

with a heavy sauce of Rudyard Kipling on top. Fortunately or unfortunately for Thomas's travelogue, Y. B. was unable to play a role in the Afghan adventure because of the refusal of the Afghan government to issue an entry visa to a British officer.

Thomas 1976, 248.

See Mack 1976 and Caton 1999.

Curzon 1923, 59.

# Part I

## The Saur Revolution

### 2. Lives of the Party

Between April 1978, when the government of Nur Muhammad Taraki took office, and December 1979, when the Soviet Union took control of the Afghan government, a bold attempt was made to transform the Afghan nation into a different kind of social and political entity. Those responsible for this transformation envisioned the establishment of a socialist nation in which class oppression would be wiped out and the productive energies of the poor mobilized. Spearheading the new Afghan state would be the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which was envisioned as a vehicle for incorporating into the governing structure those previously excluded from power: low-ranking military officers and bureaucrats, students, and women.<sup>[1]</sup> After proper training and indoctrination in the principles of scientific socialism, cadres would go to the countryside to bring literacy to the people and, with literacy, an awareness of the economic and social conditions that consigned the poor to lives of brutal poverty and limited the economic and social development of the nation. There is little doubt that Taraki, Hafizullah Amin, and other leaders of the PDPA saw April 27, 1978, as the dawning of a new era, but the era that began was one of violence and discord rather than of revolutionary promise. Those who flocked to the party standard were far fewer in number than the tens of thousands who took up arms against the regime and the millions who chose exile in Pakistan and Iran over life in the new socialist paradise.

During the early 1980s, many observers came forward to offer their explanations as to why the Marxist revolution failed in Afghanistan. Opponents of the regime—especially the exile resistance parties headquartered in Peshawar—argued that the people saw through the regime's propaganda and raised the banner of *jihad* (struggle in the path of Allah) to preserve Islam and dislodge the infidel usurpers from power. Supporters of the regime blamed the popular backlash on the machinations of the traditional elite—members of the royal family, landowners, and religious clerics—who played on the “superstitions and prejudices” of the people in order to misrepresent the party's real intentions.<sup>[2]</sup> After the Soviet invasion in December 1979, which installed Babrak Karmal in power, Soviet analysts refocused their criticisms on the deposed leadership,

especially former Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin, who was depicted as being an opportunistic despot willing to pervert the principles of scientific socialism in order to preserve his own power.

My examination of the Marxist revolution focuses on the first eighteen months—between the revolution of April 27, 1978, and the assassination of Taraki by his former disciple and successor, Hafizullah Amin, in October 1979. This first eighteen months constituted the crucial historical moment during which the revolution was still winnable. Taraki was the “father” of the revolution and its most visible symbol, and his death marked the demise of its promise, a demise that was fully signaled two months later when the Soviet Union invaded and transformed Afghanistan into an occupied country. The approach I take in understanding the failure of the Marxist revolution is different from that of other commentators on this period; it has two components, the first of which has to do with how I depict the regime. Thus, rather than trying to characterize the regime in generalities and from a distance, I use the government’s own statements, published in newspapers and broadcast over Radio Afghanistan, to establish how its leaders viewed themselves, their relation to the people, their enemies, and their place in Afghan history. In keeping with this approach, the organization of the two chapters in this section is not chronological but thematic; they focus on such matters as the characterization of the revolution, the persona of the leader, the depiction of the party and of the people, and the portrayal of the regime’s enemies.

The second feature of my analysis is my concern with understanding the regime in relation to traditional ideas of governance that held sway in Afghanistan. To date, most examinations of the revolutionary period have been undertaken through the lens of one or another imported ideology (and I view the declarations of the exile Islamic political parties as only slightly less “foreign” than any of the others). In this chapter, I use as my point of reference the principles of governance set forth by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in the last part of the nineteenth century and subsequent reworkings of those principles, especially during an earlier period of revolutionary upheaval under Amir Amanullah Khan in the 1920s. Hated by many as a tyrant, Abdur Rahman nevertheless forged the basis of governance in Afghanistan and the understandings that people have retained of the natural and proper duties, role, and comportment of its leaders. Amanullah provides an illuminating secondary point of reference for this analysis because he anticipated many of the reforms that the Marxists would later try to put in place, though he did so from his position as a member of the royal family. The transformations that he sought to bring about before his overthrow in 1929 were in many respects forerunners of those of the Marxists and were particularly revealing of the problems they later encountered.

## **From Coup d’État to Revolution**

Dream Comes True—Thousands Throng Arg

KABUL, May 2 (Bakhtar).—Tens of thousands of our compatriots, old, young, women, men and children yesterday and today visited the Arg and Delkusha Palace and other

edifices there which have been partly damaged due to ambitious resistance of the last link of despotic Naderi family, Mohammad Daoud. . . .

The patriotic citizens of the country while looking at the majestic palaces and establishments inside the Arg talked to each other about tyranny, revelry and ambition of corrupt Naderi family who were using glamorous palaces for their treacherous deeds, and expressed appreciation to the valiants who victoriously brought down the tower of tyranny and despotism.<sup>[3]</sup>

The events of the 7th of Saur, 1357 (April 27, 1978), soon came to be referred to by the Marxist regime as “The Glorious Saur Revolution.” In truth, these events are more accurately described as a military coup d’état in that the overthrow of the government of President Muhammad Daoud was engineered by a few thousand military officers under the instructions of the outlawed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan. President Daoud had once been allied with the PDPA, and with the party’s help he had succeeded in orchestrating his own coup d’état against his cousin, King Zahir Shah, in 1973. But, after taking power, Daoud had gradually moved away from his former Marxist allies and two days before the April 27th coup had struck against them, ordering that both Taraki and his deputy, Hafizullah Amin, be thrown in prison.

The officers in charge of the arrest had not done their job however. They had allowed Amin to remain under house arrest for a number of hours prior to taking him into custody, and during this time Amin had used his son as a messenger to contact military officers and to set in motion the operation that they had been preparing for and fantasizing about for years. The following morning, tanks moved into position at strategic installations and intersections throughout the capital, while jet fighters strafed the presidential palace where Daoud, his family, and principal advisors were holed up. Daoud’s republican regime, which had ruled with an authoritarian severity for the preceding five years, collapsed with surprising swiftness. Other military units that might have come to the president’s aid hesitated in their confusion or were delayed by officers sympathetic to or bullied by the coup organizers. Precious time was lost, and Daoud and his entourage were killed in a bloody shootout that effectively beheaded the government and left it unable to respond to the crisis.

At first, the identity of the new regime was masked. Military officers made the first announcements, and the Marxist orientation of the coup plotters was concealed. This caution continued for several days until it was finally revealed that the man in charge of the newly instituted Revolutionary Council was Taraki. Educated Afghans at least knew of Taraki from his years as a publisher and writer for various leftist newspapers, most notably the *Khalq* (Masses), which was the organ of the Soviet-leaning PDPA during the late 1960s, when political parties were briefly allowed to operate in the open. The first and most crucial task of this new regime was to make good on its “revolution” by rallying people to the cause. Taraki and his party supporters (known as “Khalqis”) knew full well that they had a negligible base of support outside the military. From the time that Daoud had begun to turn against them, their principal strategy—the strategy that provided such

ample and unexpected rewards—was to follow a “shortcut” to power, as Taraki himself admitted in a press conference on August 16:

There were many ways for the deliverance of the people of Afghanistan among which was the classic one based on the ideology of the workers and peasant class. This classic path was a long one. . . . This is the scientific way and we have struggled on the basis of this ideology and this is the basic principle. But we thought to find a short way which could change the destiny of the people of Afghanistan. Fortunately we found this short way in the fact that first of all a party should be founded and through this party work should be done to this effect. . . . We were able to penetrate in the army and give political and class consciousness to the sons of the people and get them organized on party basis.<sup>[4]</sup>

The success of the coup d'état of April 27, 1978, brought with it the need for the PDPA government to justify its actions, especially its violent killing of President Daud and his family. The basis of this justification was “the historic crimes of the Naderi dynasty,” which had ruled Afghanistan since 1930, when Nadir Khan, a distant cousin of the former king Amanullah Khan, seized power from the former bandit known as Bacha-i Saqao, who had forced Amanullah's abdication. Nadir qualified for PDPA scorn because of his opposition to the reform program of Amanullah and for having received British assistance in mounting his campaign to overthrow Bacha-i Saqao.<sup>[5]</sup> In Khalqi parlance,

[Nadir,] with the help of blackguards of colonialism and under their leadership, . . . gathered around himself all traitors and intrigued against independence seekers and true and alert sons of the people of Afghanistan with the assistance of the very same masters, and as he assumed the throne, he indulged in creation of division among the people. He wrenched from the people their freedom, their rights and their bread, and put the men of the valleys and forces of the motherland in stifling chains.<sup>[6]</sup>

The most effective rallying cry in Afghanistan since the mid-nineteenth century had been the threat of British imperialism, and the Khalqis mined that vein by associating Nadir with the British. In their vision of history, Nadir was the British lackey who ousted Amanullah (the fact that it was Bacha-i Saqao whom Nadir overthrew rather than Amanullah is elided in the Khalqi account), thereby “undoing the good he had done and throwing dear Afghanistan into the dark labyrinth of oppression and misery.”<sup>[7]</sup> One of the consistent themes that the Khalqis returned to was the use of religion by agents of imperialism—“Muslim-looking *farangis*” (foreigners) as they were often called—who veiled themselves “under the guise of Islam.” In their interpretation of history, religion had consistently been used as a disguise that allowed outsiders to interfere in Afghan affairs.

