

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE AFGHAN COMMUNISTS

SHIBIRGHAN, THE CAPITAL of Jowzjan Province, is a remote and barren place, even by Afghan standards. To the north, Jowzjan borders on the Amu Darya River and Turkmenistan, a former part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.<sup>1</sup> Shibirghan is a city of about 150,000 on a flat, dry plain that extends past the river into Central Asia. Most of the city's population is made up of ethnic Uzbeks, with a minority of Turkmen; the province as a whole is 40 percent Uzbek and 30 percent Turkmen. Natural gas has been exploited in the province since the 1970s, initially by a Soviet energy project. Shibirghan is on the Afghan ring road, the country's main highway, which connects the country's main cities. Shibirghan lies between the largest city in the north, Mazar-e Sharif, to the east and the largest city in the west, Herat.

Since the 1980s Shibirghan has been the stronghold of Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek Afghan warlord who has played a complex role in the wars that have wracked Afghanistan since 1978. In 1998 Dostum was my host during a visit to Shibirghan. I had met him before, in my Pentagon office, where he had related his life's journey to me. A physically strong and imposing man, he has an Asian appearance, a hint of his Mongol roots. That day he was dressed to look like a modern political leader, in a suit and tie. The notorious warlord was hosting a meeting of the Northern Alliance, the coalition of Afghan parties that opposed the Taliban, in his hometown. In addition to Dostum, Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani, Hazara Shia leader Karim Khalili, and Mohammad Abdullah, a deputy of the legendary Ahmad Shah Massoud, were in attendance. The U.S. party was led by Bill Richardson, the U.S. ambassador to the United

Nations, and Karl “Rick” Inderfurth, assistant secretary of state. At the start of the meeting, all the Afghans and Americans held each other’s hands in a symbol of unity for the cameras.

In the photo my face is grim. I was bleeding slowly from a bad leg wound that I’d received just an hour earlier, when we got off the small plane that the UN had provided to fly us from Kabul to Shibirghan. Dostum had arranged an elaborate welcome for us. At the airport an honor guard greeted us, and we boarded a convoy of vehicles to drive into the city. Hundreds of children and adults lined the road to welcome the U.S. delegation to Jowzjan, waving flags and banners in English that proudly carried the names of their schools, businesses, and trade unions. Many of the children were in their school uniforms. Most striking was that almost half were girls without head scarves, a rare sight in 1998 in Afghanistan, where very few girls went to school. The event had the look of a communist state celebration of May Day or the Russian Revolution—and it looked that way because Dostum was once a prize pupil of the Soviet Union’s intelligence service, the KGB.

Once we arrived in the city center, we moved rapidly into the main stadium. There we were to watch a game of buzkashi, a much more violent variant of polo played by Uzbeks and other Afghans. As we entered the stadium, I slipped and cut my leg badly. Watching the game, I realized that I was in distress and asked for help. Dostum himself summoned a doctor, who arrived carrying a satchel with a large saw on top that was used for amputating limbs. I demurred. Fortunately, NBC News anchor Andrea Mitchell had come along to do a story on the talks, and her camera team included a former British Royal Marine commando who had been trained as a medic. He stitched me up quickly, using a can of 7UP as disinfectant. Ten hours later, doctors at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, gave me more thorough medical treatment. Andrea described the whole scene very well in her autobiography, *Talking Back to Presidents, Dictators, and Assorted Scoundrels*.<sup>2</sup>

Dostum certainly falls into the scoundrel department. He is a useful subject to study for those seeking to understand the violent politics of Afghanistan over the last half-century—especially the intrigues of Afghanistan’s communists, who seized power in 1978 and invited the Soviet Union to send an army into their country, setting the stage for the covert involvement of the United States. Participants on both sides in

the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s claimed to be more than warlords and militias. The Afghan communist government claimed to represent a new modern socialist world order. The Afghan resistance, the mujahedin, claimed to be holy warriors—jihadists—and freedom fighters defending their country from foreign invasion. The mujahedin narrative was much more honest than that of the communists.

At the commander level, however, there was not much difference between the two sides. Most commanders were warlords and behaved like warlords. The best of them, like Ahmad Shah Massoud, the commander of mujahedin forces in the Panjsher Valley, rose above the others in caring for the welfare of his supporters and the people of his fighting zone. The worst—like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the strongest mujahedin leader in the Pashtun community, and Dostum himself—exemplified the more typical commander on both sides: ruthless, corrupt, volatile, and violent. Dostum switched sides many times during his blood-soaked career. He has been backed over the years by the Soviet Union, Iran, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Russia, and the United States. He even temporarily aligned himself with the Taliban and Pakistan. After 35 years Dostum is still a major player, so taking a more in-depth look at my host in Shibirghan is a good introduction to the Afghan war.

