

# Ethnicity, Paragon of power in Afghanistan (1747-2014)

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## Abstract

Ethnicity is an important element to culture and culture mainly is the invisible realm that has a crucial role in human life. Its vastness in range and its dominance in potential are the major factors making culture as a preponderant phenomenon with full occupancy potential in various fields of human's life. It is clearly portrayed in ethnicity in Afghanistan's political history. Politics as the territory of power evolution had never been far from cultural influences. Particularly, ethnicity as a major cultural element has been the axis of power. Ethnicity instrumentally served power in terms of power distribution, transition and legitimization which is the main concern of the topic. Therefore this article on the basis of historical case studies tends to elaborate ethnicity as a dominant cultural element that dramatically influenced power in contemporary history of Afghanistan. Since (1747), there are strong historical evidences describing ethnicity as an influential phenomenon, featuring power in contemporary history of Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, culture, contemporary history, power

## 1. Introduction

Many often scholars argue that culture follows power rather than culture influence the power. But it really seems difficult to draw a concrete theoretical frame irrespective of contextual variations. Considering diverse historical, social, political and cultural context, it drastically varies. According to this article, Afghanistan history portrays cultural dominance on power which is mainly evident at ethnicity and religion interferences in distribution, transition and legitimation of power. This paper mainly concentrates on studying the ethnical interference, which is assumed so crucial on power evolutions in Afghanistan.

In one sense the ethnical exaggerated role is the consequence of monopolized political dominance which constructed a form of segregated ethnical memory rather than national. The extensive historical evidences reflect the ethnical based social privileges and prejudices. This fact spontaneously has increased the autonomic influences of ethnicity in all social dimensions. Therefore it extraordinarily prevailed and became a paragon in political changes.

The paper covers some wide range theoretical frames which examines culture, specifically ethnicity and power relations. Most of research literature related to culture and power relations devoted more autonomy to power and examined culture as dependent variable. But literature cited for this Article examines culture with dominance and influential to power, in particular, ethnicity as a major cultural element that carries massive identical gravity in Afghanistan. Ethnicity is perceived influential, autonomous and determinant in political history of Afghanistan and subsequently followed by elaborating ethnicity affiliated to Afghanistan's context that extensively affected the power evolutions.

## 2. Culture, Ethnicity and power

Culture is the life territory, which permeates beyond many limits. Due to its wideness in range and invisible effectiveness, no point in life is taken out of cultural influences. Due to its wholeness, defining culture as life style might be the right significance we mean today.

Because it is not merely art, science, tradition, rituals, symbolic system and believes, Meanwhile it is a mechanism of social hierarchies, social control and domination, that includes the power relation (Schwartz, 1997).

The literature devoted culture more occupancy with a new sense mainly developed by the social scientists after (1960) when the culture redefined with more autonomy, rather than a peripheral content. There are many scholars bridging culture to other domain like politics and economy, but (1980) can be the neat reviving age of culture. The most prominent and controversial work on culture in that decade was the work of USAID official Lawrence Harrison which was published by the Harvard center of international Affairs in (1985), Entitled "underdevelopment is a state of mind- the Latin America case". Lawrence described that culture functioning as obstacle that confronts the development procedure in Latin America. After that increasingly the social scientist turned to cultural factor and started bridging culture with the modernization, political democratization, military strategy and antagonism among countries (Harrison & Huntington, 2000).

In order to trace the footsteps of particular relations of culture and power, it is indispensable to refer Pierre Bourdieu the French thinker as a prominent scholar who clearly bridged the culture and power. Contrary to the past literature, he examined culture as determinant variable in politics. "Bourdieu argues, can be found by

Exploring how cultural resources, processes, and institutions hold individuals and groups in competitive and self-perpetuating hierarchies of domination". In his term all forms of cultural practices in language, habits, dress and food pattern that enhance the distinctions in society and functionally reproduce the forms of power. According to him cultural socialization places the individual and groups in various status hierarchies and symbolic stratification.

