast resources to their militaries, and competed for power and influence all around the world. The hostility between the world's two superpowers would become known as the Cold War and would last for nearly four decades.

Britain, on the other hand, was an empire in decline. It had bankrupted its economy during the war and Britain's grasp on its wide-ranging empire was slipping. For example, in 1947, India declared and won independence from Britain. This led to the partition of India and the creation of West Pakistan and East Pakistan (today Pakistan and Bangladesh, respectively). The state of Pakistan bordered Afghanistan along the 1,600 mile-long Durand Line—the line that split Pashtun tribes on either side of the border (see box on page 9).

Afghanistan's leaders—who had relied on Britain for economic support to solidify their own power and to keep Russia and then the Soviet Union at bay—found themselves looking for a replacement to Great Britain. Eventually, both the United States and the Soviet Union would come to play important roles in Afghanistan.

The Cold War and Afghanistan

After Great Britain withdrew from the region, Afghanistan's leaders lobbied the United States to step in and provide economic support to the Afghan government. These efforts were led by Mohammed Daoud. Daoud, who was King Zahir Shah's cousin, was powerful and influential. Daoud would serve as prime minister from 1953-1963.

Initially the United States was reluctant to provide much aid to Afghanistan. But as Soviet aid to Afghanistan began to increase, the United States believed it had to counter the Soviet Union's efforts. The two powers began to compete for influence in Afghanistan.

"[I]t was clear to us that the Americans were penetrating Afghanistan with the obvious purpose of setting up a military base.... The amount of money we spent in gratuitous assistance to Afghanistan is a drop in the ocean compared with the price we would have had to pay in order to counter the threat of an American military base on Afghan territory."

—Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev

Ultimately, Soviet efforts dwarfed those of the United States. Between 1953 and 1978,

the Soviet Union provided about \$2.5 billion in military and development aid. The United States provided about \$533 million in aid to fund road building, dams, and education.

What effect did U.S. and Soviet aid have on Afghanistan?

The Soviet military aid ensured that Afghanistan's rulers could remain in power. With the aid, these leaders built an army strong enough to put down or discourage any revolt. The Soviet Union sent advisors to train Afghanistan's soldiers and military leaders. By 1973, two-thirds of the government's budget came in the form of aid and loans from foreign governments. Afghanistan was again dependent on foreign money, as it had been during the period of British influence.

But while aid kept the government entrenched, it did not create the kind of economic development that might have



Louis & Nancy Hatch Dupree Collection, Williams Afghan Media Project.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Kabul, March 1960. He is in the rear of the car waving his hat.

helped more of the Afghan people. For example, the government did little to encourage the creation of new industries or businesses that would create jobs. Much of the Afghan economy, particularly in rural areas, remained at the subsistence level. In 1978, 85 percent of the population were subsistence farmers or pastoralists who lived in the countryside. They produced 60 percent of Afghanistan's economy.

In addition, the Afghan government did not collect significant taxes from Afghanistan's citizens. Only about 10 percent of the government's budget came from taxes. This created a situation in which the government was not dependent on or responsive to its citizens.

Citizens, particularly in rural areas, felt little or no connection to the central government, which was seen as ineffective and corrupt. Government policies remained largely irrelevant for people in rural areas. Government functions fell primarily to local tribal and religious leaders.

Aid did increase the number of Afghans receiving an education, but the percentage of people who actually received a basic education remained quite low—only 10 percent of the population could read and write. The city of Kabul was the center of higher education. Students from rural areas who came to Kabul to attend university often remained there after they graduated because they saw no future for themselves or use for their education in the countryside. The best hope for Afghans who graduated from college was a job with the government, but after a while there were simply not enough government jobs. Even for those who did get these jobs, the rate of pay was so low that it encouraged widespread corruption. Frustration began to grow among Afghanistan's educated population about the lack of opportunity.

Why did Zahir Shah propose a new constitution in 1964?

Since the days of Ahmad Shah Durrani, political power and opportunity had rested in the hands of a small group people—usually

the family and friends of Afghanistan's kings and leaders. The best way to advance in society was through patronage—a system in which the powerful dispensed privileges or jobs in return for political support. This created competition and rivalries for power.

Zahir Shah believed that Afghanistan needed to increase political participation among more segments of society. This meant including rural and religious leaders who had been largely excluded from the decisions of the government in Kabul. Zahir Shah proposed a new constitution and assembled a convention of representatives from groups from around Afghanistan. This convention was called a *loya jirga* (a Pashtun phrase meaning "grand council"). Made up of 448 men and 4 women, the council debated the contents of the constitution for 10 days.

Eventually the council established a new government for Afghanistan: a constitutional monarchy with elected upper and lower houses of parliament. It allowed freedom of association, speech, and assembly. It also barred members of the royal family from high government positions.

But the reforms hardly ensured a perfect democracy. For example, the electoral districts were engineered to ensure that Pashtuns maintained a majority in Parliament. Although the king had promised to legalize the formation of political parties, he never actually did. Political parties might have allowed Afghans to organize themselves and represent their needs and interests in the government.

In spite of the new constitution, corruption and patronage continued to run rampant throughout the government. For the majority of Afghans who were not well off or educated or who lived in rural areas of the country, the constitution had little effect.

How did political opposition lead to a coup against the king?

Dissatisfaction with Afghanistan's government and the future prospects of its citizens increased. Students at Kabul University formed radical political groups that supported

communist ideas. Others formed groups that wanted to build a country based on Islamic law. But while these groups were vocal, they were small in number and did not necessarily represent the viewpoints of the country as a whole.

These organizations received some support from countries outside of Afghanistan. For example, Pakistan's intelligence agency (the Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI) supported some of the Islamist groups. The Soviet Union supported a number of communist organizations.

Dissatisfaction grew in Afghanistan during the 1960s and early 1970s in part because Afghanistan's economy also struggled. In 1971, a famine killed at least 100,000 Afghans. Corruption and patronage in the government remained widespread. These events contributed to discontent with government. In July 1973, when the king was visiting Italy, Mohammed Daoud, the former prime minister and king's cousin, organized a coup, declared the end of the monarchy, and made himself president of Afghanistan.

Daoud worked to crush the opposition groups that existed. Many were arrested and tortured, and others were executed. Many Afghans, particularly those who were politically active, fled to Pakistan.

Daoud also looked to form alliances with other states. For example, he sought to improve ties with Afghanistan's neighbor, Iran. Iran was then a firm U.S. ally and flush with money from the increase in oil prices. When Iran promised to build a railroad connecting Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, the Soviet Union's leaders grew more

concerned about losing influence and control. When President Daoud visited Moscow in 1977, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev pressed him to expel Western advisors from Afghanistan. Infuriated, Daoud refused.

“We do not allow anyone to dictate to us on how to run our country and who to employ. As to how and where we employ foreign experts it is the sole responsibility of the state of Afghanistan, if Afghanistan deems that it will remain poor but retain the right to decide its own affairs.”

—Prime Minister Daoud to Leonid Brezhnev, April 13, 1977

The relationship between the Afghan and Soviet governments was reaching a crisis point. The Soviet government had trained members of the Afghan military for decades and had also secretly supported groups it hoped would someday install a Soviet-style government in Kabul. They were about to be called into action.

In this section of the reading, you have explored what life is like in Afghanistan. You have examined the history of Afghanistan and how its economy and society developed. In Part II of your reading, you will explore why the United States took a role in Afghanistan and how the Taliban came to power. As you read about these events, consider how they affected ordinary Afghans. How did Afghanistan's relationships with its neighbors and the United States affect its development as a country?