Dostum began his political life as a communist. Born in 1955 into a peasant family in a village near Shibirghan, he joined the communist party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), as a teenager, and in 1973 he became a paratrooper in the Afghan army.<sup>3</sup> The Afghan communist party was badly divided from its birth in 1965. The two factions of the party, the Parcham (the Banner) and the Khalq (the People), were literally at each other's throat throughout the party's history. The Parcham drew its support from urban Afghans and from the country's diverse ethnic groups. The Khalq was more oriented toward rural areas and drew its support almost exclusively from the Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group. The Soviets tried endlessly to convince the two to work together, with only the most limited success. The PDPA's deep factional conflict would bedevil it and the Soviets until the collapse of the communist state in 1992, a collapse in which Dostum was a central player.

On April 27, 1978, the PDPA's supporters in the Afghan army staged a coup d'état in Kabul and overthrew the government of President

Mohammad Daoud Khan, who had staged his own coup five years earlier, ousting King Zahir and creating the first Afghan republic. The Saur (April) Revolution would precipitate an Afghan conflict that continues to this day. Dostum was then commander of an armored unit in the army and a member of the Parcham faction. The April coup was led by the Khalq faction and its leader, Nur Muhammad Taraki, who became president of the new People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The Khalq quickly purged many Parchamists from the party and the country, ignoring advice from Moscow to try to build a broad-based government, including noncommunists. The Khalqis were violent ideologues who saw enemies on every side, and they quickly acquired them.

Dostum fled the country to Pakistan, where he lived in exile in Peshawar. As a communist, Dostum did not fit in well in Pakistan, which was rapidly emerging as the main patron of the resistance to the communist takeover and the principal sponsor of the mujahedin. Dostum stayed in exile until December 1979, when the Soviet 40th Red Army invaded Afghanistan and killed Taraki's successor, Hafizullah Amin, and installed Babrak Karmal in his place. Dostum then returned to Afghanistan to become a local militia commander defending the natural gas fields, the only domestic source of energy in the country, in his home province of Jowzjan. Dostum was a natural soldier and a good leader whose troops admired his charisma and tough military approach. He specialized in frontal assaults on the enemy, and he quickly acquired a reputation for brutal and extreme violence. In 1982 Dostum was promoted to command a battalion of the militia run by the communist government's secret police, the State Information Service, known as the KHAD (Khedamati Ittlaati-e Dawlat). The KHAD was the KGB's Afghan protégé; it also got some assistance from the East German intelligence service. At its height it had about 30,000 employees and another 100,000 informants. Its founder was Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai, a Pashtun known for his ruthlessness in a regime that extolled extremism. In 1986 Najibullah would become Afghanistan's fourth and last communist dictator. He was nicknamed Najib (the bull) for his cruelty.

Under Najibullah's leadership Dostum thrived as a commander of the KHAD militia in Jowzjan, and soon his Jowzjani militia was the most successful communist fighting force in the country. Dostum's Jowzjanis formed a disciplined force that often defeated mujahedin commanders in

the northern part of the country and even persuaded some to defect to the communist cause. Within a year Dostum's force was upgraded to a division of 10,000 men, called the 53rd Division or the Jowzjani Division. The Jowzjani Division became one of only a few Afghan communist units that the 40th Red Army felt that it could rely on to fight well. For his performance, Dostum was given the Hero of Afghanistan award, the highest honor bestowed by the People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> In 1988, with the 40th Red Army withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Jowzjani militia was given responsibility for leading the communist military campaign in north-central Afghanistan along the southern border of the Soviet Union. After its defeat in Afghanistan, Moscow wanted Dostum controlling the Amu Darya. By then his control of his home province and the surrounding area was complete.