Given his commitment to opening up the political process and introducing social reform, Amanullah would seem a natural ancestral figure for the PDPA to hold up for veneration, but because of his failure to implement these reforms, his having been a member of the royal family, and the general hostility to his memory still felt by many Afghans, Amanullah was not much commemorated by the new regime, and connections between

his past and their present were not widely commented on. Rather, the government focused its attention on the Naderi dynasty, which replaced Amanullah, especially the last surviving member of that dynasty, whom they had deposed—Muhammad Daud. Daud had long been despised by many Afghans, particularly tribal Pakhtuns, for his harsh suppression of groups that had protested against government policy. Daud's anti-insurgency activities had been carried out during his younger days as a military officer and provincial governor, but Afghans have long memories for such offenses, and the regime tried to play on this animosity as a basis for popular support. "Now the Naderi dynasty and its last hangman representative is no more, history is on the path of wishes and will of the noble nation of Afghanistan. We shall tell constantly stories of high handedness and decay of the Naderi dynasty to the brave people and the whole humanity. Long live the great nation of Afghanistan and 'Long live the heroic army of the country.'" [8]

When it first took power, the PDPA had soft-pedaled its Marxist orientation, but by the end of its first summer, the regime began to be more outspoken in its pronouncements, gradually dropping hints of its leftist orientation in its written declarations and providing even more visible indications in the symbols of power it adopted. The most dramatic of these indications was undoubtedly the display on October 19 of an all-red flag that resembled the flags of the Soviet Central Asian republics. As the majority of Afghans are illiterate, this symbol was more revealing of the government's direction than anything published in the press, but at this stage the government seemed confident that it could weather any adverse consequences of admitting its alignment with the Soviet Union and its adherence to Soviet-style Marxism. Thus, on November 7, in honor of the anniversary of the October Revolution, the *Kabul Times* published photographs of Lenin and Leonid Brezhnev, and the next day a front-page headline quoted Hafizullah Amin to the effect that the "Saur Revolution is continuation of Great October Revolution."

Afghan leaders were in fact eager to draw connections to the Bolshevik revolution because they saw their own revolution as the direct lineal descendant of that earlier event, while also believing that the social exigencies of the Afghan situation made their own Saur Revolution uniquely valuable as a model for the rest of the world. This sentiment is evidenced in a long speech by then Deputy Prime Minister Amin delivered in 1978 at the opening ceremonies of the Afghan Academy of Science. [9] The speech is mostly a long-winded description of elementary Marxist theory, with myriad references to "infrastructures" and "superstructures" and "scientific sociology," but it also contains a lengthy exegesis of how the PDPA envisioned Afghan society and why the Afghan experience could be considered both the proud successor to the October Revolution and a unique event in the annals of Marxist revolutionary struggles.

Thus, alone among all the world proletarian revolutions, "it was the great Saur Revolution which transferred, like the great October Revolution, the political power directly from the exploiters to the working class." What made the Saur Revolution unique and gave it a distinction greater even than that of the October Revolution was that "the great Saur Revolution for the first time in the world triumphed under the feudal conditions when the feudal lords and peasants constituted its basic classes":

In the great Saur Revolution, in spite of the fact that it triumphed according to the general and particular laws of the epoch-making working class ideology, the army played a major proletarian role that is the powerful center of the victorious revolution. The army, as a result of the regular work of PDPA, had been transformed into Khalqi forces equipped with the scientific working class ideology and organized through the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the vanguard of the working class of the country.

Marx had predicted that a true proletarian revolution could occur only in a society where capitalism had triumphed and the working class had been thoroughly beaten down, and Lenin himself had despaired of mobilizing a revolutionary movement among the Central Asian peasant peoples. But, where Marx and Lenin had failed, the PDPA had triumphed by using the military as a "shortcut" to revolution.

On one level, Amin's speech can be seen as a glorification of what was in reality a necessity. Rather than being a stroke of strategic brilliance, the choice of the military as the avenue by which to seize power was an all-too-conventional one in the Middle East and South Asia, and one mandated in this instance by the fact that the other segments of the society with a proven capacity for military adventure—namely, the tribes—were generally opposed to parties of all ideological persuasions. Therefore, the PDPA's employment of the military was somewhat unusual merely because it had been able to mobilize this group as effectively as it had through ideological means. Since the recruitment of military officers had been Amin's responsibility, his glorification of this aspect of PDPA history can also be seen as an act of self-congratulation. Still in the thrall of his unexpected success, Amin glorified the military option as a stroke of genius that qualified the Saur Revolution—and he himself—for a special place in the Marxist pantheon.

In seeking reasons for the eventual failure of the Saur Revolution, one should keep the attitude exemplified in Amin's speech in mind, for it demonstrates the kind of hubris that led the party to believe in the historical inevitability of the process of revolutionary transformation it had set in motion. The word Afghans use (in both Dari Persian and Pakhtu) for hubris is *kibr*. A man who acts beyond his station or who behaves in a way that indicates that he seeks merely to benefit himself while ignoring the precepts of society will be accused of "doing *kibr*," or being excessively proud (*gharur*). Taraki and Amin are thought by many Afghans to have committed precisely this sin of acting beyond their rank and claiming a greatness for themselves that others were not prepared to bestow. The fate of such overweening men, Afghans will tell you, is usually disastrous for themselves and others, for their arrogance not only creates resentment in those around them but also makes them incautious. More than anyone else, the man who risks all on a bold gamble, as Taraki and Amin undoubtedly had done, must be most prudent and circumspect. The PDPA leadership, however, had forgotten or never learned this folk wisdom, and their self-absorption caused them to become ultimately more concerned with theoretically defined class relations than with the actual social relations that existed on the ground.<sup>[10]</sup>

## **A True Son of the Soil**

One may be able to introduce a certain person with a few words or phrases. But the fact is that one should deal with each person with as much details as his characteristics and qualities call for.

The reason is there exist in human societies such personalities that a few words or phrases don't do any justice to introduce. They may need thick volumes to deal only with their thoughts.

The True Son of the People, the Chief Commander of the Great Saur Revolution, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the President of the Revolutionary Council and Prime Minister, Comrade Noor Mohammad Taraki, is one of those prominent world figures who needs a few words or phrases for his descriptive title only. One has to compile volumes to introduce his formidable personality in due details. <sup>[11]</sup>

On October 30, 1978, the Political Department of the People's Armed Forces published the first extensive biography of Taraki. The biography is an interesting document that provides an insight into not only who Taraki was but also how he and the party thought their leader should be depicted. Many educated Afghans living in Kabul in the 1960s and 1970s knew who Taraki was, at least by reputation, but even in Kabul few knew much about the man. The name "Taraki" told them that his ancestors were from the Taraki tribe, a branch of the Ghilzai confederacy, which meant that he was in all likelihood a native Pakhtu speaker and that his family was probably originally from Ghazni Province, south of Kabul. But this was all most people knew or could infer since Taraki was unknown outside a small circle of educated Afghans in the capital; the fact that so little was known about the man who would be the ruler was a significant matter in a society where family background mattered a great deal.

Americans may look to the myth of the self-made man as justification for forgetting the past and starting afresh, and they have shown themselves willing to vote into office men like Bill Clinton who come from dysfunctional families of little means and less inherited prestige. However, in Afghanistan, especially among Afghan Pakhtuns, who make up the majority of the population, kinship is inescapable and vitally important in reckoning who a man is and where he properly belongs. The most profound innovation introduced by the PDPA was not in the area of land reform or women's rights. Amir Amanullah, President Daud, and other leaders had begun chipping away at these impediments to change, and the PDPA's plan—had it succeeded—would have sped up a process that other regimes had initiated. Far more radical for Afghan society was the notion that kinship didn't matter, that literally anyone could lead the nation.

