

**ETHNOPOLITICS AND PASHTUNIZATION IN AFGHANISTAN DURING THE
REIGN OF AMIR ABDUR RAHMAN KHAN**

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Abstract. This article examines the ethnopolitical strategies and state-building policies implemented during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901) in Afghanistan. Drawing on both primary sources—such as the Amir’s autobiography (Rahman, 1900)—and secondary historical analyses (Kakar, 1979; Barfield, 2010; Omrani, 2014), the study analyzes the mechanisms through which Abdur Rahman consolidated his power, established a centralized authoritarian regime, and pursued a policy of Pashtunization. The findings reveal that the Amir employed differential policies toward Sunni and Shia Pashtuns, used marriage diplomacy to control tribal elites, created a disciplined national army to suppress uprisings, and strategically elevated or marginalized various ethnic and religious groups. While he allowed certain minorities, such as Hindus and Jews, to freely practice their religion, others—such as the population of Kafiristan—were subjected to forced conversion. These policies not only ensured the Amir’s personal dominance but also laid the institutional and ethnopolitical foundations for the modern Afghan state. The article contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between tribal politics, religion, and state centralization in late 19th-century Afghanistan.

Keywords. Amir Abdur Rahman Khan; ethnopolitics; Pashtunization; tribal policy; Afghanistan history; state centralization; marriage diplomacy; national army; religious minorities; 19th century

Introduction. After signing a peace treaty with the British in May 1880, at the end of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, Abdur Rahman became the Amir of Afghanistan. His primary objective upon ascending the throne was to consolidate his power and pacify the country. To achieve this goal, he successfully defeated his Pashtun rival Ayub Khan in 1881 and Muhammad Ishaq in 1888. Through these victories, he managed to put an end to the prolonged struggles for the throne that had destabilized Afghanistan for many years. However, Abdur Rahman’s reign was not entirely peaceful, as uprisings continually broke out in various parts of the country. One such major rebellion was initiated by the local Ghilzai tribe and lasted for nearly seven years. It was only by 1887 that Abdur Rahman’s forces succeeded in suppressing the serious uprising of the Ghilzais. By 1893, the rebellion of the Hazaras was completely crushed as well. In addition, Abdur Rahman’s last major military campaign concluded with the surrender of the inhabitants of Kafiristan. Following this campaign, the local population was collectively forced to convert to Islam, and the region’s name was changed to **Nuristan**.

During this period, it was also common practice to use one tribe to suppress the uprising or diminish the political influence of another. For example, after the Ghilzai rebellion was suppressed with their assistance, Amir Abdur Rahman granted the Muhammadzai tribe numerous political and economic privileges. In addition, he appointed members of this tribe to

high-ranking government positions, allocated pensions to their families, and allowed those who had been exiled during the reigns of previous amirs to return to their homeland. Furthermore, the Amir declared the Muhammadzais as “sharik-i-dawlat” (i.e., “partners of the state”), thereby granting them an official political status and guaranteeing economic privileges. However, the political status of the defeated Ghilzais in the country gradually began to decline, primarily due to their rebellion. This shift is particularly notable given that relations between Amir Abdur Rahman and the Ghilzai tribe were initially quite amicable (Barfield, 2010, p. 110).. However, after they rose up against the Amir once again in 1886, this stability was disrupted. Following their defeat and their diminished capacity to pose any threat to the throne, the Amir initiated efforts at reconciliation with the Ghilzais. However, members of this tribe no longer enjoyed significant political influence in the country, nor did they receive any special status or rewards comparable to those granted to the Muhammadzais. Only their tribal leaders were treated with relatively lenient policies by the Amir (Barfield, 2010, p. 98)..