Meanwhile the individuals pursue their strategies to achieve their interests based on such stratification, constructed in a society (Schwartz, 1997). In 2010 Carlos J. Torelli and Sharon Shavitt published an article titled "Culture and Concepts of Power". This Article focuses on culture as determinant variable which influences the power definition. Means "Cultures nurture different views of what is desirable and meaningful to do with power". It regards power as cultural element that culture in this sense considered as mechanism of conceptualizing the power, which determines power the way to be ruled. Culture determines power to be perceived as the mean of personnel advancement or to be stated as instrument of benefiting the others (Torelli & Shavitt, 2010).

But "the Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis" examines ethnicity and power relations. It sets out the Disappearances of the contextual approaches in political science. The points include a common aim is to redefine the significance of contextual approaches in political analysis. Bringing the context matters like cultural and historical context matters, philosophical context matters, and psychological context matters; to the axis of Analysis is regarded as the main concern of this topic. Particularly, describing religion, ethnicity and race divisive and problematic issues for democracy. But in this research such groups are perceived exogenous to political process. (Goodin & Tilly, 2006).

Ethnicity hasn't been merely the substantial base of social stratification in the history, rather it depicts distinctions in forms of beliefs and life style. The term ethnicity' is usually used to define a group of persons sharing a common cultural heritage, which differentiate the groups and diversification of the social groups becomes the inherent character of ethnicity. As major cultural element it carries diverse identities and defined with differences and discrepancies that such discrepancies arose to diverse group expressions in various fields, including politics.

However, in many ways "Ethnic groups are defined by differences, whether the indicium is color, appearance, language, religion, some other indicator of common origin, or some combination thereof" but Frances Stewart in his article "Religion versus Ethnicity as a Source of Mobilizations: Are There Differences?" Published in (2009) add one more important character to describe ethnicity in a broader sense. He specifies "common history" as sufficiently important shared characteristics and treated as potential of mobilization, (Stewart, 2009) which seems quite relevant as analytical mechanism for Afghanistan's ethnical structure, because ethnic groups in Afghanistan can be well explained in term of various historical memories. The past history is not perceived equally fair by all ethnic groups, they view it diversely.

There are many definitions which vary. It can be defined variously on the basis of its structure and the way it functions in relation to power, which is well expressed by Jan Nederveen Pieterse in (1997). He categorizes four types of ethnicity in a political sense. Firstly Pieterse clarifies "domination ethnicity" that refers to a nation imposes monoculture control. Than "enclosure ethnicity" characterized with three variants, dormant ethnicity, cultural confinement, and inward-looking ethnicity. "Competition Ethnicity" is in fact pointing to struggles over resources of the state and development. Finally, "optional ethnicity" is of low intensity and is light, volitional and fluid, as in the case of ethnic Entrepreneurs and symbolic ethnicity (Pieterse, 1997). Considering the mentioned points, domination and competition ethnicity are the two models we mean in Afghanistan.

But functionally ethnicity is one of the strong mobilizing sources that cause the people to be affiliated and gathered on the basis of some common characteristics. Especially in traditional societies it plays vitally constitutive and unifying role. As "Turtonin (1997) pointed out, 'the very effectiveness [of ethnicity] as a means of advancing group interests depends upon its being seen as primordial by those who make claims in its name'" (Stewart, 2009).

There are limited theoretical frame to examine ethnicity crucial to power. Therefore, it is difficult to wholly generalize the reviewed framework in Afghanistan context, because Afghanistan's ethnicity with its exceptional character seems complex to be comprehensively analyzed on the basis of mentioned literature but it gives a clue to examine how culture and particularly ethnicity as rich cultural element related to each other. Afghanistan's traditional structure caused ethnicity to be perceived very crucial. Hence it is overly prevailed and ethnical interference became evident in all dimensions of social life. If there be a need to define Afghanistan in a short term, entitling it as a country with ethnical structure will be the clearest reflection. Considering contemporary history which starts from (1774) and forged with absolute ethnical domination is start of tragic historical trajectory that followed by ethnocentricity steps in later periods. In politics in terms of Pieterse "Domination ethnicity" is

being the fame ruling model in power evolution. Such model overly prevailed in politics, eventually reproduced ethnical history and segregate collective memory.