In 1989 Dostum was promoted again, becoming commander of the 7th Afghan Army Corps, with even more responsibility for the north. Najibullah was by now president of Afghanistan, and the KHAD effectively ran the communist state, which was under siege by the mujahedin. Estimates of the size of Dostum's command in the north range from around 20,000 to 45,000.<sup>5</sup> His forces included 3 infantry divisions, an armored brigade, 60 MiG aircraft, 60 helicopters, and 200 Soviet-made tanks. He ruled a state within a state. He sent elite units of his force to buttress Najibullah's garrisons in other parts of the country, including at the key battle of Jalalabad in 1989, which halted the mujahedin advance on Kabul.<sup>6</sup>

Early in 1992 Dostum read the handwriting on the wall. The USSR had ceased to exist, and its aid to Najibullah was coming to an end. In December 1991, Dostum turned to the newly independent country of Uzbekistan and its dictator, President Islam Karimov, for aid.<sup>7</sup> In 1992 Dostum "defected" to the side of the mujahedin and joined in the battle to take Kabul and oust Najibullah. Afghanistan's civil war entered a new phase: the communists were finished, and a new power struggle arose, between the warlords. Dostum would be a central player, shifting alliances constantly from his power base in Jowzjan. He solicited aid from many regional players, including Iran and Uzbekistan in particular but also Russia and Turkey. In 1998 it was Iran that backed him most actively. A senior delegation from the Iranian intelligence service, MOIS, arrived right after my delegation left to check on what Dostum had been

up to with the Americans.<sup>8</sup> He went into exile twice in the late 1990s, on both occasions spending much of his time in Turkey. In 2001 he again became an Iranian protégé, fighting the Taliban from exile. The United States became his new patron when he joined the CIA campaign to oust the Taliban in the last months of 2001, after the 9/11 attacks. Dostum famously led Uzbek cavalry charges supported by U.S. B-52 bombers to defeat the Taliban.<sup>9</sup>

Dostum remains a power broker today, although his health has deteriorated from the effects of a hard life and heavy drinking. He still commands Jowzjan and can deliver 1 million votes, mostly Uzbeks, in a national election. He was a key supporter of President Hamid Karzai's reelection in 2009. Dostum is a warlord par excellence and a classic product of Afghan politics, which is both local and volatile. He has been accused of numerous war crimes against prisoners and sadistic treatment of his own supporters when they crossed him. In a country with many brutal warlords, his brutality is legendary. Yet in his state-within-a-state in the 1980s and 1990s, Dostum ensured more gender equality than almost any other Afghan leader. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, he is one of the few prominent communists from the 1980s to still play a role on the Afghan stage. In the deadly politics of Afghanistan, Dostum is a proven survivor.

### *From the Great Game to the Great Saur Revolution*

Afghanistan has been invaded by foreign armies since the beginning of history. Its location—in the middle of Asia, with Iran, Russia, China, and the Indian subcontinent as neighbors—has placed it at the center of world politics for centuries, often to the detriment of its people. Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, and Moghuls have marched through Afghanistan, and Alexander the Great conquered the country on his way to India (the modern city of Kandahar is named for him). For much of the last two centuries it was either at the fault line between Russia and the British Empire or, after the end of the Raj, at the fault line between Russia and the United States. The Russians and British referred to their rivalry in Afghanistan as the Great Game. Moscow, London, and Calcutta (the capital of the British empire in India until 1911) were convinced that Russia and Britain were colliding great powers in Afghanistan and Persia and

that the winner of the collision would tip the global balance of power. The British were convinced that the tsar intended to seize the Ottoman capital at Constantinople (today's Istanbul) and then drive south through Afghanistan to give the Russian Empire access to the warm-water ports on the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean. Much of London's paranoia about Russian ambitions in Afghanistan was excessive, but it was real enough to lead Britain to go to war three times to keep Afghanistan from being absorbed by Russia.

The First Anglo-Afghan War (1838–42) was fought between the Afghans and a British Indian army organized by the British East India Company, which ruled India until 1858. However, the company never provided competent leadership or adequate support for the Afghan war because almost as soon as it began, London and Calcutta became engaged in the First Opium War with China, a much more lucrative and significant venture for British diplomats, military officers, and businessmen. Much as the United States did in Afghanistan in 2002 when it prepared to invade Iraq, the British took their eye off the ball in Afghanistan in the nineteenth century to focus on forcing China to open its doors to the opium trade. Many of the army's best units were diverted from Afghanistan to the China front, and the result was a disaster for Britain. The army that took Kabul was forced to retreat from the city in the dead of winter, and it was annihilated on its way back to Peshawar. The story has been brilliantly retold by my friend William Dalrymple in *Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan*.<sup>10</sup>