One sees this idea made flesh in the person of Taraki, who—according to his official biography—was born in the aptly named Sur Kelaye (Red Village) in Ghazni Province in July 1917 to "a poor semi-peasant, semi-shepherd family." At the age of five, Taraki was hired by a widow to run her errands and look after her house; however, he did not stay in this position long, as his father wanted his son to become literate so that one day he might earn his living as a scribe. Life was never easy in this household. Securing sufficient food

for the family was an uncertain proposition because of both poverty and the chicanery of others: “Comrade Taraki’s father was always bothered by problems arising in connection with his precarious mode of living. The great and back-breaking difficulties that he had confronted as a peasant cum shepherd and destitute childhood in relation to the oppressing feudal lords and crafty tribal chieftains were indeed highly taxing to him.” However, Taraki’s father “suffered silently and consoled himself with the signs of brilliance he had traced in his prodigious son. The thought that one day he would see his son in such a movement triumphantly marching among the hard-working intelligentsia, serving the country, raised high hopes in his heart.”

As the story progresses, we discover that there was no noble ancestor dispossessed of his rightful inheritance, no hint that the boy who would be president had any prior claim to that title. The only nobility here is the nobility of poverty and toil, which Afghans had never before seen exalted and treated as worthy of praise. In Afghan culture, nobility is inherited and can only rarely be forged through experience. As Shahmund, an elder of the Mohmand tribe described it to me, “‘The sword of real iron cuts [*tura pa asil ghutsa kawi*].’ For example, Faiz Gul is the brother of Haji Reza Khan. Since Faiz Gul is a good-for-nothing, his son is just like him. His grandson is also nothing. Since Haji Reza Khan is a good man, his sons are also like him. His grandsons are also like him, and maybe his grandsons’ sons will be even better than him.”<sup>[12]</sup> Belief in the inherited nature of nobility is also the traditional pillar of Afghan political culture. With the lone exception of Bacha-i Saqao, who ruled forlornly for a year in 1929–1930, all the rulers of Afghanistan from 1747 until 1978 had come from the Durrani tribe. Within that tribe, there were vicious battles for the throne, but no one effectively challenged the right of this tribe to rule until the Saur Revolution.

Justification for the tribe’s status was succinctly expressed by Abdur Rahman in a proclamation to his people; at the beginning he notes that “everyone’s share [*nasib*] is determined by God on the basis of his merit, circumstances, and capabilities. . . . Each one stands in his own place and position, and hence you people should be grateful to God and to the king.” The proper attitude of every subject should be gratitude, for it is God who has determined one’s position in life:

In whatever rank and position you are and wherever you stand look downward to know how many people are lower than you. When you look downward and see your high rank and position you will receive three blessings [*ni‘mat*]. First is the consent and contentment of God, for it is written, “If you express your gratitude to God for the blessings He has given you, He will increase them for you.” Second is the approbation and good will of your ruler for you. The third is that you can keep that rank or position that you have, and you can be hopeful for more progress and promotion in the future. God has said that “if you are grateful for His blessings, He will increase them for you.” The increase of blessings, in fact, is progress in rank [*daraja*].<sup>[13]</sup>

Abdur Rahman’s proclamation was written in 1898, eighty years before the Saur Revolution, but Afghans would still concur with the principles contained in it because they are based on transcendent values associated with Islam. Thus, at the center of

traditional Afghan political understanding is the belief in the supremacy of God as creator of the universe and ultimate judge of human affairs and in the related tenet that the ruler is bound in a covenantal relationship with God to ensure the safety and prosperity of the community. The ruler's responsibility, above all else, is to enable the people to practice their faith and to keep them from *fitna*, a term that can be translated as sedition, disorder, or discord but that carries the larger metaphysical notion of being in a state of anarchy presaging a total collapse of the community.

Far from affirming the notion that “anyone can be president” or that “right ultimately wins out over might,” Taraki's biography—read through the lens of traditional Afghan political principles—proposes the altogether novel and heretical notion that God erred in allocating his blessings and that human action can correct that mistake. In Afghan culture, people believed that the poor were poor because that is the way God made them; it was their duty to make the best of their situation and to be grateful and obedient to God as well as to those higher than themselves in return for the favors they were given. While this attitude didn't preclude people from trying to advance their fortunes and to make a better life for themselves than their parents had experienced, it was an altogether different matter who could claim to rule the country. To seek personal prosperity was one thing. To establish oneself as the ruler of all the people was something else entirely—something beyond what any ordinary person could aspire to. Taraki's life history, however, reverses these basic assumptions; it proclaims that the poor were that way not because of God but because of systematic oppression by “feudal lords and crafty tribal chieftains” and that anyone—even a lowly shepherd's son—could claim what had been until then the hereditary throne of the Durrani tribe.

Equally revolutionary in light of traditional culture is the implicit notion presented in Taraki's biography that the means to get ahead in the world is by deserting one's home and taking up with strangers. Thus, we read that, while still in his teens, Taraki left his native village and sought employment in Qandahar as an office boy at an overseas trading company that sent him to work in its Bombay branch. By dint of his intelligence and hard work, Taraki rose to the position of clerk and used his spare time to read, learn English, and become acquainted with a larger world of affairs otherwise unavailable to Afghans at that time. We don't find out as much in the biography as we might like about what happened in Bombay. There is the suspicion that Taraki may have been exposed there for the first time to works of socialist philosophy, and some have also speculated that he may have had his first contact there with a Soviet agent who cultivated him for future service.

However that may be, Taraki returned to Afghanistan in 1937, settling in Kabul and using his newly acquired education to begin a career in journalism, which was still in its infancy in Afghanistan at that time. According to the biography, during this period Taraki first “realized with a profound political and class consciousness the pathetic conditions under which the people lived in Afghanistan and became keenly interested in political activities.” Allowing his emerging political sensibilities to influence his writing, Taraki was “harassed” for articles he wrote, but he persevered and began for the first time to meet with other like-minded members of the educated class who shared his convictions.

He also started writing short stories and novels of a realist nature with strong political themes that reflected his experiences growing up in poverty.

Most important, from 1943 to 1948, Taraki began to lay the groundwork for the establishment of a political party by “preparing a large number of the intelligentsia to fight against absolute monarchy, aristocracy and despotism of the descendants of Yahya, Nader’s grandfather.” Ultimately, these “long years of struggle led to the founding of Weesh Zalmayan” (Awakened Youth), one of the nascent leftist political parties in Afghanistan that briefly flourished during a period of government liberalization. During the five years of the party’s existence (1948–1953), Taraki, who was then in his early thirties, apparently played an active role but was not so central to its activities as other, older men were or as latter accounts produced by the party portrayed him to be. Thus, one PDPA report had it that Taraki wrote the statement of principles of the party, and the biography itself indicates that Taraki was so significant in the activities of the party that he was “exiled” for his activities to the Afghan embassy in Washington, D.C., where he was appointed press attaché.

Being handed a job in the foreign service in a desirable Western capital is admittedly a strange kind of exile, but, given the later pattern developed by Taraki and Amin of sending disgraced former colleagues off to serve as ambassadors in various distant locales, it is not improbable that the government, in sending Taraki away, was trying to rid itself of someone who was becoming if not dangerous at least a nuisance. Whatever the reality here, Taraki’s moment of truth came when Daud—the same man he would later overthrow—was appointed prime minister by Zahir Shah. In protest at this appointment, Taraki publicly resigned his post in Washington and held a press conference, “explaining the conditions prevailing in Afghanistan, exposing the bankruptcy of the absolute monarchy under the Nader Family with a bunch of feudal lords ruling Afghanistan.” In response, Daud is said to have recalled the former press attaché, at which point Taraki had to decide whether to stay in exile abroad or to return to Afghanistan to face the consequences of his protest. The biography tells us that he went back to Afghanistan, and, “upon his return to Kabul, he telephoned the despotic Daoud from the Kabul Cinema, telling him ‘I am Noor Mohammad Taraki. I have just arrived. Shall I go home or to the prison?’ ” For reasons that are not guessed at in the biography, Daud allowed him to go home but kept him under police surveillance throughout his tenure as prime minister.

We can see in Taraki’s several journeys abroad the reinvention of a common theme in Afghan life histories. In *Heroes of the Age*, one of the common threads I noted in the lives of a tribal chief, a would-be king, and a Sufi mystic was the protagonist’s exile—sometimes voluntary, sometimes not—from his home. For the tribal chief, Sultan Muhammad Khan, that exile came at an early age, after the murder of his father, when it was no longer safe for him to remain at home. Exile for Sultan Muhammad brought the decisive moment in his life, when he had to resolve whether to stay in the court of his patron, the nawab of Dir, where he had manufactured a comfortable life for himself as a scribe, or to return home to face the dangerous challenge of confronting his enemies and thereby regain his honor. For the king-in-waiting, Abdur Rahman, exile came in his

twenties, after seeing his father and uncle both lose the throne of Kabul. He too found a safe refuge and comfortable position with a foreign ruler; however, ultimately, like Sultan Muhammad, Abdur Rahman became dissatisfied with the subservient life of a courtier and set off to recover the throne that was rightfully his. For the Mulla of Hadda, exile meant leaving an impoverished home at a young age to gain religious knowledge and spiritual advancement in India. There, he not only gained the training he needed to become a religious authority but also encountered and fulfilled his preordained destiny by meeting the Akhund of Swat, who would guide him in the path of Sufi enlightenment.