To take out the effects of ethnicity related to power in Afghanistan, the taxonomy of ethnical types of Pieterse, considering mobilizing function of ethnicity toward a common ethnical interest, seems supportive to point out the effect of ethnicity related to power evolutions.

### **3. Glance to Diverse ethnical groups in Afghanistan**

Due to research context insufficiency Afghanistan lagged behind to make known of its cultural heritage. Continuous armed struggle and non-stabilized political systems caused many social and political uneven incidents with huge destructions and diversion of cultural legacy and diversities. In many case the diversity led in confrontations as the case of diverse ethnicity.

Afghanistan ethnically is a multi-ethnic society, but historically there are different evidences describing the origin of the ethnicity to immemorial and some take it to 20<sup>th</sup> century. Shahrani takes the Afghan ethnical categorization very far, but Conrad Schetter assure Dollo (French Anthropologist), who for the first time titled the Afghan people as separate ethnic units in (1937). Insufficient and non-appropriate Assessment makes it difficult to claim the exact calculation of the ethnic groups. But historically it goes beyond (1937). A Germany survey concludes that there are about 54 ethnic groups, while a soviet estimation presents it near to 200 units (Schetter, 2003). It is really difficult to specify the account of ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Because firstly there is not an explicate literary definition of ethnicity. In many case it is meshed with religion and sometime with race. Secondly, the lacuna of appropriate research literature makes it more ambiguous. Adding common historical memory beside race and religion as characteristics of ethnical division in Afghanistan can be more appropriate to define ethnicity in Afghanistan.

As CIA estimates the total population at 30.4 million as of mid (2012) (Cordesman, 2013), that include Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, Aimaq, Baluch, Brahui, Nuristani, Pashaie, Pamiri, Kirghiz, Qizilbash, Mongols, Arabs, Gujars, Kohistanis, Wakhis and Jats and others (wardak, 2004). Among all 54 ethnic groups, Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, are the major units who have been structurally and crucially involved in political evolutions. But due to inappropriate statistical assessment the ethnical percentage still seems controversial, particularly in case of major ethnic groups (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). In many cases numerating the percentage of ethnicity in Afghanistan has been excessively propagated. The term ethnicity, conceptualized in very conflictive significance in political history of Afghanistan, especially among four named major ethnical groups, nowhere, social and political life stayed far of ethnical influences. It has comprehensively occupied wide angel influence and tabooed status in social believes. Now the main questions arise here that, how have they been in their inter- ethnical relations? Specifically, how they have contributed to the politics and social decision making? Have they moved parallel and balanced? Did they treated each other in equal status and how is their contribution to Afghanistan's history? To trace the answer scholastically history is the best evident, to answer these questions.

### **4. Power evolution in Ethnicity trap**

The contemporary history of Afghanistan starts from (1774). Ahmad shah Durani was the first chief with Pashtun Background and belonged to Durani tribe. By capturing the power, Ahmadshah even confronted by many Pashtun rebels but later he could unite Pashtuns throughout the country and crossed the challenges, eventually became the ruler of whole land (wahab & youngerman, 2007).

Afghanistan due to its traditional structure and Nature couldn't go beyond those primordial attitudes. Hence the commonness in tribal interests becomes a trap that never let the leaders' even elites to go beyond those boundaries. It is evident in history. Even in many cases there are harsh and violent clashes between clans, which symbolize extraordinary traditional life style. Further than clan clashes ethnicization of politics is an axiom, while there is power interference, there is ethnicity. Even ethnicity in Afghanistan regarded as mechanism for the distribution of all privileges and prejudices, particularly in relation to power, but in a broad sense it has been a form of division of labor, power and status.

