

# Pros and Cons of Federalism in Afghanistan

by  
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## A General Overview:

There exist little reliable statistics to show the composition of population in the country. Estimates are widely varying according to the sources that make them. For example the majority Pashtuns make from 40 to 54 per cent of the population while the closest minority of Tajiks are estimated anywhere between 30 to 38 percent. Next in percentage is the Hazara Afghans who make between 8 to 15 percent.

Other minority groups include Uzbeks, Turkmens, Baloochis, Nooris etc who make smaller percentages of the population in Afghanistan.

There is little reliable information as to the true distribution of different tribes in the country. What is evident is that the majority of the Pashtuns live in the east, south, and south west with significant pockets in the west and northern parts of the country. The latter have been located in the 18th century by King Abdul Rahman Khan in an effort to unify his sequestered kingdom.

The economic base of land for cultivation and pastureland for livestocking as well as rivers and water sources, has strongly influenced the distribution of population in the country. Furthermore, the eastern and southern parts of the country are densely populated in the provinces of Nangrahar, Kunar, Laghman, Logar, and Kabul. In the south-west, Kandahar, Ghazni and Helmand claim greater concentration of population while the provinces of Farah and Neemroze are almost empty. In the north, the fertile lands in Baghlan, Kunduz, Samangan and Mazar-e-Sharif host major population concentration while the province of Ghore is scarcely populated. The central province of Bamiyan together with Uruzgan house Hazaras and Pashtuns respectively. Central Afghanistan has a severe cold climate and the land is mountainous and thus earning a living from the rock base has not been easy for the residents. In the west, the fertile and historic land of Herat houses another major population concentration.

## Historic Background:

Ever since establishment of the modern day Afghanistan by the great Durani Chieftain Ahmad Shah, some sort of provincial set up has been used to administer the land of the Afghans. Earlier it was Kandahar, Kabul, Mashriquee, Maimana, Kataghan and Badakhshan, Turkestan and Herat administrative divisions. Later Deputy Chief Administrators (Nayebul Hukooma) called Governors were appointed by the King to run huge administrative divisions. The Governor represented the authority of the King in the division. During the reign of King Zahir Shah and after the coming into force of the 1964 constitution, Afghanistan was divided into 28 provinces each run by a governor appointed on the proposal of the minister of interior, approval of the cabinet and ratification by the King. The provincial governors were to report to the minister of interior who was responsible for coordinating provincial finances, incomes and expenditures, security, education, health, agriculture, mines and industries etc in collaboration with the appropriate ministries of the government. The system worked in that unified rules were implemented regarding taxes, customs duties of imported goods and collection of revenues and expenditures worked out at the center. Military and foreign affairs were the two areas which were fully controlled by the center.

Although a true freedom of expression was a distant dream of the population, some deputies in the national assembly would voice the need for a more equitable distribution of resources to their constituencies. Some would express fear of imposition of cultural values of other ethnic groupings into their area, or exploitation of their resources for the benefit of other geographically destitute regions. Matters such as education, health, agricultural assistance and industrial development planning were also posed as regional problems. Even then there was almost no voice for establishment of a federal system for the country.

After the fall of the monarchy and establishment of the republican system by the late Mohammad Daoud in 1973, still the system of centralized government continued in the country. During the Soviet occupation years and when the war for freedom from communist rule was coming closer to its final victory in favor of the Afghan nation, people started thinking seriously about a system of government to replace the communist administration. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan failed shortly after its establishment in early 1990s, due to infighting and disunity among its leaders. Taleban government that replaced it was ignorant of the need for any modern method of governance.

It is since the establishment of the interim government replacing the Taleban and now during the era of transition that the issue of type of government for Afghanistan has gained momentum.

Presently a nine member committee has been sworn in by the former King, Zahir Shah to work on a draft constitution for Afghanistan. The draft will be scrutinized later by a thirty member commission and then it will be forwarded to a Constitutional Loya Jirga for final approval. This constitution would have to address many vital issues, among them the most important subject of the type of government and its administration.

Some high ranking members of the government mainly belonging to the Northern Alliance have expressed their personal views in favor of a federal system for Afghanistan. Some intellectuals also have considered the federal system as an alternative. Others have been very cautious to support the idea fearing a disarray and even danger to the country's sovereignty.