A number of other tribes and ethnic groups were also dissatisfied with Amir Abdur Rahman’s rise to power. Among them were the Tajiks, who, in 1881 — just one year after Abdur Rahman became Amir — launched an uprising in Kohistan. When the Tajiks refused to assist in suppressing the Ghilzai uprising, the Amir became even more infuriated with them. He also harbored suspicions toward the Persian-speaking Qizilbash ethnic group and the Hazaras, as they had expressed a generally favorable attitude toward the British. Although the Hazaras had previously supported the Amir during the war of succession against Ishaq Khan, Abdur Rahman consistently regarded non-Pashtun groups with suspicion. This distrust intensified particularly when these groups demonstrated inclinations toward Russia. Another indication of the Amir’s distrust toward non-Pashtun tribal leaders can be seen in his own statement: “Up to now, it has been a mistaken policy of the Afghan Amirs to entrust power to chiefs who are not Afghans (i.e., Pashtuns).”

Methods. However, Amir Abdur Rahman did not pursue a uniform national policy toward all Pashtun groups in Afghanistan. As a follower of Sunni Islam, he tended to favor Pashtun tribes adhering to the Sunni branch of Islam, while maintaining a less favorable attitude toward Shia Pashtun tribes. Later, the Amir articulated his stance on the Pashtunization policy—which infringed upon the rights of other ethnic groups in Afghanistan—by stating: “There is no tribe more trustworthy than the Afghans (i.e., Pashtuns).”

Although in the early years of his reign Abdur Rahman initially pursued a policy of unifying the tribes, he later abandoned this approach. At first, he succeeded in reconciling the Hazaras with the Ghilzais, the principal Pashtun ethnic group, a move that enabled the Hazaras—an ethnic minority in tribal conflicts—to avoid large-scale massacres (Kakar, 1979, p. 10). However, the Amir eventually abandoned this policy as ethnic uprisings became increasingly frequent, realizing that dividing the tribes was the only effective means of weakening their political and military power and diminishing their capacity to organize rebellions (Kakar, 1979, p. 10).

Another important turning point in his tribal policy occurred during the 1890s. After suppressing most internal revolts and establishing a strong centralized authority capable of controlling the tribes, the Amir began to fear external threats. Consequently, he initiated a new policy of national unity aimed at uniting all tribes. In this policy, he relied on tribal national and religious traditions to rally their support in defending Islam against those who had betrayed the faith

(Kakar, 1979, p. 10). The Amir even established a festival called *jashn-i-muttafiqiyya-i-milli* (“Festival of National Unity”), which he ordered to be celebrated annually throughout the country. Through this festival, he hoped to foster a “sense of unity among Afghans” (Kakar, 1979, p. 11).

In order to secure his position as an absolute ruler, Abdur Rahman employed a wide range of political strategies. Among these was what Kakar (1979, p. 16) refers to as his “marriage diplomacy” with tribal chiefs and khans across Afghanistan. The Amir himself married several times, with most of these unions motivated by political considerations. He followed a principle of “uniting the tribes with the state through marriage,” and these unions were largely symbolic in nature (Kakar, 1979, p. 16).

His relationships with his two sons, Habibullah and Nasrullah, were kept at a strictly formal level. They always addressed their father as “Amir” (Kakar, 1979, p. 16). Abdur Rahman did not appoint any of his sons as provincial governors, fearing that they might rise against him (Kakar, 1979, p. 16). However, once it became clear that his sons would not make claims to the throne, they were treated with particular respect, appointed to senior positions at court, and granted generous pensions (Kakar, 1979, p. 17).

Abdur Rahman adopted the title *Amir al-Mu'minin* (“Commander of the Faithful”), which symbolically and legally legitimized his supreme religious and political authority over all the tribes of Afghanistan (Kakar, 1979, p. 21). In addition, he was referred to by honorific titles such as *Ziyou al-Millat-i va ad-Din* (“The Light of the Nation and Religion”) and the even more prestigious *Shahansho-i Adil* (“The Just Emperor”). These titles endowed him with absolute authority over all matters and judicial decisions (Kakar, 1979, p. 21).