The Second Anglo-Afghan War began with the visit of a Russian delegation to Kabul in 1878, during the midst of a larger crisis between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. London was convinced that the Russians were intent on taking control of both Constantinople and Kabul. Again, the British took Kabul for a time and then withdrew. The major result of the second war was the demarcation in the 1890s of the border between Afghanistan and the British Empire in India. The foreign secretary of British India, Mortimer Durand, drew the line in 1893 and secured grudging Afghan agreement to it. It split the Pashtun community into two parts, and it also cut Afghanistan off from the sea and created a tiny finger of Afghan territory, the Wakhan Corridor, that separated the Russian Empire from India and opened a link from Afghanistan to China. By the terms of the Treaty of Gandamak, the government of India

(the Raj) gained control of Afghan foreign policy. The Afghans agreed not to establish diplomatic relations with Moscow, thus, for a time, eliminating London's rival from the game.<sup>11</sup>

Afghanistan stayed neutral during the First World War, although it flirted with joining the German-Austrian-Turkish alliance against Britain and Russia. In 1919 the Afghans, sensing that Britain was weakened by the war effort and nationalist unrest in India, started the Third Anglo-Afghan War, with a border incursion in the Khyber Pass. It was a relatively short conflict marked by the use of British air power, which brought about a stalemate between the two armies. The parties agreed to a cease-fire in June. The Treaty of Rawalpindi ended the war and gave Afghanistan its independence on August 19, 1919. The Afghans built a victory monument in Kabul portraying the British lion in chains. They had wanted London to cede Waziristan as part of the deal, but the Raj conceded no territory.<sup>12</sup> The Durand Line was reaffirmed as the border, but Afghanistan was given total independence in conducting its foreign policy, and it promptly became the first country in the world to recognize the new communist government in Moscow. Russia's new leader, Vladimir Lenin, sent a Soviet delegation to Kabul in September 1919 to open diplomatic channels, and the Soviets equipped and trained an Afghan air force. The countries signed a treaty of friendship in 1921. Soviet involvement in Afghan affairs had begun.

The three Anglo-Afghan wars shaped modern Afghanistan both literally and figuratively. The Durand Line settled the country's longest border, to the east and south, and settlement of the borders with the Russian Empire and Iran followed. The wars also provided Afghans with a national narrative of resistance to imperialism and the West. Few third-world countries could portray themselves as having resisted European imperialism as well as Afghanistan had.

Afghanistan's modern political history can be said to have begun on November 8, 1933, with the assassination of King Nadir Shah by a Hazara student radical. The king was succeeded by his 19-year-old son, Muhammad Zahir, who would rule the country for the next 40 years. For most of his four decades on the throne, Zahir, who was educated in France and Afghanistan, was content to leave effective power in the hands of two of his uncles, both of whom acted at prime minister. Hashim was



prime minister until 1946, followed by Mahmoud until 1953. Zahir's cousin Mohammad Daoud Khan then acted as prime minister until 1963.

Diplomatic contacts with the United States began in 1922, when an Afghan ambassador came to Washington to present his credentials to President Warren Harding, but a permanent U.S. envoy was not posted to Kabul until 1942, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. Until Japan attacked, Washington was isolationist and uninterested in Afghanistan. Twenty years earlier, Cornelius Van H. Engert had been the first U.S. diplomat ever to visit Kabul. Engert, who later became the first U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, published a 225-page study of the country in 1924 and lobbied Washington with little success for a modest aid program to Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of World War II, Afghanistan again flirted with supporting Germany. However, once the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Moscow and London invaded Iran and surrounded Afghanistan, putting an end to any flirtation with the Nazis. When the Soviets and British demanded that all German agents and diplomats be expelled from Afghanistan, Prime Minister Hashim reluctantly gave in and sent the Germans home. Afghanistan spent the first three decades of the cold war as a buffer between the two hostile superpowers. The king and his ministers very adeptly maneuvered between them to secure economic and military assistance from both. The United States helped fund a large agricultural production project in the Helmand River Valley between 1946 and 1953, modeled in part on similar projects in the U.S. Southwest. But the United States would not sell arms or provide military assistance to Afghanistan because of the emerging U.S. alliance with Pakistan. When the Afghans asked for military aid from President Harry Truman in 1948, Secretary of State George Marshall dismissed the request by asking "Who's the enemy?"<sup>14</sup>

When the Raj was partitioned in 1947, the Islamic state of Pakistan inherited the Durand Line and a border with Afghanistan. The Afghan government had never accepted the legitimacy of the Durand Line, which it correctly argued had been imposed on the Afghans by force of arms by an imperialist power. Afghanistan pressed the British either to return to Afghan sovereignty the disputed Pashtun- and Baluchi-inhabited portions of what was to become Pakistan or to let the inhabitants form their own state, to be called Pashtunistan. The Afghan

claim would have cost Pakistan almost half its territory and provided Afghanistan with access to the sea by absorbing all of Baluchistan into either Afghanistan or Pashtunistan. Instead, after local votes and tribal councils were held, the British announced that the disputed areas had chosen to become part of Pakistan.