In Taraki's life history, the journey motif was redeployed and reinvented in interesting ways, with the first journey to Qandahar and Bombay resembling that of the Mulla of Hadda in particular. Thus, Taraki at a young age also decided to leave the poverty, oppression, and limited horizons at home to seek refuge and possible advancement abroad. His search exposed him to other worlds and provided him with the tools needed to open up new fields of knowledge, tools that he then took back to others in his native land. The second trip abroad, to Washington, followed the pattern of the exile journeys of Sultan Muhammad and Abdur Rahman. In Taraki's case, it was not a family feud or dynastic upheaval that led to his exile but the early struggles of the radical movement to free Afghanistan from the chains of despotism and oppression. Both Abdur Rahman and Sultan Muhammad faced their moments of truth when they had to decide whether to chance a return that would lead them to their death or to their destiny. The biography tells us that Taraki also had to face the same sort of crisis; he had to decide whether to stay abroad in safety or to face the uncertain consequences of a return to the wrath of Prime Minister Daud.

His decision to return home and openly confront Daud is the most heroic act ascribed to Taraki in the biography. While his involvement in covert party organizing was certainly risky, this is the only time Taraki is portrayed facing off against an adversary (albeit over the telephone). Reading between the lines, one might speculate that Daud didn't take Taraki seriously enough to bother putting him in prison and felt that surveillance was perfectly adequate for so humble an adversary. Daud during this period was sympathetic to most of the ideological positions of the leftists, and the educated elite with whom both men associated constituted such a small circle in those days that some of Taraki's old friends might also have exerted their influence on Daud to keep him out of trouble. Or maybe none of this happened at all, and this story masks a more ignominious period during which Taraki accepted a government position for the money and then later had to explain it away by making up the story of his confrontation with the prime minister. Whatever the reality, the biographical depiction of these events provides Taraki with a narrative moment of reckoning that would have been typologically comprehensible to Afghans. Whether successfully or not, the biography tries to make of the new leader a recognizably Afghan, though also thoroughly modern, "hero" for a revolutionary age.

The next stage of this would-be heroic life features suffering ("Comrade Taraki . . . did odd jobs to eke out a living. However, as soon as he would land a good job, he was suspended through the intelligence service"); the production of a string of "revolutionary and class-conscious" novels;<sup>[14]</sup> and the founding of the PDPA ("Comrade Taraki with a

high revolutionary spirit almost openly took the initiative to launch his political party. To achieve this end, he began his meetings with a number of youths whom he had already groomed as young revolutionaries so that he could establish the workers' party equipped with the working class scientific ideology"). The context of the party's founding was the advent of a period of democratic liberalization in which Zahir Shah promised to open up the political process. This era began with the drafting of a new constitution in 1964 and the election of a representative parliamentary assembly in 1965.

Taraki himself ran for the lower house (*wolesi jirga*) of parliament from his native district in Ghazni, but he was defeated, as the biography explains, "through Government machinations and shameless intervention in the election." Other Marxists, however, including Babrak Karmal and Dr. Anahita Ratebzad, were elected and immediately set about making their presence felt in the assembly. The elections had produced a lower house split between conservative and Marxist factions, with a relatively weak and ineffectual center, represented by Prime Minister Muhammad Yusuf, who had been appointed by the king to replace Prime Minister Daud. Immediately after the opening of parliament, the Marxists began accusing the new government of corruption and forced a vote of confidence; it was held on October 24, 1965, before a gallery packed with shouting, chanting Karmal supporters, who managed to disrupt the vote. The next day, the police locked the demonstrators out of the parliamentary chambers, so they took their protest to the streets and were eventually fired on by overwhelmed Afghan troops. This event led to more demonstrations and finally forced the resignation of Yusuf. <sup>[15]</sup>

Although no direct role in the parliamentary crisis is ascribed to Taraki, the biography does tell us that he was working in this period to organize the PDPA and to found "the glorious historic and brilliant *Khalq* newspaper." Although the paper was allowed to run for only six weeks and six issues, it managed in that short time to further divide the already factionalized political climate, especially through its open declaration that "the main issue of contemporary times and the center of class struggle on a worldwide basis, which began with the Great October Socialist Revolution, is the struggle between international socialism and international imperialism." <sup>[16]</sup> Religious leaders in the upper house of the parliament (*meshrano jirga*) demanded an investigation, and the government decided to ban the paper outright on May 23, 1966.

Despite the banning of *Khalq*, other leftist newspapers were started, including *Parcham* (Flag) and the Maoist *Shu'la-yi Jawed* (Eternal Flame). These publications played a cat-and-mouse game with conservative opponents and government censors, taunting with cartoons and editorials, creating minor provocations that went right up to the line that would get them noticed but not banned. One incident in particular stands out during this period, the publication of a poem in *Parcham* written by Bariq Shafi, the former editor of *Khalq*, titled "The Bugle of Revolution." In this poem, the writer intentionally used forms of eulogistic praise (*dorud*) traditionally reserved for the Prophet Muhammad to celebrate Lenin. Where earlier provocations had resulted in scattered protests, impassioned mosque sermons, and delegations demanding an audience with the king, "The Bugle of Revolution" created a nationwide furor, as news of the outrage spread throughout the country. Inspired by the increasing immorality of the left, mullas from throughout the

country traveled to Kabul, where they gathered in the Pul-i Khishti mosque near the central marketplace to protest the poem and give vent to their larger concern over the expansion of leftist influence.<sup>[17]</sup>

In the parliament, leftist deputies employed the same practice, provoking their clerical opponents while trying not to directly offend the government. Karmal, in particular, was famous for offering public praise of the king while getting into symbolic tiffs with religious deputies, as evidenced in the following story told by Samiullah Safi, a fellow deputy of Karmal's, whose story is the centerpiece of Chapter Four:

One time Karmal started a speech without the usual invocation of *bismillah* [in the name of God]. One of the deputies announced, "I have a legal objection." The president of the assembly, who was Umar Wardak, stopped [Karmal] from talking and asked what his objection was. I don't remember which deputy it was, but he said that "whenever Karmal makes a speech, he doesn't say 'bismillah.' He must say '*bismillah ul-rahman ul-rahim*.'" If other people would forget to say the "bismillah," he presumably wouldn't have minded, but since it involved Karmal, who was a communist and a servant of Russia, . . . people were sensitive to his manner of speaking. So he said, "He must say the 'bismillah' before he begins his speeches."

They put this objection to a vote—whether or not he should say "bismillah." When the voting took place, even Hafizullah Amin, who was present, raised his hand to show that he thought that "bismillah" should be spoken. The only person in the parliament who didn't raise his hand was Karmal. After that, Umar Wardak hit the desk with his gavel and said, "It has been unanimously decided that Mr. Karmal must say 'bismillah ul-rahman ul-rahim' before starting his speeches." Then they gave him permission [to speak], and the light went on the microphone; but he started speaking from where he left off and didn't say "bismillah." Immediately the assembly broke out in a great hubbub. There was lots of shouting. Karmal didn't say "bismillah," so he pushed the mic away and leaned to one side, giving up on his speech.<sup>[18]</sup>

Another, similar confrontation between Karmal and Maulavi Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi, a Muslim cleric who later became the leader of one of the exile Islamic resistance parties, resulted in a skirmish on the floor of the parliament in which Karmal received a cut on his head. According to Louis Dupree, "When his followers demonstrated outside the hospital, [Karmal] grabbed additional bandages and energetically tied them around his head before appearing to wave feebly to the spirited crowd."<sup>[19]</sup> The ultimate effect of this sort of incitement was the paralysis of the government, as a succession of prime ministers tried and failed to exert some modicum of influence over a dysfunctional parliament and incendiary press. Ultimately, this failure led to the mobilization of a coup d'état by Muhammad Daud, a cousin of Zahir Shah and the last prime minister prior to the advent of the democratic era in 1964. Among Daud's early supporters were members of the PDPA, but they soon became disillusioned with Daud as he reverted to the autocratic style of governing that he had relied on during his earlier decade of rule.

At this moment, according to Taraki's biography, Taraki struck on his plan to take "a shortcut" to revolution via the armed forces: "Previously, the army was considered as the tool of dictatorship and despotism of the ruling class and it was not imaginable to use it before toppling its employer. However, Comrade Taraki suggested this tool ought to be wrested in order to topple the ruling class thereby and this end could be achieved through extensively doing party work in the army and diffusing the epoch-making working class ideology among the armed forces." Taraki entrusted the job of mobilizing a military base to the man who was becoming his closest confidant and protégé, Hafizullah Amin.