As Conrad Schetter titles itacutely "Pashtuns were privileged in all areas and dominated the military. Tajiks were left with the economic sector and the educational institutions, whereas the Hazaras were marginalized in general. The different treatment of the people went along with the forming of ethnic stereotypes: Pashtuns were considered 'bellicose', Tajiks were said to be 'thrifty', Uzbeks were known as 'brutal' and the Hazaras as 'illiterate' and 'poor'. Even though the politics of the nation-state thus created an ethnic hierarchy, there were surprisingly few ethnic conflicts. The main reason for this lack of conflicts was the enormous contrast between

the rural and urban areas” (Schetter, 2003). The way Schetter regarded is changed today, but it vividly reflects the historical conception toward diverse ethnic groups and imbalances of ethnical structure.

To see the power structure, it is vividly seen that since the contemporary history all the rulers are Pashtun, except Habibullah Kalakani famed in Bacha-i-Saqaw who is ethnically Tajik and ruled Kabul from January 14 to October 9, 1929 (Maley, 1987). Hence power structure in Afghanistan has been Monarchic and followed by a sort of ethnical absolutism. Ethnicity repeatedly functionalized to serve power in terms of transformation, legitimization, and stabilization. But historically legitimacy here doesn't refer to social consensus toward ruling group; rather it depicts the power gained by majority ethnic group (Pashtun tribes) irrespective of the other's will.

During the reign of Amir Abdurrahman Khan (1880-1901), ruling group were extra ordinarily centralized and harshly brutalized toward other ethnic groups. Nazif Mohammad Sharani writes that “ Ghilzai Pashtun tribes whom he did not trust, Emir Abdurrahman moved against the Hazaras in the center of the country. The Hazaras resisted Abdurrahman's conquest of their territory and, as a result, were subjected to extremely harsh punishments: entire villages were massacred, people were skinned alive, and women and children were enslaved. A particularly gruesome form of torture perpetrated against the Hazara people was to form a rim of dough around the shaven heads of men so that boiling oil could be poured on them to fry their brains. Stories of brutalities were used in subjugating Uzbek, Turkmen, Tajik, and other ethnic communities' in the northern region. Throughout the entire country during the 21 years of his reign, people were brutally terrorized in to submission” (Shahrani, 2002).

Pointing out the roots of legitimacy, it largely exercised in traditional grounds in alliance with particular interpretation of Islam. As well as the ethnical potentiality is being parallel evident in power legitimation. The Pashtun are the majority comparing other ethnic groups, the support of key Pashtun tribes always have been crucial for the stability of central government. William Malay presents the traditional Sharia Law and ethnicity role as the basis of legitimacy in Afghanistan regimes. Clearly expresses the two most important such legitimacy codes were the Sharia or Islamic law, and the Pushtunwali or "Way of the Pashtuns" to owe political conditions (Maley, 1987).

Considering the history of Afghanistan the ethnical and religious inference to power has been inevitable. Ethnical potential in influencing the power transformation has been significant. Meanwhile the role of religion is excessively evident in confrontation of strange values that perceived non-Islamic. The case with the Collapse of Amanullah's regime and withdrawal of the soviet force from Afghanistan are basically rooted in religion. Due to their heterogeneity and antagonism in values with particular Islamic interpretation, were not religiously justifiable any more. But in case of ethnicity if we take it further, Later on after (1992) the ethnical struggle for power started that took the country to a very dark shell. The past factional historical memory created by the past rulers forged the conflicts among the ethnic groups. Because, such prejudiced history where some were suppressed and others have been privileged was functioning as conflictive force. Therefore distribution of power on ethnical base resulted a kind of social distrust among all ethnic groups. The civil war period extensively changed the civilian perception toward each other and increased the ethnical gap. It resulted ethnicity to be perceived as the base of privileges and deprivations.