Kabul rejected the British decision and was the only member of the United Nations to vote against admitting Pakistan in 1947 (Afghanistan had joined in 1946). Tensions between the two states began at Pakistan's birth and continue to the present day. The cause of Pashtunistan haunts the relationship. No Afghan government has ever recognized the Durand Line as the border of Afghanistan, and successive Afghan governments have flirted with supporting Pashtun and Baluchi irredentism or independence.

Instead of building a relationship with Kabul, Washington developed a close relationship with Pakistan, which sought U.S. support against both Afghanistan and India. Pakistan eagerly sided with the United States and the United Kingdom in the cold war in order to obtain military aid and diplomatic support. In 1954 Pakistan joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which was intended to extend the containment of the Soviet Union into Asia, and in 1955 it joined the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), which connected NATO and SEATO in a line of containment encircling the Soviet Union and its then-ally, Communist China.<sup>15</sup> The United States became Pakistan's major source of weapons in the 1950s, and Pakistan was enthusiastically welcomed into the camp of the "Free World" by the Eisenhower administration. In contrast, Kabul was told in 1954 that the United States would not provide arms to Afghanistan until it settled the Pashtunistan dispute with Pakistan.<sup>16</sup>

The Soviets saw and eagerly exploited the opening in Afghanistan. If the United States tilted toward Pakistan, Russia would tilt toward Afghanistan. Moscow and Kabul signed a barter agreement in 1950 to trade Afghan wool and cotton for Russian oil, and trade rapidly expanded. The Soviets opened a trade office in Kabul, and prospecting for oil and gas began in Jowzjan and other parts of northern Afghanistan. When Pakistan joined SEATO and CENTO and became the "most allied ally" of the United States, the Afghans turned to the Soviets for arms. King Zahir's cousin, Mohammad Daoud Khan, who had become prime minister in 1953, signed a \$3 million arms deal with Moscow's puppet

Czechoslovakia in 1955 and a \$32.5 million arms deal with the Soviet Union in 1956 to buy T-34 tanks and MiG-17 jet fighters. Soviet training for the Afghan army and air force began in earnest. By 1973 a quarter to a third of all Afghan officers had been trained in the USSR.<sup>17</sup> In his first trip abroad as leader of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev visited Kabul in 1955 and endorsed Afghan claims to Pashtunistan.<sup>18</sup>

By 1979 the Soviet Union had provided a total of more than \$1 billion in military aid and \$1.25 billion in economic aid to Afghanistan. In contrast, U.S. assistance totaled less than a half-billion dollars; of that, only a little more than \$25 million was military aid. The Soviets built the 1.7-mile-long, 11,500-foot-high Salang Pass tunnel connecting Kabul to the northern part of the country, providing an all-weather road from the Soviet border to the capital. Russian aid built the air base at Bagram, north of Kabul. U.S. aid built roads connecting Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran and a major air field at Kandahar. Daoud's government played on the Soviet and U.S. rivalry to get as much help as possible from both, but the Soviets had the inside track because they were geographically close to Afghanistan and they did not support Pakistan. In 1957, King Zahir made a state visit to Moscow to thank Russia for its assistance.<sup>19</sup>

In 1959 President Eisenhower became the first U.S. president to visit Kabul, on a trip that took him to India and Pakistan too (it was also the maiden voyage of Air Force One). The trip was soon overshadowed by a crisis with Moscow that arose when an American U-2 spy plane, flying from a secret base in Peshawar, Pakistan, was shot down over Soviet territory in 1960. The incident revealed that Pakistan had become a major base for U.S. espionage against the USSR, hosting both a secret CIA air base and a major National Security Agency signals intelligence collection facility.<sup>20</sup> In the late 1950s the CIA also began flying missions to supply anticommunist Tibetan rebels inside Communist China from an air base in East Pakistan provided by the Pakistani army.<sup>21</sup>