Comrade Amin who was responsible for the party affairs among the armed forces and enjoyed the trust of the young officers respecting his orders with extreme faith and loyalty soon realized that now the young officers in the armed forces on the one hand adored their great leader Noor Mohammad Taraki and on the other hand were ready to proceed with any revolutionary action with utmost discipline to place themselves in his command with deep loyalty and devotion. The Khalqi officers in the armed forces believed that Comrade Amin as the most faithful follower and disciple of Comrade Taraki was sincerely following his beloved leader's instructions and faithfully and loyally reported to him on behalf of the Khalqi officers.

Throughout the mid-1970s, President Daud, who earlier in his career had been known as the "red prince" for his leftist views, became steadily more suspicious of his former allies on the left and of the intentions of his Soviet patrons. Many believe that in the months before the Saur Revolution, Daud was sufficiently concerned for his position that he was making plans to renounce or severely restrict aid from the Soviet Union while increasing his reliance on assistance from Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of which he visited in early 1978. Daud's suspicions of the left were galvanized on April 17, 1978, when unknown assassins shot down Mir Akbar Khyber, one of the best-known Marxists and a close ally of Karmal. Khyber's funeral attracted a large and vociferous crowd, and a new wave of leftist protests appeared likely in the days ahead. To forestall that eventuality, Daud dispatched police officers in the early morning hours of April 26 to arrest Taraki, Karmal, Amin, and other leading Marxists at their homes. Taraki appears not to have anticipated this move:

Holding his shot gun and on the verge of firing on the police, Comrade Taraki thought it was the thieves or the reactionaries who had raided into his house but soon realized that they were police officers of the inhuman Daoud Regime. When Mrs. Taraki confronted these officers, one threatened her with his weapon and wounded her arm with his bayonet: Sprinkling her blood on the faces of the police officers, Mrs. Taraki exclaimed "this blood would not remain unavenged."

Showing a political dexterity that would ultimately be his undoing, Amin took advantage of the arresting officer's leniency in allowing him to remain in his house for several hours to send a message to Marxist officers instructing them to begin their coup d'état on the following day—April 27. Thus, the long planned coup d'état got under way while Taraki, Amin, and other party leaders were in prison. Not until the afternoon, several hours after the beginning of the operation, were military officers able to "release great heroic leader,

Comrade Noor Muhammad Taraki and others from their dark cells” and convey them by armored car to Radio Afghanistan, where military officers announced to the Afghan people that a new revolutionary government was now in control of the homeland. After the announcement and as the battle for Kabul continued to rage, the officers took Taraki and other leaders to an air force base outside the capital where they would be safe until the outcome of the coup could be assured.

Thus ends the narrative portion of the biography, the last paragraphs being taken up with fulsome praise for Taraki’s personal attributes. What is striking about the presentation of these attributes is the same thing that one notes about the biography as a whole—that is, how atypical Taraki is as an Afghan leader. Throughout, the story hardly mentions any acts of personal bravery or heroism, beyond the possibly made-up instance of standing up to then-Prime Minister Daud over the telephone. Where Amin (the likely author of the biography) is singled out for praise for his coolheadedness at the time of his arrest, Taraki in the same circumstances appears to have been confused, thinking that he was under threat from burglars rather than from the police, and the only real defiance comes from his wife.

According to one man with whom I have spoken, whose brother led the detail assigned to arrest Taraki, the soldiers could not find him right away because he was hiding in the bathroom. “A soldier opened the door of the bathroom and found Taraki in there with his wife’s chadar [veil] over his head. Then the soldier took off the chadar and called out that he [Taraki] was in the bathroom.”<sup>[20]</sup> Whether this story is true or not, the hagiographic biography provides few details that augment the image of Taraki as a great leader in any usual Afghan sense. To the contrary, we find out that in the moment of battle, when the revolution could still have collapsed, Taraki had no hand in coordinating operations but was instead whisked out of harm’s way to the relative safety of a military base already in the hands of coup leaders.

In addition to the absence of any singular deeds, Taraki’s life is also notable for other missing elements, most importantly children. In Afghanistan, having children is not only a symbol of a man’s potency, it is also his claim to immortality. In Taraki’s native Pakhtun culture in particular, men without children are soon forgotten, and their names—having no more significance—are quickly elided from tribal genealogies. The absence of a family is also thought to make one vulnerable to the designs of others. Family members, and especially sons, are the ultimate insurance policy, for a man with many sons, along with brothers and nephews, has *mlatar*—male relatives who will “tie their waists” (something like “girding one’s loins”) for battle to defend their kin and avenge attacks on them. The only individuals who are exempt from needing kinsmen for self-protection are mullas, whose poverty and devotion to religion protect them from assault, and a few celibate saints like the Mulla of Hadda; these saints acquire a surrogate progeny through their disciples, whose names are linked to theirs through lines of spiritual transmission (*silsila*), which functions as a kind of genealogy in giving status and position to those included in them.

Taraki's childlessness is noted in the biography, along with the notation that "all members of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan revere him as their father and he reciprocally treats them as his own children."<sup>[21]</sup> The implication here is that the party for Taraki displaced the family. This equates in a way with a tenet of Leninist ideology—that the party should be more important to its members than the sentimental attachments of birth, kin, and nation—but this is a notion that only the most alienated and deracinated Afghans would willingly accept. And it would anyway appear that rather than the party's eliminating such attachments as bourgeois and antirevolutionary, for Taraki the party was a substitute family in which he invested the same sentimental attachments that others placed in their families. That Taraki had this need to treat his younger colleagues as children makes him in some ways a more sympathetic character, but it also made him in Afghan eyes somewhat pathetic and all the more unworthy as a national leader.

Another lack in Taraki's life prior to the revolution is property. As the biography notes, "Comrade Taraki does not own any personal property with the exception of a one story mud house in Sher Shah Mina, Kabul." This feature of the life history is again laudable from the point of view of Marxist doctrine and shows Taraki neither to have been corrupted by inherited wealth nor to have bent his principles to acquire property. But even if Taraki's relative poverty was a mark of his commitment rather than his incompetence, the valorization of being propertyless at age sixty-one is still incomprehensible in Afghan culture, which views property as both a sign of *ni'mat* and an indication of a man's success in life. A man of property is thought of as being "heavy," or *drund*, which implies that he is in a position to provide hospitality and benefit to others. Conversely, a man without property is considered "naked" (*luchak*) and unable to fulfill the requirements of honor, which dictate that a man must be able to provide for himself and for others. Such a man is also vulnerable to the assaults of the world, for he lacks the means with which to defend himself. If a man without property cannot meet the basic demands of honor, how much less prepared is he to handle the far greater obligations of rule? One might even say that having such a man as ruler would be a sign of God's displeasure with his subjects since the benefits that God allows to the people emanate in the first instance from the ruler.<sup>[22]</sup>

A final lack that can be noted in the biography is what might be called a kingly persona. Abdur Rahman, the so-called Iron Amir, was the archetype of the battle-hardened warrior who was quick to avenge any slight or suggestion that he was not in charge. Many considered him the cruelest of Afghan monarchs, but as Lord Curzon noted at the time, "None had given so large a measure of unity to the kingdom."<sup>[23]</sup> Abdur Rahman's son, Habibullah, was gargantuan in girth but a shadow of his father as ruler; however, he at least possessed the hauteur that Afghans expect of their rulers. So, too, did Amanullah. For all his plans for reform and his willingness to recast his subjects as citizens, Amanullah carried himself as a king and left no one wondering who was in charge. Zahir Shah was a less prepossessing man, and many Afghans believe that his apparent weakness and unwillingness to rule with a strong hand started in motion the disastrous decline that culminated in the Saur Revolution.

Given the respect accorded strong political personalities in Afghan society, one of the more curious features of recent history is that a man of Taraki's modest character and talents should have managed to topple Afghanistan's two-hundred-year-old dynasty. In the modest language of the biography, "Comrade Noor Mohammad Taraki is a dear friend to all hard-working, honest and patriotic compatriots. He is a just leader and teacher. He is highly cultured, modest and compassionate." What he was not was the "great leader" of government propaganda, at least not in any sense that Afghans traditionally recognized. As already noted, there was no evidence of physical stamina or bravery, no signs of any brilliance as a warrior or orator; and despite the exalted claims made by Amin for the strategic brilliance of Taraki's revolutionary "shortcut," he made no notable contributions to revolutionary ideology. Above all else, he was a dreamer and a conversationalist who was apparently most persuasive when speaking with a small group of younger men, and perhaps his single greatest talent was for bringing together more powerful and repellent personalities who, in his absence, could never have worked or even remained in the same room together.

