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AFGHANISTAN: BOTH GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL SYSTEM FACE TRIAL

The parliament session which began March 13 may provide an important test of the new government and of the King's "experiment in democracy." This paper assesses the new government's prospects in the context of some institutional weaknesses in the Afghan political system.

ABSTRACT

By the end of 1972, after nearly a decade of trial and error, King Zahir's "experiment" with parliamentary government had reached a standstill. Afghanistan's political system, despite its modern trappings, continued to operate more along tribal than parliamentary lines. The resignation of Prime Minister Zahir in December highlighted the inherent weaknesses of the governmental system and the extent to which the King continued to dominate the course of Afghanistan's Government. Each of the last three governments under the 1964 Constitution had been paralyzed by, and eventually succumbed to, the deadlock with the Parliament and the chaos in the Cabinet which appear to be inherent in the system.

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The new Prime Minister, Mohammad Shafiq, is young, able, and ambitious. With strong support from the King, he has moved to

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strengthen the government structure and by personal example has injected a new sense of dynamism and purpose into the Cabinet. The introduction of the controversial Helmand Waters Treaty to Parliament for ratification will provide a test of Shafiq's ability. His performance during this session will have important implications for his own future and for that of Afghanistan's "experiment with democracy."

If he depends on the King's influence to obtain ratification, Shafiq may repeat the failures of his predecessors; if he demonstrates strong leadership, however, he will have set a promising precedent for his own future legislation and prepared the way for a new phase in the King's "experiment."

INR/Near East and South Asia
Director : Curtis F. Jones *CFJ*
Analysts : WHowells/DCMcGarfe *WJ*
Ext. : 22227
Released by: David E. Mark *DEM*

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Blueprint for Democracy

The process of political modernization was initiated in Afghanistan only 50 years ago. As an independent buffer state between the British and Russian empires, Afghanistan had been largely isolated from Western social and political thought, which trickled down to the tribal population only indirectly via the ruling elites. The efforts of Afghanistan's monarchy to achieve rapid modernization through dramatic social and political reforms in the 1920s and '30s resulted in substantial progress in terms of the distance to be covered and the time involved; but each new initiative, after initial progress, met with resistance, gradually stagnated, and finally expired without reaching its ultimate objectives. The performance of the present government during the coming months may determine whether Afghanistan's most recent experiment in modernization will fall into the same pattern.

The constitutions of 1923 and 1931 provided for a rudimentary parliamentary system with partially elected "rubber-stamp" councils, but the authority of the monarchy remained supreme in all executive, legislative, and judicial matters. In 1964, however, King Mohammad Zahir introduced a new constitution, designed on the European model, which provided for a constitutional monarchy but formally divested the monarch of authority in the legislative and judicial spheres. In order to prevent ex-officio royal control of the Government, moreover, royal family members were specifically prohibited from party politics, from sitting in Parliament and on the Supreme Court, and from holding top cabinet positions.

The 1964 Constitution set up a bicameral legislature (the lower house of which is elected under universal suffrage from single-member constituencies) and an independent judiciary (which must give priority to secular over Islamic law where secular law exists), and provided for a system of checks and balances based on the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers. All of these features were new to Afghanistan.

The Constitution differs from most parliamentary models, however, in that the King, in the exercise of the substantial powers invested in him as sovereign head of state, is not enjoined to act with the advice of his prime minister. This omission means, among other things, that the King is able to control the pace of political modernization by delaying the enactment of legislation -- as he has done with laws long approved by the Parliament providing for provincial assemblies and political parties. Further, neither the Prime Minister nor his deputy can be a member of Parliament, which fact means they have no significant source of legitimacy or political strength other than the King's favor. The Prime Minister, therefore, was intended to be the King's coordinator rather than the chief executive.

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In sum, King Zahir's blueprint for democracy was to provide a representative parliamentary system over which he could retain absolute control. With the King remaining aloof from the daily governmental process and refraining from direct exercise of his powers, the Afghans would learn over time to operate the system responsibly, while the King retained the necessary power to ensure stability during the transition period.