## Divisions Envisioned as Basis for a Federal System:

Proponents of federalism for Afghanistan would like to see the country divided on ethnic, linguistic or economic basis. This would give ethnic groupings freedom to shape up their own social and cultural affairs without the need for national coordination of the same. It would also mean dividing the country geographically into perhaps north and south or east, south, and the west along with the northern division. Others talk of river basins such as Helmand and Harirode and Kabul and Amu and Panj. A more pragmatic approach suggests division of the country into broader regions. Some base their definition of the federal delineation on the area controlled by the warlords at the present time. Yet others would even allow mass movement of population into new federal divisions. However, no definitive plan exists at present and even those who are thinking on these lines realize the impracticability of many of these propositions.

Fears of imposition of a federal system in Afghanistan by interest groups inside and outside the country can be allayed by considering the fact that hopefully a more representative Loya Jirga would decide on it.

This paper is an attempt to highlight some of the points in favor and against federalism in Afghanistan.

## The Issue of Federalism for a New Post-Taleban Government:

The issue of federalism for a new post-Taleban government in Afghanistan has received considerable scrutiny by many scholars and many interested forums and institutions already. To highlight some of the analytical considerations by well known authorities, here are some excerpts for and against a federal system of government for Afghanistan. These were published in a number of famous world media and collected in a publication by the Forum of Federation in Ottawa.

## Pros and Cons of Federalism for Afghanistan:

The forum paper in an overview of the subject referring to the difficulties facing nation builders in Afghanistan writes:

"Strong, sensitive assistance in the design of new constitutions will be essential if a definitive break with the recent unhappy past is to be achieved. Harvard lawyers may have written Japan's Democratic constitution in six days in 1946 but that won't work here."

The same paper has an article by David Cameron titled: "A Role for Federalism in Afghanistan after the Taleban." This article tries to lay out a description of what it is like to consider options such as federalism.

Another paper on History, Culture and Ethnicity in Afghanistan by Seddique Weera and Alison Roberts Miculan refer to the situations on the ground by an explanation of the ethnic structure in a historical perspective.

Nazif Shahrani, looking at the issue probably from the point of view of ethnic minorities, in a detailed article called "Not 'Who?' but 'How?': Governing Afghanistan After the Conflict" describes his view in favor of federalism and states: "At this critical moment in its history, what Afghanistan needs the most is what the United States already has-the federal model of decentralized government with a strong national constitution." He further states: "The painful lesson of Afghanistan's history has been that strong centralized government in any form will only lead to hegemony by one group, whether ethnic, linguistic, or religious, and abuse by ruling group at the expense of justice for all citizens of Afghanistan."

Reeta Chowdhary Tremblay in an article called: "A Federal Arrangement for Afghanistan" says: "The major challenge which federalism in Afghanistan will have to face will be to balance the territorial with the non-territorial requirements of the Afghan multicultural, multi-tribal nation."

Omar Zakhilwal of the Institute for Afghan Studies has a definitive stand on the issue and in his paper on Federalism for Afghanistan writes: " Many who know the ground reality in Afghanistan would agree that federalism is not only unnecessary under the circumstances, but it would serve as a recipe for deeper divisions among diverse ethnic groups in Afghanistan and would lead to a subsequent disintegration of the country." He further refers to the fact that: "Though ethnically diverse, politically and socially Afghans have mingled into one distinct entity: 'Afghan'. It is this distinction-as-Afghans- that has enabled them to remain living in one integral country."

Another paper on "The Regional and International Context: Are Peace and Cooperation Possible?" by Amir Hassanpour says: "The people of the region are fed up with despotism, both Islamic and secular, and with the wars and massacres that inevitably accompany various forms of despotism." He further writes: It is difficult to reconcile the

conflicting interests that Western powers and the states of the region pursue in Afghanistan. It may be more realistic, instead, if they accept and safeguard the neutrality of a democratic state in Afghanistan, which in turn does not allow its territory and citizens to be dragged into war, terrorism, and conspiracy."