In this sense, one could argue that Taraki's rise to the top of the Afghan political hierarchy was comparable to the rise of another previously unknown figure—Ahmad Shah Abdali—who was a second-tier tribal leader when a deadlock between more powerful khans led to his being chosen to lead the Durrani confederation of tribes in 1747. The difference is that Ahmad Shah proved to be a true leader; he seized his opportunity and led his tribe to foreign conquests and two centuries of unchallenged hegemony over the Kingdom of Afghanistan. Taraki's ascendance, by contrast, was short-lived, and his ultimate failure to consolidate his rule reveals a more telling relationship, that between the leader of the PDPA and his own tribal people—the Taraki Ghilzai.

Like most other Ghilzai tribes, the Taraki were opportunistic nomads. Some were sheep and goat herders who migrated with their flocks each summer to high pastures. Some were long-range camel nomads who hired out their animals to carry goods from one market to another. Some were itinerant workers who traveled to India in the winter months to engage in casual labor, while other, more ambitious and adventurous types journeyed as far as Calcutta, where they "hawk[ed] clothing on credit or carr[ied] on usury."<sup>[24]</sup> Taraki's own early career as a clerk for the Pushtun Trading Company in Bombay mirrored his tribe's age-old association with South Asian trade, and, in that tradition, Taraki remained throughout his life a middleman, a broker in foreign goods who operated on the margins between different social worlds, never fully committing himself to anyone, never being fully accepted any place. This is not the most generous but it may be the most realistic assessment of an itinerant and interstitial career that brought a most unsuitable figure to the pinnacle of power and precipitated a conflict that would consume his people long after his death.

### **The People's Party in Cultural Context**

Comrade Taraki was tirelessly in touch with those who were equipped with the working class ideology, struggling individually or in separate circles, linking them up with a view

to creating the working class party. As a result of his creative work and on the basis of his ardent love for the people, about 30 young men representing all patriotic, progressive and revolutionary youth gathered at Comrade Noor Mohammad Taraki's humble residence at Sher Shah Maina, Kabul on January 1st, 1965, establishing the first Founding Congress of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.<sup>[25]</sup>

Hidden behind the rhetoric of fraternal feeling contained in this passage is the reality that the party that got its start on January 1, 1965, was in crisis almost from the start. The first outward sign of that crisis occurred in 1966 and involved a dispute over whether Amin should be made an alternate member of the central committee of the party. Taraki supported the proposal, but it was resisted by Karmal and a number of his allies on the central committee who would leave the PDPA in 1967 and form their own Parcham (Banner) party. There were a number of reasons for the split. Taraki and others in the Khalq branch of the party were mostly rural Pakhtuns and Pakhtu speakers, while Karmal and his supporters were predominantly Persian speakers from Kabul and other Tajik-majority regions. Karmal was also suspected by Amin and other Khalqis because of his supposed ties to the royal family, though the nature and extent of these ties have long been in dispute.<sup>[26]</sup> Some have contended that there was a close personal link between Karmal and Daud through Karmal's father, an Afghan general, who was appointed by Daud during his tenure as prime minister as governor of Herat and Paktia provinces. According to these sources, Daud is even suspected of providing financial assistance to Parcham after its split with the Khalq faction.<sup>[27]</sup>

While the extent of Karmal's personal association with the royal family is uncertain, there were philosophical and strategic differences between the Parchamis and Khalqis, with Karmal advocating a more conciliatory line toward the monarchy of Zahir Shah and a gradual approach to political change.<sup>[28]</sup> In apparent gratitude, the government allowed Karmal's faction to continue publishing its newspaper, *Parcham*, well after the *Khalq* newspaper had been shut down, a fact that further antagonized Taraki, Amin, and other staunch Khalqis. Later, when Daud overthrew the monarchy, Karmal and other Parchamis were initially welcomed into Daud's circle. Expectations that this embrace would lead to real power were quickly dashed, however, as many Parchami activists were dispatched to low-level government positions in out-of-the-way areas. Even then, the Parchamis continued to advocate a more cautious approach to political change while the Khalqis, led by Amin, were making secret plans for a military coup d'état.

Irrespective of ethnic and linguistic factors, possible royal connections, and policy disagreements, the source of the division between Khalq and Parcham arose more than anything else from the profound personal animosity between Karmal and Amin. In his role as mediator and benevolent friend to all the world, Taraki succeeded from time to time in overcoming the rift—Khalq and Parcham unified again in 1977—but the antipathy between Amin and Karmal was too deep to mend permanently. Some sense of the personality differences and the dislike that Amin and Karmal shared for one another can be gleaned from another story told to me by Safi:

When Hafizullah Amin would come in [to the parliamentary chamber], he would go and sit down with some mulla, and talk and joke. Then he would sit with some elder or some khan or some other deputy or with some educated person. He'd joke, sometimes he'd sit in this chair, sometimes he'd sit in that chair, although everyone knew his seat was on the left [where the leftist deputies tended to sit]. He would talk and joke with everyone, and the deputies would say to him, "Hey, infidel [*kafir*]! Hey, devil [*la'in*]." They'd say that sort of thing, and he would laugh. Everyone rejected his political connections, but all of the deputies had social and personal relations with him—everyone, even this Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi.<sup>[29]</sup> So many times, Amin would sit at a table and talk and debate with them, even Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi. . . . Karmal [however] would act like a *sardar* [prince]. He would enter in the manner of a Muhammadzai [member of the extended royal family]. He wouldn't socialize with the deputies. He would come in, looking very serious. He would always go to the left and sit down in a chair in his customary and permanent place. That wretched man would just sit there, quietly, not saying anything. This was his character. . . .

Karmal and Hafizullah Amin were not only opposed to the government, . . . [but] also opposed to each other—violently opposed. It was the most serious opposition that I saw in the four years I was in the parliament. Not once did I see Hafizullah Amin and Karmal shaking hands. By way of example, I tell you that we deputies would be standing around outside before the beginning of a session or during breaks. If Hafizullah Amin was standing in the circle and Karmal went by, he wouldn't be able to enter the circle—out of fear. He was scared of Hafizullah Amin, just like a mouse, and he wouldn't come into the circle. He would go far away and wouldn't shake hands with anyone, but when Karmal was standing in the circle and Hafizullah Amin arrived, Amin would stick out his hand like this to each one and look angrily in [Karmal's] direction, not offering his hand, but instead offering it to someone else. And in these circles he would dominate the whole conversation, and Karmal would eventually slink away like a mouse, as though he wasn't included in the group. He couldn't speak in front of him. That's the truth.

Amin's great gift was for persuasion. Where Karmal was an effective orator but aloof in person, Amin was personable and easy in interaction. A rural Pakhtun from Paghman, close to Kabul, Amin was unusually well educated for someone of his background, having gained the opportunity, after graduating from Kabul University in the late 1950s, to study at Columbia University in New York City, where he received a master's degree in education. On his return to Afghanistan, Amin worked as a teacher and principal at Ibn-i Sina High School and the national teacher-training college (*dar ul-ulum*). After the founding of the PDPA, Amin used his position and access to young people to recruit members to the party. Because of these early efforts, the Khalq had a considerable edge over Parcham and every other party in gaining support among young educated men, especially among primary and secondary schoolteachers who had been inspired by Amin and who went out into the provinces to spread the message. This support would initially give Khalq an advantage, but it would also ultimately prove to be part of the government's undoing after the revolution as zealous young teachers became a focus of popular resentment.

After the 1973 coup d'état against Zahir Shah and the decision by the Khalqis to begin implementing their "shortcut" to revolution, it was natural for Amin to play the role of organizer. In the case of military officers, he had an additional recruiting advantage in that many officers were already being sent by the Afghan government to the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia for military training. By 1970, an estimated 7,000 junior officers were trained in those two states, compared to 600 who went to the United States and lesser numbers to Turkey, India, and Great Britain. <sup>[30]</sup> As Hasan Kakar has noted, the ideological training of these young men was well along even before Amin got to them. <sup>[31]</sup> Whether the majority of these officers became communists as a result of their indoctrination is doubtful, but the experience of studying abroad in a more advanced country does seem to have turned many against their own government. So too did the situation they found on their return, for as Anthony Hyman has pointed out, returning junior officers found it difficult "to reconcile their own lowly positions and poor pay with the prestige of army officers in Afghan society as a whole—or their own merits (as they saw them) against the superannuated and inefficient senior officers." <sup>[32]</sup>

Likewise, young officers saw firsthand the failure of parliamentary democracy and then experienced the disappointment of seeing Daud's left-leaning "revolution" become mired in corruption and turn increasingly defensive and conservative. With the collapse of emergent institutions, there was the additional failure of political leaders to come up with development programs for the country at large. Junior officers trained in the Soviet bloc may not have converted to Marxism as a result of their experiences in the Soviet Union. However, most of them did come back more radicalized than when they left, and the failure of the parliament and then of Daud's regime to make good on the promise of reform certainly made many officers sympathetic to the possibilities of a homegrown Marxist movement. At the same time that junior officers were feeling increasingly alienated from the military establishment and the government, they were also feeling increasingly cut off from their rural roots. In this context, Amin offered not only ideological comfort but also a sense of belonging. The party with its coded language of fraternal fellowship and its secret meetings became for many an alternative family and tribe, replacing the ones they had left behind and from which they had become increasingly estranged by education and distance. The vast majority of those whom Amin recruited were, like himself, deracinated Pakhtuns, and they appear to have felt considerable loyalty to him.