By pursuing its policy of *bi-tarafi* ("without sides") in the cold war, Daoud's government secured 80 percent of its development budget from the two superpowers. Daoud's major investment was in education and women's rights. Schools were opened, and by the Saur Revolution more than 1 million Afghan students were in school—of a population of 15 million—and many of them were girls. In August 1959, on the fortieth anniversary of Afghan independence from British control of its

foreign policy, Daoud ordered the wives and daughters of the royal family and prominent government officials to appear in public without veils, a shocking move in Afghanistan's conservative society that was denounced by many in the Islamic clergy (ulema). In addition, women were admitted to Kabul University as students and faculty and even as stewardesses on the national airline, Ariana Airways.<sup>22</sup>

In 1961 Daoud instigated a crisis with Pakistan over the Pashtunistan issue, sending a combined army and tribal force across the border into Pakistani territory. Pakistan's military dictator, Field Marshal Ayub Khan, shut Pakistan's consulates in Afghanistan. U.S.-supplied Pakistani F-86 Sabre jets bombed Afghan positions in Konar Province, and Ayub Khan shut the border to trade and cross-border tribal migration.<sup>23</sup> The closing of the border hurt Afghanistan, a landlocked country dependent on trade through Karachi, much more than it hurt Pakistan, and it went on for eighteen months. Daoud was disgraced and resigned in March 1963. President John F. Kennedy urged Khan to avoid further conflict with Kabul when he hosted him for a state dinner at Mount Vernon, George Washington's home in Alexandria, Virginia. After the Shah of Iran hosted a tripartite meeting with U.S. support in Tehran, Khan agreed to reopen the border. King Zahir ceased disseminating anti-Pakistan propaganda and traveled to Washington to meet with Kennedy in September 1963, the first visit by an Afghan head of state to the United States.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1960s King Zahir allowed political parties to begin to operate; while they were tolerated, they were not, strictly speaking, legal. In January 1965 the PDPA was formed, led by a Khalqi, Nur Muhammad Taraki. The party was funded by the Soviet Communist Party and followed the Soviet line. Within two years the party split into the two factions that became its hallmark, the Khalq, led by Taraki, and the Parcham, led by Babrak Karmal. There was also a smaller Maoist, pro-Chinese faction. Islamist political parties also emerged in the 1960s, led by future mujahedin leaders Ahmad Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The communist factions emphasized recruiting new party members among the officer corps and students, especially at Kabul University.

Mohammad Daoud Khan carefully planned a comeback, securing the support of Pashtunistan nationalists, students, and reformers and the Parcham faction of the PDPA, among others. On July 17, 1973, while the king was in Europe, Daoud staged a coup and proclaimed the end of the

monarchy and the creation of the Republic of Afghanistan. The Parcham joined Daoud's government, and several members were elected to parliament. The Khalq stayed out of the government, ridiculing their rival as "royal communists." King Zahir went into exile in Rome, where his bills and expenses initially were paid for by President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, the Shah of Iran, and the king of Saudi Arabia. After Sadat's assassination and the fall of the Shah, King Fahd paid the bills.<sup>25</sup>

Moscow welcomed the coup, of which it had advance knowledge because many of the officers who took part were Soviet trained and the PDPA was involved. Daoud visited Moscow in 1974, where he was given debt relief and a new half-billion-dollar aid program. He also promised to prevent any Western economic activity in northern Afghanistan along the Russian border, and he again revived the Pashtunistan issue, offering Pashtun and Baluchi rebels sanctuary and safe haven in Afghanistan. For its part, Pakistan backed the Islamist parties in Afghanistan, which engaged in terror attacks in Kabul.

But Daoud did not want to become a Soviet puppet, so he turned to Iran for help. The Shah of Iran, who was beginning to enjoy a surge of oil wealth after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, promised Daoud a ten-year, \$2 billion aid package. The Shah even suggested unification of Afghanistan and Iran under his imperial crown. Iran also brokered a *détente* with Pakistan. Daoud and Pakistan's president, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, traded official state visits in 1976. In 1978 the Shah offered Daoud a \$3 billion aid program if Daoud would recognize the Durand Line as a permanent border and in return Pakistan would cease all aid to Afghan dissidents. Daoud agreed to consider the offer.<sup>26</sup> The Shah was scheduled to visit Kabul in June 1978, and Daoud was scheduled to visit Washington to meet President Jimmy Carter in September.<sup>27</sup>

From Moscow's perspective, Afghanistan appeared to be drifting from its camp to the other side in the cold war. The Parcham and Khalq had been declared illegal in 1976 by Daoud, who feared their links to Moscow, and all Parchamists had been removed from the cabinet. Daoud visited Moscow for a second time in April 1977, but the visit went poorly. Daoud complained about Soviet efforts to unite the two factions of the PDPA, and Leonid Brezhnev, Khrushchev's successor, demanded the expulsion of Western experts working in the northern provinces on aid projects. Daoud refused and walked out of the meeting.