So far, the King has maintained stability, but there has been little progress toward the evolution of an effective parliamentary system. The key flaws in the design are the partyless parliament, the powerless prime minister, and a King reluctant either to use or delegate his authority. After nearly a decade, the effects of these flaws pose a real question as to whether Zahir's "experiment in democracy" can succeed.

The Legislative-Executive Deadlock

The most serious effect of a partyless parliament has been the severe deadlock between the executive and legislative branches. While a political parties act was passed several years ago by the Parliament, it has never been promulgated by the King. He fears that if parties were permitted now he would not be able to prevent their forming along ethnic, linguistic, or tribal lines. These fears have considerable justification.

In the absence of parties, however, each deputy represents a narrow local interest and operates free from party organization and discipline. Thus the Prime Minister, seeking legislative approval, must persuade individually at least half of the 216 members to vote for him and must persuade at least two-thirds of them to attend the legislative session to establish a quorum. For the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, without the King's intervention, this is a monumental effort -- a hopeless one except for extremely important issues. Even then, it is not certain that the Government can obtain a quorum. In fact, the deputies have become accustomed to blocking a quorum to obtain special concessions from the Government. By default, therefore, the Prime Minister has become the originator of almost all proposed legislation, and with each new bill faces high political costs and an erosion of his position.

Chaos in the Cabinet

The impotence of the Prime Minister has contributed to the disorganization of the Cabinet. Another problem is the lack of any organic relationship between Cabinet and Parliament. There is no constitutional requirement that ministers be drawn from Parliament, and in fact ministers have usually been technocrats with no social or political ties with the parliamentarians. The new cabinet includes only one former senator and

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no past or present members of the lower house. Ministers have very little influence there, and little contact except when their programs are being questioned. Again, without shared party affiliation, they have no leverage with Parliament, and tend to view it with distrust.

Although initially selected by the Prime Minister, the ministers are appointed by the King and, because of the usual stalemate in Parliament, are dependent on royal action to implement their programs. Thus, they have typically run their departments with a great deal of independence, and often compete with the Prime Minister and with each other for the King's favor. As there is no seniority among the ministers, the Planning Ministry is usually ignored by other ministries when they set their priorities. Because of the lack of central planning, the various proposed government programs have often exceeded available government resources. Individual ministers have then maneuvered for royal favor to ensure priority for their programs. This usually meant they were competing with the Prime Minister for favor. In the last government, for example, Foreign Minister Shafiq was known to be the royal favorite, and therefore the strongest man in the Cabinet, long before Prime Minister Zahir submitted his resignation.

The King Retains the Keys

Both the executive and legislative branches look to the King for direction, support, and authority. When the King wishes a bill to pass, he is able to persuade the deputies to pass it. When the deputies oppose a government proposal, they complain directly to the King to have it stopped. As the King has endeavored to stay aloof from day-to-day operations, the result has been long periods of government paralysis punctuated by royal action. Thus the King not only retains the power but has also largely assumed the role of coordinator of the Government which had been intended for the Prime Minister. With his ministers managing the separate departments and the King determining policy, each of the first four Prime Ministers found his authority eroded rapidly. Thus, in the past, the Prime Minister has often been made to appear ineffective and even unnecessary.

Despite its trappings of parliamentary democracy, the Government in Afghanistan until recently revealed many of the characteristics of an absolute monarchy run along Afghanistan's traditional tribal jirgah lines. The traditional pattern has been reinforced by the largely illiterate, conservative tribal population which endures government officials as representatives of the King, but does not understand or care about what is intended by the "experiment in democracy." Without some basic changes in the political roles and powers of the King and the Government, this pattern appears likely to endure.

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The Results So Far: Four Dead Governments

The restrictions maintained by the King in his experiment have been largely responsible for the death of four governments in eight years. Each government, after a promising beginning, ran aground on the parliamentary rocks and foundered from lack of power; when its influence had sunk so low as to be beyond salvage, the King replaced it with a new government of the same design set to sail the same course. The first Prime Minister under the new constitution, Dr. Mohammad Yusuf, was the first commoner to be appointed Prime Minister of Afghanistan. A technocrat himself, he picked technocrats for his cabinet. The 1965 Parliament, however, was overwhelmingly representative of conservative rural elites -- large landholders and ranchers. Even before the election, animosities between parliamentary candidates and the Yusuf cabinet were apparent, and Yusuf resigned immediately following the elections.