Results The extent of his control over the legal system is clearly reflected in his autobiography, where he states: “All laws came into force only with my consent,” emphasizing the absolute power he wielded within the legislative system (Rahman, 1900, p. 66). Similarly, Abdur Rahman disliked delegating power; he exercised direct control over administrative affairs and appointed no permanent deputy to act on his behalf. Only occasionally did his son Habibullah temporarily serve as acting Amir (Kakar, 1979, p. 22).

During Abdur Rahman’s reign, an executive council known as *darbari avom* (“public council” or “people’s assembly”) was established. Structurally, it resembled a parliament, with a bicameral system composed of the *darbar-i shohi* (“royal court”) and the *khwanin-i mulki* (“landed nobility”)—functioning as upper and lower chambers respectively (Kakar, 1979, p. 23). This council included members of the landed elite, religious scholars (*ulama*), and court officials. However, the Amir granted the council no formal political authority; it merely served to give official approval—or a “seal”—to his decisions (Kakar, 1979, p. 23).

Those admitted to the council were individuals who had demonstrated loyalty to the Amir, held no political ambitions, and “lacked both the capacity and the courage to identify flaws in the laws or the ruler’s policies” ((Barfield, 2010, p. 77). The presence of several *khan-i ulum* (chief qazis), qazis (judges), muftis (legal advisors), and mullahs (religious figures) was largely ceremonial, based on age, length of service, or symbolic status (Rahman, 1900, p.36)

The Amir's policies regarding ministries and state administrative divisions were designed to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of any individual. Although high officials bore titles such as *sadr-i azam* (prime minister), *wazir* (minister), or *mustaufi* (chief prosecutor), these titles were either unofficial or used only briefly (Omrani, 2014,p.93).According to Kakar, the Amir's relationship with his ministers resembled that "not between a monarch and his ministers, but between a master and his servants" (Kakar, 1979, p. 27).

Abdur Rahman possessed the authority to dismiss and arrest any official at will. For example, shortly after appointing his finance minister, he imprisoned him for showing "sympathy" toward one of his political rivals (Kakar, 1979, p. 27). He also arrested the chief prosecutor on charges of corruption, although this action was, in fact, motivated by the Amir's determination to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of any single individual (Omrani, 2014,p.56).

The Amir forbade all high-ranking officials from "gathering in one place, befriending one another, and discussing state affairs" (Kakar, 1979, p. 28). Nevertheless, he sought to project a positive public image of these senior officials by bestowing upon them civil and military titles as well as high salaries. Among the highest-ranking military officials were his son Habibullah Khan, who held the title of "brigadier," and Diwan Naranjan, who served as a "colonel." In addition, the *sipahsalar* (military commander) of Kabul and the head of the state accounts office also occupied prominent positions (Rahman, 1900, p.85)

Although the Amir appointed officials based on their prestige, social status, and loyalty, he also included members of various ethnic minorities—such as Qizilbash, Tajiks, and Hindus—in senior administrative positions (Kakar, 1979, p. 28). His policy was to appoint individuals from politically weak or smaller ethnic groups to key administrative posts (Kakar, 1979, p. 28). If members of major ethnic groups demonstrated loyalty to the Amir, they too were eligible for high positions (Omrani, 2014,p.69).

Discussion. Regardless of their background, however, most senior officials were often dismissed in a humiliating manner before they could consolidate their power or become politically influential (Kakar, 1979, p. 28). Lower-ranking positions such as *sarishtadar* (head of financial departments), *safdaftari* (head of the main office), and *munshi* (clerks) were primarily occupied by *ghulambacha* (young servants of the royal court) and *mirzas* (junior secretaries) ((Barfield, 2010, p. 12).

In his autobiography, Abdur Rahman wrote that he recruited officials from all ethnic groups, noting that some of the most loyal and trusted members of his administration had even been former slaves. Although Qizilbash officials occupied a significant number of administrative posts, they were not sufficient to meet the growing demands of the bureaucracy. Consequently, the Amir recruited *mirzas* from other ethnic groups, including Hazaras and Uzbeks (Kakar, 1979, p. 29).