"The Future: A responsible role for International Community" by Ralph Lysyshyn and Paul Mortan look into the future and state: " Through a consultative process, practitioners and academics from various backgrounds in federal systems, focused on the task of relating federal experiences from their countries to the choices that Afghanistan will face, could provide a valuable tool for Afghan state builders."

Jan Mohammad of the Institute for Afghan Studies in a personal note to this scribe detailed his views as such:

"How can Afghanistan be divided into internally autonomous regions without compounding the hardships Afghanistan has suffered in its recent years of war?" He further states: " The fact that proponents of federalism in Afghanistan think that dividing Afghanistan into autonomous regions will give all ethnic groups a chance to take control of their own destiny suggests that Afghanistan should be divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. However, the ground realities suggest that dividing Afghanistan based on ethnic and linguistic criteria is not possible. The Tajiks are mostly scattered from Kapisa province all the way to Herat in western Afghanistan. The Hazaras live side by side with the Pashtuns in Ghazni, Wardak and Uruzgan provinces; the Uzbeks live side by side with the Tajiks, Hazaras, Turkmans and Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan. Realistically, it would be impossible to divide Afghanistan along ethnic and linguistic lines." "An even bigger issue," he writes, " would be who is going to decide what regions goes to what ethnic group without sparking further armed conflict?"

All of the aforementioned scholars and all others interested in regulating the system of government that would rule over an independent and free Afghanistan seek a government for the country that would be effective and responsible, nationally and internationally, for Afghanistan's today and tomorrow.

## Some Examples:

It is hoped that the above excerpts would have laid the foundation for basic thought on the issue of federalism and many facets and aspects of the same as seen through the eyes of those who favor or dislike federalism as a system of government for Afghanistan. This paper will now try to look at examples of successful and failed federal systems in order to proceed with a factual judgment in the case of Afghanistan.

## The United States:

The greatest example of a successful federation is the government of the United States that has functioned well in all its levels and branches. But it is to be borne in mind that Afghanistan cannot be compared with the United States for the obvious reasons explained hereunder:

The size of Afghanistan is about fifty times smaller and its population more than ten times fewer than the United States. The United States is many thousand years younger than Afghanistan and its government including its capital was planned. While the founding fathers of the United States slated a constitution for the country, considering the original 13 colonies that existed as separate entities, they were in fact matching the needs of their contemporary societies with the requirements of time and the application of the principles of true democracy. The freedoms granted by the constitution to the

people were based on the doctrines of freedom simmering in France and elsewhere in Europe. Although the new republic was drastically different in its form and functionality to many monarchical societies of Europe, Washington, D.C. was fashioned after the beautiful town of Versailles which was home to the French Royalty before the revolution. The very first constitution based on modern principles was inked for Afghanistan during the reign of King Amanullah Khan. The United States boasts one of the highest literacy rates while Afghanistan has recorded one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. There is no comparison in per capita income in the two countries. Agriculture, highly developed in the United States remains primitive in Afghanistan. The Midwestern states in the US are not as much dependent on irrigation and rainfall as the vast unirrigated land in Afghanistan that suffers greatly during each period of drought. Communication underdevelopment limits exports of agricultural products in Afghanistan both inside the country and to outside buyers. Excellent transportation routes and equipment in the US ensure delivery of these products to the highly industrialized centers in the vast country of the United States and abroad. Industries are highly developed in the US while even the rudimentary small industrial undertakings in Afghanistan were destroyed due to a protracted war that lasted for quarter of a century. Education between the two countries is vastly different in its size, quality and coverage. Poverty and ignorance, the two natural enemies of democracy are still in power in Afghanistan.

Under these circumstances, copying a system of government into another country that is lacking in education, wealth and technology is like seeking an utopia amidst the blood of wars.

## Yugoslavia:

Let us now look at another example of a federal system. Let us look at Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was a viable federation of many nations such as the Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Albanians etc. Two major religions in the country consisted of Christianity and Islam. Under Marshal Tito's socialist rule in the vicinity of the big brother Soviet Union that had shown its rage at dissent in Czechoslovakia by its overnight invasion of that country in 1968, Yugoslavia used to be like a Haven in hell. Bosnians would drink tea with their Serb neighbors on the same street and enjoy the little freedoms Yugoslavia cherished in those days as compared to the strict communist rule elsewhere in the Soviet Satellite countries. On the other hand communist system and checks by the party ensured the continuity of the federal system in Yugoslavia under Tito. With Tito gone and the Soviet hold loosened, the federation fell apart and bloody war ensued claiming thousands of innocent lives and scarring the societies for generations to come.