Amin was a strong personality and tended to create as many enemies as converts, but among those whom Amin clearly seduced was Taraki himself. As the biography makes clear, Taraki acted as Amin's protector when others on the central committee wanted to see his authority diminished. As the biography explained it, "Comrade Taraki used to pay much attention to the cultivation of Comrade Amin's tactical and strategic talents . . . [and] defended him against all sorts of intrigues and propagandas, . . . safeguarding his loyal disciple against all intrigues resorted [to] by some colleagues consciously or sub-consciously which eventually proved to be in the interests of the enemy." When the party reunified in July 1977, the Khalqi wing refused to let the Parchamis in on their plan to mount a coup d'état, both because of Parcham's cautiousness and because of the Khalqis' suspicion that Parchamis might tip off the government to their plans. According to

Taraki's biography, Khalq suspicion of Parchami loyalty to the revolution proved well founded at the time of the April 27th coup d'état—first, when Karmal “argued that the revolution was doomed to failure and hence members of Central Committee should be dispersed in villages and hide there” and, then, when he urged that Daud only be arrested and not killed.

Rapprochement between the two wings of the PDPA proved short-lived after the revolution. Though Karmal was initially given the post of vice chairman of the Revolutionary Council and deputy prime minister (a title he shared with Amin), he was ousted, along with various of his Parchami allies, in July 1978 and dispatched as ambassador to Czechoslovakia. In reporting on Karmal's ouster, the government-run *Kabul Times* was respectful of Karmal and treated his new assignment as a considerable honor. However, with the news of the diplomatic posting of other Parchamis—Nur Ahmad Nur to Washington, Anahita Ratebzad to Belgrade, Dr. Najibullah to Teheran, and Mahmud Barylay to Pakistan—it became clear that this was nothing less than a purge, a fact the government made clear in August with the announcement of the arrest or ouster of various Parchami-aligned “traitors,” whom the government accused of subverting the revolution. These announcements were followed on September 23 by published confessions of various Parchami conspirators who admitted to participating in plans for a counterrevolution that was being orchestrated by Karmal and his allies. The Khalq wing was in a position to execute this purge of its former allies because of its stronger position among military officers.

Following the purges of July, the government set about the task of revolutionizing Afghan society. The main thrust of this effort involved winning over the people, an effort that is discussed in the next chapter. But, particularly after the divisive Parcham purge, Taraki and Amin had also to ensure the loyalty of their own comrades, most important, those in the military who had brought them to power and who could just as easily remove them. On August 1, Taraki addressed the ranking officers of the Fourth and Fifteenth Armored Divisions of the People's Armed Forces of Afghanistan at the People's House (the renamed presidential palace) in Kabul. This was one of many speeches given by Taraki during this period, and it is representative in its focus and style.<sup>[33]</sup>

Taraki began the speech by indicating that he was addressing the officers “in a party capacity as comrades and members of the party cadres.” He waxed nostalgic about “how we used to meet at night and how our comrades used to exert great caution and travel to our home under cover in order to meet us occasionally.” Then, he reminded his audience that it was through these early efforts that “we were able to eliminate the class of exploiters, the era of pharaonic despotism, aristocracy, the ruling classes and those who traveled with them and bring a people's government in their place.” After more preamble about the importance of “progressive ideology,” Taraki turned to his main subject, which was the role of the military itself, and advised his audience “to once again carefully study the workers' and farmers' ideology,” as well as “to closely observe party order, discipline and ideology and not only to observe them but to act on them.” A productive party member, Taraki asserted, was “a philosopher, a dialectician, an historian. . . . Such prominent party members will be able to build our society in accordance with the needs

and wishes of the people and can rescue them from the present social and economic ailments.” After digressions into foreign policy and other matters, Taraki concluded his address with this counsel:

Couple your studies and knowledge with action; find good, clean and pious comrades. You should not only be an example of political, social and moral piety in the army but throughout the country so that everyone will say that the Khalqis are truly honorable and trustworthy people to be proud of. Our comrades set such an example even before the revolution. I always used to advise them: Always observe your piety, whether you are a teacher, a director or whatever job you may have. . . . We are capable of attracting even greater trust in our society and of introducing changes for the benefit of the people thus implementing our slogan, which was bread, clothes and shelter. From then on the people can realize their happiness, prosperity and progress.

In examining this speech, I have been struck by certain parallels to the proclamation of Abdur Rahman’s that I analyzed in *Heroes of the Age*.<sup>[34]</sup> That document was also addressed principally to members of the military, and the amir—like Taraki—had the same intention: reinforcing the loyalty of the army to the state. Likewise, the earlier text demonstrated some of the same rhetorical techniques as those evinced in Taraki’s address—for example, when Abdur Rahman indicated his personal association with his audience (“During the time of my reign, I have always been sympathetic and benevolent to you people of Afghanistan”), which mirrors in its way Taraki’s nostalgic remembrances of early party meetings. Like Taraki as well, Abdur Rahman offered benevolent advice (“Listen, obey, and weigh well what I am saying to you, for no use can come from lamenting later if you do something wrong now”) and urged a sense of responsibility for those less fortunate than themselves (“You should sympathize with the subjects, who are your own tribesmen and who are continually employed in cultivating their lands, in cutting their crops, in thrashing their corn, in gathering in the harvests, and in winnowing the wheat from the chaff”).

However, as obvious as the similarities are between Taraki’s address and Abdur Rahman’s proclamation, more striking and ultimately more significant for explaining the revolution’s failure are the ways in which Taraki’s speech differs from Abdur Rahman’s proclamation. Thus, where loyalty to the party was Taraki’s principal message, Abdur Rahman emphasized that loyalty to the ruler was an expression of obedience to God, who determines the ranks and positions of mankind (“Obeying the order of the king with complete devotion and loyalty is just like obeying the commands of God”). Taraki’s address included no reference to God, as one would expect given his ideological orientation, but in leaving aside such references, he also left himself vulnerable to attack. In Abdur Rahman’s stern pronouncements, it was sinful to feel envy for another’s good fortune, and he warned of divine punishment for those who were bitter about their lot in life. Taraki, for his part, could only counsel caution and offer the lesser threat of earthly retribution against those who would try to subvert the revolution.

To further strengthen his message, Abdur Rahman also had the rhetoric of honor at his disposal. (“When you lose your position, you will be walking down a street in a state of

disgrace [*be abru*] and dishonor [*be ghairat*]. No one will even mention your name. You will be forgotten.”) And he had as well recourse to family and kinship. (“The most important thing for you to know is that the kindness and mercy of the king for his subjects is like the kindness and mercy of a father for his son.”) This language is deeply rooted in Afghan culture, and Abdur Rahman appropriated that language for his own ends by portraying himself simultaneously as God’s regent, honor’s arbiter, and father of the nation. The language of class struggle, however, has no ground in Afghan culture. While the rhetoric of segmentary opposition (Ghilzai versus Durrani, Pakhtun versus Hazara, tribes versus state) is well entrenched in Afghanistan, the rhetoric of socialist opposition (the party of “workers, farmers and toilers” versus “the stinking, rotten, feudalist society”)—which is at the center of Taraki’s appeal—had little purchase beyond the circle of socialist true believers. This was particularly true given traditional Afghan suspicions of factionalism (*gundi*) as a phenomenon antithetical to and disruptive of the intrinsic and natural unity of the kinship group. <sup>[35]</sup>

The dangers of factionalism are, in fact, nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in Taraki’s life story, which can be seen as a cultural allegory of the impermanence and flawed nature of factions, especially those that emulate or pretend to replace the kinship group. Reduced to its basics, Taraki’s story is that of a childless father who adopts a number of sons, one of whom in particular stands out for his apparent loyalty and gratitude to the older man who has protected him and taken him under his wing. The favored son is, of course, Amin, who worms his way into the father’s good graces through offering the father ever more flamboyant encomiums that delude the father into believing that he is something extraordinary and unique—virtually godlike in his powers and importance. Hubris blinds the father to the true intentions of the favored son and so too do the son’s warnings that the real threat lies with another, evil son, who is not like them. The bad son is Karmal, who comes from the world of the court, and whatever his intentions, whether he is in reality loyal or simply less adroitly duplicitous, the effect of the warnings is to push the father ever deeper into the favored son’s trap. <sup>[36]</sup> With the father rendered both paranoid and deluded, the favored son is able gradually to take away the father’s power, reducing him ultimately to the status of a pathetic old man who trusts too much and pays too little heed to the dangers around him.