During Abdur Rahman's reign, governors no longer combined civil and military powers as they had in earlier periods (Kakar, 1979, p. 48). In the provinces, they commanded only small contingents of armed *khassadars* (local militias) and relied on regular army units stationed in the provinces during emergencies (Kakar, 1979, p. 48). The Amir appointed as governors only those individuals who lacked political ambition, were not widely known among the population, and did not rely on tribal support (Omrani, 2014,p.63)..

Most of these governors, however, possessed little formal authority. They were prohibited from engaging in court affairs and were not permitted to spend state funds at their own discretion (Kakar, 1979, p. 49). Except for a few elders who held positions as state officials, no government official attained office through elections (Kakar, 1979, p. 70).

With regard to the national army, it was one of the key instruments through which Abdur Rahman consolidated his rule and established a strong authoritarian regime (Kakar, 1979, p. 92). Rather than merely inheriting the military forces of his predecessors, the Amir created a new, large, and disciplined army that was independent of tribal influence (Kakar, 1979, p. 93). He utilized this army for two main purposes: first, to strengthen his power and eliminate internal opposition, and second, to defend Afghanistan against external invasions (Kakar, 1979, p. 96).

In his autobiography, Abdur Rahman claimed to be the first ruler in Afghanistan to establish a well-trained and disciplined army. He wrote:

“Every man is, in effect, a soldier, and ghaza (religious war for truth and faith) is a duty imposed on every citizen; every true Muslim must defend his religion” (Rahman, 1900, p. 51).

Military service was compulsory for members of all tribes in Afghanistan and was organized according to the following recruitment system:

“...out of every eight people, one would be sent, and during training and preparation, he would bear all necessary expenses himself” (Rahman, 1900, p. 53).

However, the Amir appointed to military positions only those “who were not politically influential” (Kakar, 1979, p. 96). Typically, the sons of tribal elders were appointed to military ranks. In some cases, peshkhidmat (slave soldiers) could be promoted to certain positions, but only when there was a shortage of qualified personnel in the army (Kakar, 1979, p. 97).

Not all tribes were equally included in the army. For example, the Hazaras and Qizilbash were entirely excluded from the military during the period of Hazara uprisings against the Amir, whereas Hindus—who had not participated in the revolts—were recruited (Kakar, 1979, p. 97). The Amir even recruited soldiers from across the Durand Line, including Waziri, Afridi, and Khattak tribes. In other words, “although the army was predominantly commanded by Pashtuns, it included almost all ethnic groups—including Uzbeks and Aimaqs” (Kakar, 1979, p. 97).

Nevertheless, soldiers were not treated equally, and in some cases, they were deployed against their own tribes. For example, the Ghilzai regiment fought against fellow Ghilzais during the Ghilzai uprising (Kakar, 1979, p. 113). Within the Pashtun population itself, the Ghilzais—the second-largest Pashtun group—served in the army with an inferior status compared to the Durranis, who constituted the primary elite group (Kakar, 1979, p. 113).

Conclusion. Overall, Abdur Rahman pursued a dual strategy in managing ethnic minorities: while he elevated some groups socially and economically, others were marginalized, denied privileges, or entirely excluded from administrative positions (Kakar, 1979; Omrani, 2014; Barfield, 2010). For instance, although Abdur Rahman was a staunch supporter of Sunni Islam, he allowed Shia minority groups to practice their faith openly. Moreover, other religious

minorities such as Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews were allowed to freely observe their religious practices without interference from the state (Rahman, 1900, p.9)

Hindus held high positions within the bureaucracy, and a special court council was established to adjudicate cases according to Hindu law (Kakar, 1979, p. 149). Although some Hindus voluntarily converted to Islam, they were never forced to do so. Jews, who had lived in various parts of Afghanistan for centuries, built synagogues during Abdur Rahman's reign and maintained their religious and cultural traditions (Kakar, 1979, p. 149).

However, such tolerance did not extend to the population of Kafiristan. After their rebellion was suppressed, the entire population was forcibly converted to Islam (Kakar, 1979, p. 151).

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