A federal system for Afghanistan would make it closer to becoming a Yugoslavia. Although the religious divide in Afghanistan is not between faiths but within the one faith of Islam, ethnic groupings are diverse. However, throughout Afghan history, the ethnic make up of the society has led the Afghans to cherish their status as Afghans rather than members of the ethnic groupings. The name Afghan has become synonymous with a freedom loving nation that has never accepted foreign rule and would never do so. Today in Afghanistan there are more Pashtuns than in Pakistan, more Tajiks than in Tajikistan. This situation has given rise to a political fear in Afghanistan's neighbors. On the other hand, the mostly Shiite Iran eyes a strong influence over the minority Shiites of Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Baloochis live in the three neighboring countries of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan in harsh climatic conditions in relative poverty. A federal system in Afghanistan may make it easier for Afghanistan's neighbors to further intervene in the affairs of the country in favor of the ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities that they support and want to befriend. That in itself would create the danger of disintegration of the country. A centralized strong but just system of government would guarantee unity of the nation and maintenance of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

## Geopolitics of Federalism and the Economic Connection:

Geopolitical conditions too, do not favor federalism in Afghanistan. As this scribe had mentioned in his Country Corner Column on the web (<http://roashan.com>), Afghan geography has not provided for an equal distribution of resources. As a result, the highlands of the Hazaras in central Afghanistan are less productive due to extreme cold climate. Also lack of communication links such as reliable roads or railway system has broken off the area from the rest of the country with a result that even if a federal system provided local autonomy, the land would not be able to provide for economic prosperity of the residents. The same example applies elsewhere in a different perspective. For example, while land is fertile and more productive in the east, it is scarce and the population concentration is much higher and thus the resources in and of themselves do not suffice the needs until and unless a central economic system provides for distribution on a just basis of resources within the framework of a unified nation. In other words, if today an autonomous Hazaristan was carved out, it would not be viable if it were to stand on its own amidst competing regions and peoples for the meager economic resources.

Apart from the aforementioned issues, regional politics and international objectives have and shall continue to influence the affairs in Afghanistan. These influences would affect the shaping up of local powers inside the country in order to play for the interests of the foreign powers. This could be achieved more readily when a federal system is in place that would support different ethnic or linguistic groupings with a dangerous result of empowering them to fight each other for territory and resources.

## Prerequisites for the success of a federal system:

For a federation to be successful the following prerequisites need to be in place:

1. A reasonably educated population
2. Reasonable economic equality and opportunities
3. Identification in full with the federation's history and historical prides
4. Full respect to the differences in cultural diversity
5. A high degree of technological development coupled with effective communication and transportation systems for successful commercial transactions.
6. Access to the sea and possession of reliable airports for international commerce
7. Identifiable sources of revenues
8. A democratic system to understand and appreciate rules of federation.

Afghanistan today does not have any of the above qualifications.

## What is the alternative?

The alternative may be a centrally administered representative government based on a constitution that provides for a proportional and just distribution of resources and opportunities. A central government that is supported by a truly national army consisting, on an equal basis, of members of all ethnic, religious and linguistic groupings, would serve the present needs of the country in a better way. The need for establishing of a federal system does not arise as there is no urgent justification under the present circumstances for it. On the contrary, even under present transitional conditions, where warlords enjoy local but unregulated autonomy, they have resorted to fighting on administrative issues such as revenues. One example being customs duties levied on imports. This has made the traditional main item of revenue for administrations in the country. Now the border provinces that levy the duty keep it for themselves depriving the center and other inner provinces from this resource.

The constitutional committee and the upcoming commission are therefore entrusted with the grave task of scrutinizing all aspects of the issue before making a decision regarding the distribution of power between the center and the peripheries or a choice of federalism pushed by some minorities or international interests.