This allegorical approach to understanding the dynamics of Khalqi rulership accord with Abdur Rahman’s account of his life’s travails. As Abdur Rahman told it in his autobiography, most of the problems he encountered prior to securing the throne were the fault of courtiers and supposed allies, men who tried to appear to him as kinlike in their loyalties but who invariably betrayed his trust when given the chance. <sup>[37]</sup> In a tribal society, one trusts nonkin at one’s peril, for only kin have a vested interest in protecting each other. One must assume that other relationships are contracted through self-interest and that expressions of loyalty—however sincerely uttered—can be contravened by circumstance. Kinship alone endures, and Abdur Rahman’s life history showed that even kinship can be corrupted when an incautious ruler allows his courtiers and would-be allies to spread suspicion and feed their appetite for power and conspiracy. Not having children, Taraki was especially vulnerable, for in the end he had no one to trust, no one whose interests were coterminous with his own. There were only the putative “sons” he

had recruited to the party, and the best of them proved only too willing to sacrifice the old man's trust for the sake of his own ambition.

## Conclusion

While it failed in its ostensible goal of creating a Marxist state in Afghanistan, the Saur Revolution is nevertheless the single most important event in recent Afghan history. Some of the effects of the revolution are obvious, for it laid the groundwork for the popular rebellion that swept over the country in 1978–1979, the subsequent rise to power of the Islamic resistance organizations, and later the development of the Taliban movement. Beyond this, however, are other important, though less obvious, effects, which I have considered in this chapter. One of these is the transformation of the idea of what a leader should and could be. The unlikely ascension of Nur Muhammad Taraki to the pinnacle of Afghan politics proved to be an important stage in the evolution of political authority. In the preceding two hundred years, Afghanistan had experienced numerous dynastic feuds, assassinations, tribal insurrections, and a coup d'état; but in every instance but one (the brief reign of Bacha-i Saqao), a member of the Durrani tribe had come out on top.

Taraki changed that, and, in the act of murdering Daud and his entire family, his party virtually ensured that the Durrani dynasty would never return. While it has been noted that Taraki was a Ghilzai—the traditional enemies of the Durrani—and that his ascension could be seen as a revival of that centuries-old rivalry, the most significant fact about Taraki was not that he was from the Taraki Ghilzai tribe, which had little in the way of a corporate identity, but that he was from a poor and insignificant family. In the past, a pretender to the throne would have tried to mask this reality, as in the case of Bacha-i Saqao, whose humble background was improved on and ultimately glorified by his supporters.<sup>[38]</sup> Taraki, however, made no attempt to hide the poverty of his upbringing; indeed, he flaunted it, in the unrealized hope that other Afghans of similar means would identify with him and see him as their champion. Even though his strategy didn't work the way he had planned, the very fact that Taraki was able to secure the top position—while also ensuring that virtually all the remaining members of the royal family in a position to make a claim of their own were eliminated—forever changed the nature of leadership in Afghanistan. Taraki may not have succeeded in bringing about a revolution, but he did effectively destroy the mystique of royalty and the notion that only certain men from certain families could rule.

Another significant transformation brought about by the Saur Revolution was the use of the party as a vehicle of political struggle and popular mobilization. The PDPA was not the first political party in Afghanistan. In the early part of the century, during the reign of Amir Habibullah, courtiers and government officials had established the National Secret Party to press for political and social reform, and from the 1940s on political parties of various orientations had been in existence, some covertly, some with government sanction. But the Saur Revolution was the first time that a political party had actually come to power and the first time a party had attempted in any serious way to extend its reach beyond the capital to the population at large. That the effort was ultimately

unsuccessful should not obscure how radical a transformation this was. Tribal Afghans in particular have long maintained a wariness with regard to political parties since they are based—in their view—not on enduring and trustworthy links such as kinship but on ephemeral ideas, temporary alliances, and opportunistic individuals. Party loyalties are seen as transitory and artificial and cannot be counted on, and they tend to divide people and create ruptures within kinship units and communities. This being the case, it is not surprising that the PDPA achieved its greatest success not in the countryside but in the two institutions—the military and the public schools—that long served as the principal pipelines through which deracinated tribal Afghans entered into the apparatus of the state.

If one looks at the history of these two institutions, one notices that the military and the schools were both at the center of a number of contests of authority between the state and the tribes. Throughout its history, the state required a strong military to defend itself from external and internal threats, and one of the best recruiting grounds was the tribal areas because of the Pakhtuns' valorization of warfare and the paucity of economic opportunities available to them. The point of friction was always the terms of tribal participation—the tribes traditionally wanting to set the number of conscripts and to stay as tribal units within the army rather than have their men dispersed to different groups. For its part, the government long resisted these terms, wanting to conscript tribesmen according to its own calculations and to assign them to mixed units whose loyalty would be primarily to the government, not to a tribe or area. On a number of occasions, most recently during what has become known as the Safi War (*safi jang*) in 1945–1946, individual tribes took up arms against the government over this issue. However, in the years prior to the Saur Revolution, the government was able to maintain the rules of military service, and it was through this institution that the greatest number of Pakhtun tribesmen were exposed to and incorporated within state culture.

Educational institutions were the other great pipeline of tribal Afghans into government service, and here as well there have been numerous contests between tribes and the government over how education would be offered in tribal areas and for tribal students. During Amanullah's reign, one of the sources of conflict that led to his ouster was the amir's insistence on making education universally available, including education for girls. Tensions continued to surround education after Amanullah's overthrow, but subsequent regimes reduced animosity by making coeducation voluntary and limiting it to the primary level, while offering incentives to male students who wished to continue their education beyond the primary level. Through these incremental measures, the government succeeded in establishing primary schools in most of the tribal areas, along with secondary schools in most provincial capitals and two boarding schools specifically set aside for tribal boys in Kabul (Khushhal Khan and Rahman Baba lycées).

In assessing the legacy of the Saur Revolution, it is important to take into account the history of party recruitment within the military and the schools and to recognize that the PDPA was able to come to power because it recognized and exploited the interstitial nature of these institutions, which lay between the governmental and tribal realms. Past actions against the government had relied on the twin engines of Islam and tribalism. Islam generally came in the person of a charismatic Sufi leader and his coterie of

followers, who provided communications and logistical support, along with firebrand rhetoric; the tribes were represented by whichever combination of people had been swayed by the leader's preaching or the prospect of booty (or both) to join in the cause of the moment. While guaranteed to inspire fear and trepidation in far-off Kabul, these insurrections were unreliable affairs that were generally over in a short period of time; they were also relatively easy to defend against if the ruler was sufficiently astute to recognize the threat before it was too late and had enough political capital with other groups to mount a credible defense. Occasionally, such efforts succeeded in threatening the state, but even then there was no guarantee that the new rulers would institute any substantial change of policy. More often than not, as in the case of Amanullah's overthrow, the religious/tribal insurrection led to a different member of the royal family taking charge and exercising a more prudent, but not fundamentally different type of rule.

While ultimately unsuccessful, the PDPA takeover changed the formula or at least proved that the formula could be changed. Instead of the usual combination of religious and tribal leaders overseeing an unwieldy and undisciplined mass intent on plunder, Taraki and Amin oversaw a network of highly disciplined, tightly organized, and ideologically motivated cadres ready to risk their lives at their leaders' prompting. The availability of these cohorts was made possible by the prior existence of the military and educational institutions that established the liminal space within which Pakhtuns (who provided the backbone of the Khalqi movement) could leave one world and worldview behind and adopt another. Recall the scene described before from the film *Naim and Jabar* in which the boy slipped his turban into his pocket. Many young men during this period felt the seduction of the modern world as it appeared before them, moving past, seeming to promise so much if only they knew how to get on board. Schools and the officer corps were full of such people, hung out between the old and the new, caught up in the day-to-day routine of learning (most of which was still conducted on something approximating the traditional rote model), while longing for something bigger and better and, above all else, different. The triumph of the PDPA was that it harnessed this youthful desire, gave it energy and purpose, and set it in motion. As is discussed in the next chapter, the tragedy of the PDPA was that the path it took was not one the vast majority of Afghans were prepared to follow.

## Notes

The PDPA was known in Persian as Hizb-i Demokratik-i Khalq-i Afghanistan and in Pakhtu as da Afghanistan da Khalq o Demokratik Gund.

Male 1982.

*Kabul Times*, May 4, 1978. The *Kabul Times* was a government-run newspaper. Grammatical errors in this and subsequent quotations from government publications are in the originals.

*Kabul Times*, August 16, 1978.