Zalmay Khalilzad and Daniel Byman describes that; “Once the Soviet backed regime fell, war, anarchy, and fragmentation followed. The conflict became increasingly one of ethnic and sectarian groups, particularly Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and the Shi'a Hazaras. Without the glue of the common enemy, the opposition turned their guns on one another. During the battle for Kabul from 1992 to 1996, every major group had both allied with and fought against every other major group at one time or another” (Khalilzad & Bayman, 2000).

The war in its fragmented ethnical form also utilized the proxies for intermediations of the other countries. Particularly Iran and Pakistan were supporting their own proxies like Hizbe Wahdat was Established by Iran and Jamiat\_i \_ Islami Developed during (1980) as representative of Tajik ethnic group. There were many established militia groups with ethnical pattern and affiliated to particular countries. Pakistan supported Taliban who follow radical Islam. Parallel to this awakening wave for taking power, Abdur Rashid Dostum was the Leader of Uzbek Militias. These fragmentations took place, while the Leader of these four Ethnic groups concentrated on their common ethnical interest in order to mobilize the people. The political movements used ethnicity as main argument for legitimacy of their political existence, because all other ideologies Islamic as well as communist or Royalist one lost ground to mobilize the masses as instrument of political demands. The leaders of the warring factions strived to give consciousness for their ethnical supporter about their economical and political deprivations in history. They claimed to save their ethnical interests in such aggressive ethnical confrontations and demanded to achieve the economical and political resources on the basis of their own ethnic size. Such tackling to ethnicity simultaneously followed by jealousy toward each other that eventually ended in

unfortunate realities. Ethnic cleansing and ethnocide trapped different regions of the country that frequently flowed in Kabul between (1992- 1994), in Shomali occurred between (1996) and 2001 in the hazarajat between (1998) and 2001 and in northern especially in Mazare- e- Sharif it happened since (1997) (schetter, 2010).

### 5.Ethnical democracy (2001- 2014)

What changed after (2001) in Afghanistan? Where from the democratic claims emerged? What is ethnical interference to power in ethnical democracy? The late wave of democracy in Afghanistan destined to collapse of Washington twin towers. It was a start of a new story in history of Afghanistan.

Civil war which characterized with Anarchy followed by domination of Taliban regime in Kabul and many other regions, but just three weeks later after 9, 11, 2001 incident, president Bush announced his decision to Attack AQ terrorists' installations and Taliban camps in Afghanistan. Because, Bin Laden and his AQ network, the Taliban regime became a primary target for the US military action (Hammidov, 2004).

Then it is followed by Bonn conference (I). United States and united nation organized the Bonn conference (I) in Germany which included diverse international diplomats and warriors to consensus and chart a political course for the fronted decades of Afghanistan. (Fields&Ahmed, 2011). The international community and Afghan representatives acknowledged democracy as the guidelines to the next decades. Therefore election came on 9 October 2004, over 8 million throughout country as well as refugees in Pakistan and Iran directly voted for the presidential election for the first time in their history (Kippen, 2005).

Entering in diverse era the ethnic line didn't blur much, it dressed in democratic pattern. List of the nominees for first presidential election in 2004 is the evident of ethnical based contribution. This time four warring ethnic groups competed each other in presidential election. Hamid Karzai as Pashtun, Qanooni as Tajik, Mohaqiq as Hazara and Dostum with Uzbek background were the fame candidates (Katzman, 2006,) which In fact is a form of ethicized politics. Because the smaller ethnic groups, Despite of being aware of their limited potential to score vote independently, accepted no coalition in contributing to election. The strength ties of ethnicity in interaction to power are rooted in long history; hence it is difficult to be ceased easily. Historically the political interest is inseparable from ethnical interference in Afghanistan which is evident even in present political scenario. Considering eleven presidential candidates team features for (2014) election, it structurally neglected elitism and strictly formed on the basis of ethnicity. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, Abdullah Abdullah and Zalmi Rasoul major opponents in coming presidential election. The historical significance of ethnical politics influenced them in featuring their team; therefore irrespective of proficiency and political skill they selected their vice president nominees from chamber of four ethnic groups particularly from the team of past warlords, which is a sort of restructuring ethnic based politics, clearly evident in table 1.