Yusuf was succeeded in 1965 by Mohammad Hashim Maiwandwal, a former journalist and diplomat. Energetic, progressive, and a natural leader, he interpreted his mandate under the King's experiment too liberally. In order to cope with parliamentary and cabinet problems, he attempted to establish a political base founded on a prototype political party of deputies and civil servants known as the Progressive Democratic Party. These and other steps by Maiwandwal evidently went further toward strengthening the Prime Minister's position than the King was willing to accept, and Maiwandwal was encouraged to resign after just two years in office.

The King next appointed Nur Ahmed Etemadi, a conservative, lack-luster former diplomat and cabinet minister. Whereas Maiwandwal had moved too quickly, Etemadi made no progress toward effective government and, after four stagnant years in office, was replaced by Abdul Kayeum Zahir.

Zahir had previously been the president of the lower house, where he had demonstrated a talent for knocking heads together and organizing the deputies; he was appointed in 1971 largely in the hope that he would be able to end the deadlock between the executive and the legislature. Once in office as Prime Minister, however, Zahir apparently lost the power he had previously enjoyed over the obstreperous deputies; although his government faced more serious issues than its predecessors, it proved no more capable of obtaining parliamentary cooperation. Within a year of taking office, Zahir's government had been paralyzed. His initial offers of resignation in June and September 1972 were thinly disguised appeals to the King to grant him more authority in cabinet appointments and government policy decisions. By the time his resignation was finally accepted in December, there had been speculation that the King might be forced to make some changes in the system -- either to grant greater powers to the Government or to play a more direct role in the Government himself.

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The Shafiq Government -- Challenge and Prospects

Mohammad Musa Shafiq Kamawi, the new Prime Minister, is young (43), energetic, competent, and ambitious. As Foreign Minister in Zahir's cabinet, he observed at first hand the limitations and frustrations of the Prime Minister's office, and has thus accepted the challenge to overcome the obstacles which proved insurmountable for his predecessors. His combination of ambition and realism have led to speculation that, before accepting the job, he obtained assurances from the King not only of full support but also that new measures -- such as the establishment of political parties and provincial councils -- might soon be approved.

Since taking office in December, Shafiq has moved vigorously toward cabinet and economic reforms. He has already planned a new cabinet-management office directly under his control which should improve the Government's coordination and effectiveness considerably. By his own example, he has injected a new sense of dynamism and purpose into the Government. His proposed economic reforms have yet to face the Parliament, however, and he has no means of overcoming the legislative deadlock other than his own political skill and the King's support. Moreover, he has so far been unable to find suitable candidates for at least three important cabinet positions.

The new government will face its first important test during the next few weeks when the controversial March 12 Helmand Waters Treaty with Iran is introduced to the Parliament for ratification. Although the provisions of the treaty itself should be acceptable to the large majority of Afghans, the fact that the Government has reached any agreement with Iran has raised strong opposition on the grounds of the Persian threat to Afghan cultural identity. Superficial as these grounds may appear, they have already been the cause of strong statements from the opposition and a large demonstration in Kabul which provided a rare occasion for disparate organizations to combine under a united front.

The prospects are that the Government, with the King's support, will be able to obtain parliamentary approval, albeit after a stormy debate. The real problem is that it may prove a Pyrrhic victory. The inherent weakness of the Government vis-à-vis the Parliament and its dependence on the King may once more become apparent in this contentious issue, and Shafiq's prestige may begin to erode like that of his predecessors. Moreover, the issue at stake is one likely to encourage a parliamentary division along ethnic and linguistic lines which would reinforce the King's reluctance to permit the formation of political parties and force him to demonstrate again that he remains the sole unifying force in the country. If so, Shafiq's government could be well on its way toward the ultimate failure experienced by his predecessors.

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If, on the other hand, the Government can manage the coming parliament session so as to appear to provide strong and effective leadership, it will have set a promising precedent for its future legislation and prepared the way for political reforms which will enhance the Government's capabilities even further. Much will depend on Prime Minister Shafiq's personal skill in dealing with the coming test. The outcome will have important implications both for his own future and for that of King Zahir's "experiment in democracy."

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