The Soviets became convinced that Iran and the CIA were turning Daoud and Afghanistan against them. The Soviet conspiracy theories are easy to understand. Richard Helms, the U.S. ambassador in Tehran, was the former head of the CIA; he also had attended the same Swiss prep school as the Shah and had known him well since the CIA-backed coup that put him in power in 1953.<sup>28</sup> In July 1977 Moscow engineered a brief reunification of the Khalq and the Parcham, assisted by the communist Tudeh Party of Iran and the Communist Party of India.<sup>29</sup> The stage was set for a communist coup d'état.

### *The Communists in Power*

In retrospect, there is a tendency to minimize the Afghan communists as simply pawns of the Soviet Union. They certainly were close to Moscow, but they were never obedient pawns. The KGB never controlled them fully and never succeeded in mending the factional rift in the PDPA. The communists had their own constituency in Afghanistan, among the urban population, students, parts of the minority ethnic communities, women's rights advocates, and believers in Marxism as the wave of the future. The PDPA would remain in power longer than the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; indeed, it would outlast the USSR.

Nonetheless, the connections between the PDPA and Moscow were deep and intimate. Moreover, by 1978 Soviet-trained personnel composed a third of the country's army officers and more than half of the air force officers. Soviet-trained personnel filled a majority of professional and technical positions in the government bureaucracy; many had been indoctrinated during their training in the Soviet Union, and some were KGB assets. The coup was planned in advance, and the KGB must have been well aware of the plot. Whether the Soviets explicitly instructed the PDPA to stage the coup is disputed by historians.<sup>30</sup> A CIA postmortem on the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1980 concluded that "there was no evidence that the Soviet Union participated in the coup," but that leaves unanswered the question of how much Moscow knew of it in advance and encouraged or discouraged the plot.<sup>31</sup> A later study by the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence concluded Moscow was aware of the plot but that the coup took place earlier than Moscow expected because of fast-moving events in Kabul.<sup>32</sup>

The assassination of a prominent PDPA member, Mir Akbar Khyber, on April 17, 1978, set the stage for the coup. The communists, who blamed Daoud and the CIA for his death, organized a large demonstration in Kabul. Daoud responded by arresting the leaders of the two factions, Taraki and Karmal. On April 27, 1978, Khalq faction officers in Kabul mutinied and stormed the Presidential Palace with fifty tanks, supported by air strikes from the Afghan air force. By the next day, Daoud and thirty members of his family had been killed and rapidly buried in a secret mass grave. Daoud had been shot dead in a hail of bullets while trying to resist the coup.

Nur Muhammad Taraki, the leader of the Khalq faction, became president and prime minister, with Babrak Karmal as deputy prime minister and another Khalqi, Hafizullah Amin, as foreign minister. The attempt to reconcile the factions would not last long. Taraki was born in 1917, the son of a Pashtun livestock dealer. He spent much of the 1930s in Bombay, India, where he was recruited by the Communist Party of India. In the 1960s he lived in the Soviet Union as a translator, but he was probably funded by the KGB. In 1965 he became a founder of the PDPA. He served in the early 1970s as the press attaché at the Afghan embassy in Washington. He also was a novelist, depicting classic Pashtun tribal society in Marxist dialectical terms.

The new regime moved quickly to implement its agenda. The Khalq was determined to change Afghanistan at top speed. The sexes were declared equal, and a minimum age was set for marriage, 16 years for girls and 18 for boys. Dowries were restricted to encourage girls to have more choices. In a deeply religious society, especially among the Pashtuns, the new policies were an affront to religious and tribal customs. The state now seemed determined to decide the terms of marriage and interfere in family decisions. In addition, an ambitious but poorly thought-out land reform program was embarked on that appeared to be an attack on rural farmers, the vast bulk of the population. Large land holdings were seized by the state, alienating important local power brokers. Widespread arrests were carried out of anyone objecting to the new reforms and anyone suspected of disloyalty. A reign of terror ensued.