**Table 1:** Restructuring ethnical power structure

No	Presidential Nominee	ethnicity	Vice president nominee	ethnicity
1	Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai	Pashtun	1 <sup>st</sup> Abd Rashid Dostum	Uzbek
			2 <sup>nd</sup> Sarwar Danish	Hazara
2	Abdullah Adullah	Tajik	1 <sup>st</sup> Mohammad Khan	Pashtun
			2 <sup>nd</sup> Mohammad Mohaqiq	Hazara
3	Zalmi Rasoul	Pashtun	1 <sup>st</sup> Zia Masood	Tajik
			2 <sup>nd</sup> Habiba Sarabi	Hazara

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The ethnical featuring of power and Democracy clearly emerges in above figure. It represents the way Power shapes among four ethnic groups mainly by the warlords, irrespective of their proficiency and knowledge. Elitism and proficiency are the essence of today's democracy, but contrary in Afghanistan due to its traditional structure, the traditional and ethnical elites are still regarded relevant and occupy wide social capital. In such society ethnicity shapes the political mechanism, rather than political mechanism influence ethnicity. In other sense democracy came to change the format of ethnic based contribution to power, but later it self changed by ethnicity to current ethnical democracy. It is evident in past ethnical Marxism and ethnical democracy in current era which represents the determinant role of culture in politics mainly in term of ethnicity. Though the format of today's contribution to power varies from past but still is a kind of ethnical restructuring the power, shifted from monopolism to particularly four major ethnic groups, which is a kind of limited pluralism.



## 6. Conclusion

This article precisely emphasis to examine the role of ethnicity as cultural element in power evolutions in Afghanistan's contemporary history. The presence rigidity in ethnicity resulted an intense social segregation and extensive discrepancies of historical memory. Since 1747 which is regarded as the starting point of contemporary history, ethnicity has crucially interfered in power in terms of structuring the power, power distribution, transition and legitimatization. Particularly power has been practiced in form of ethnical monopoly. Considering power structure in Afghanistan history, it is vividly seen that since (1747) all the rulers have been Pashtun, except Bacha-i Saqaw "Habibullah kalakani" who is ethnically Tajik and ruled Kabul from January 14 to October 9, 1929.

Since (1747), history followed by many changes, but ethnical based power transition and distribution didn't blur, it consistently remained. Eventually the over emphasis on ethnicity emerged in civil war and resulted ethnical confrontations in (1992). Ethnic groups, particularly Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek without determining the common enemy, opposition turned them to violent battle toward each other. It was a sort of unknown war and all against all. Ethnicity treated as paragon of contribution to power, therefore in civil war period, ethnical leaders legitimized their armed battle to demand for ethnical share in state. All ethnical based confrontations created a segregated history and benefited social distrust in ethnic relations. Therefore while Afghanistan arose to democratic era, no vital changes occurred and ethnical based share of power reproduced as political tradition. It restructured itself, which is clearly evident in team features of electoral opponents of (2014) presidential election. But the way it invisibly functions will be very disgusting and damaging to Democracy. Because ethnical based contribution results, violation of major values in democracy likes elitism and civil based social solidarity. In the other hand, ethnic based politics leads to structural suppression of minor social and ethnic groups like Sikh, Hindu, Arab, Baloch and others and it never leads to change in homogeneous historical values and memory. In order to stabilize democracy and originate social unity in accepting diversity it is recommended to suspect ethnic based contribution to power.

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