The Khalq also turned on the Parcham faction. In early July 1978, Taraki and Amin ousted most of the Parchamists from the government. Karmal was dispatched to Prague as ambassador to Czechoslovakia.

“Plots” by Parchamists were discovered and ringleaders executed. As the regime became ever more extreme, it changed the national flag from the traditional black, red, and green tricolor to an all-red flag with a gold emblem in the upper left corner and the word *Khalq*, the people, at the center—an obvious imitation of the Soviet flag.

Moscow had welcomed the coup and rapidly endorsed Taraki. Amin visited Moscow in May 1978, where he was treated as a fraternal communist leader. New aid projects were announced immediately. After the Soviets and Taraki signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation in December 1978, thousands of Soviet advisers and experts entered the country to help the PDPA consolidate its power. The Soviet military presence in the country grew tenfold, from 350 advisers and experts at the time of the Saur coup to more than 3,000 by the time of the invasion in December 1979; several thousand more elite paratroopers guarded Bagram air base.<sup>33</sup> A series of increasingly high-level Soviet military delegations visited Kabul to take stock of the situation and report back to Moscow.

Resistance to the regime began almost immediately after the coup. By the fall of 1978, Kabul and the communists had lost control of parts of the country, including remote Shia-inhabited Hazarajat in the center, the Tajik-dominated northeast around Badakhshan province, and Pashtun provinces like Nuristan and Kunar along the Pakistani border. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul, which had suspended all aid projects, estimated that by mid-1978 the communist government controlled no more than half of the country.<sup>34</sup> In March 1979 a major uprising occurred in Herat, the largest city in the west, and the local Afghan army forces defected en masse to the side of the insurgents. Russian advisers and their families were killed in the uprising, although how many is still a source of confusion. Some accounts claimed as many as 200 Russians died, but the number was probably much smaller. Taraki pressed for Soviet military intervention to help put down the revolt, but Moscow resisted. Taraki flew to Moscow to make his case directly to the Soviet Politburo. He was promised more and better weapons along with more advisers and experts, but no combat forces. The communist regime publicly blamed the uprising on the new Islamic Republic of Iran and the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. There is no doubt that Khomeini was sympathetic, but the origins of the uprising were Afghan and included both Shia Muslims and Pashtuns.



After a week of shock, Kabul struck back. The Afghan air force bombed Herat with Ilyushin Il-28 bombers, and an armored force loyal to the PDPA retook the city in late March. Estimates of the dead run from 4,000 to 25,000. In 1992 a mass grave was uncovered that contained 2,000 bodies. Taraki was disgraced by the Herat debacle and became a figurehead. Hafizullah Amin, who took over the job of prime minister, became the regime strong man.

Then, in September 1979, Taraki planned his own comeback. He traveled to Havana, Cuba, and then to Moscow looking for support to oust Amin. Brezhnev encouraged Taraki to get rid of Amin, whom he considered too reckless and unwilling to work with other parts of the PDPA. Taraki returned to Kabul and moved to oust Amin, but Amin had learned from his informants that a coup was under way. On September 16 Amin struck first, ousting Taraki in a coup. The Russians were still urging intraparty unity as Amin removed Taraki's supporters from office. On October 8, 1979, on Amin's orders, Taraki was smothered to death.<sup>35</sup> Radio Kabul announced that Taraki had died of a "serious illness" from which he had long been suffering. Brezhnev and the Politburo were furious at Amin.

Hafizullah Amin was born near Kabul in 1921. After earning a degree from Kabul University, he came to New York in 1957 to study at the Teachers College of Columbia University in its prestigious master's program. In 1962 he returned to Columbia to get a Ph.D. He was head of the Union of Afghan Students in the United States, and he was a committed communist. In 1965 he returned to Kabul to help found the PDPA. In 1969 he won the only seat in parliament ever won by a Khalq member of the party. In the 1970s he organized the recruitment of army and air force officers for the party, thus becoming in effect the godfather of the Saur Revolution.

But Amin could not stop the deterioration of communist control in the countryside or the defection of more and more soldiers from the army. The communists had bungled their chance at power, and the revolution was in danger. The scene was set for the Soviet invasion. In mid-September the U.S. intelligence community detected unusual activity at a Soviet elite paratrooper division base, the 105th Guards Airborne Division at Fergana air base in Uzbekistan. It was the beginning of Soviet preparations to invade Afghanistan and the birth of the 40th Red Army.