



Minority group politics: the role of Ismailis in Afghanistan's politics

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Minorities are a group of people or community descendants of immigrant or indigenous people of a country speaking their own language and practising their own religious belief which distinguishes them from the majority of the country's population. They resist cultural, linguistic, and religious integration with the majority and aspire for equality and freedom of cultural and religious practices. They espouse self-determination or sovereignty and may even advocate the rights to secession and the establishment of an independent nation. The United Nations has defined the term minority as follows:

A group of citizens of a state, constituting a numerical minority and in a non-dominant position in that state, endowed with ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which differ from those of the majority of the population, having a sense of solidarity with one another, motivated if only implicitly, by a collective will to survive and whose aim is to achieve equality with the majority in fact and in law.¹

Ismailis constitute a religious minority in Afghanistan. At present their total population is estimated to be between 150,000 and 180,000. They have been suppressed by the governments and treated as second-class citizens. The focus of this article is to study the emergence of Ismailism in Afghanistan, to examine the role of Ismaili missionaries in preaching the Ismaili doctrines, and to explore factors that compelled Ismailis to collaborate with the dominant powers in the post-Alamut period. It also studies the position and politics Ismailis adopted during and after the Soviet occupation of the country.

Historical background

Islam was divided into Sunni and Shia sects after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632. Supporters of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, argued that Ali and his descendants by Muhammad's daughter Fatima are the rightful successors to lead the Islamic world. Shiism developed as a political movement and did not differ from the Sunnis. After Ali's short rule (656-61) the Umayyad dynasty ruled the Islamic world and suppressed Ali's supporters. Having failed to seize power as an Arab faction, the Shiites strove to gain victory as a Muslim sect. They championed the cause of the poor and oppressed people and maintained that justice could reign only if Muhammad's descendants

lead the Islamic world. The Shiites pledged their allegiance to Ali's sons, Hasan and Hussein and to the latter's descendants. The Shiites split after the death of Imam Jaffar Sadiq in 765. Those who followed his eldest son, Ismail, are known as Ismailis, and the adherents of another of Jaffar's sons, Musa Al-Kazim, whose line started the 12 Shiite Imam genealogy, are known as Athna Ashri (their last Imam, Mahdi, disappeared in about 873 and the Shiites maintain that he will return to rule the earth).

Ismailism represented the most radical sect of the Shiite community. Its emergence coincided with the transformation of the predominantly agrarian and military Islamic empire into a cosmopolitan society, and increasing integration of non-Arab ruling classes with the Arab Sunni state. This situation required the reorganization and realignment of classes. Supporters of Ismail advocated the cause of the dispossessed social strata: labourers, artisans and craftsmen. Ismailis renounced the existing laws on the grounds that laws had been enacted to subjugate the poor and protect the interests of those who rule. They encouraged dissent and rebellion against the system. For their radicalism, Ismailis were branded a 'heretical sect' by traditionalists and the dominating classes of the Islamic world.² For a century and a half after Ismail's death, Ismaili Imams remained hidden. During the occultation period *dayis* or missionaries conducted Ismaili community affairs. In 975 Ismailis under the leadership of Al-Muiz seized power in Cairo, Egypt, consolidated their base of support and laid the foundation for the Fatimid state. The Fatimid rulers revised the revolutionary doctrines that were developed by their predecessors in order to conform to the requirements of a new state. The Fatimid caliphs ruled over the Islamic empire until the 18th caliph, Al-Mustansir was overthrown by the powerful Saljuqid empire in 1094.

The Ismailis split into two factions following the death of Al-Mustansir. Al-Mustansir's chief of the army, Al-Afdal, supported Al-Mustansir's son, Al-Mustali, who was also his son-in-law and recognized him as the Imam. In doing so he divided the Ismailis into two hostile factions. Al-Mustali was recognized as the 19th Ismaili Imam in Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Western India. Ismailis in Iran rejected Al-Mustali's leadership and maintained that Al-Mustansir's son, Nizar, was his rightful successor and broke their ties with Cairo. They are known as Nizari Ismailis.³ Nizar fled to Alexandria, organized an army to regain power but was defeated. He, his sons and his close associates were killed.

Nizar's followers maintained that the line of the Nizari leadership continued when a son of Nizar—his posthumous son, was carried away to the Alamut fort (Eagle Nest) and remained hidden from the public.⁴ The Nizari rule thus emerged in Iran when Hasan Al-Sabbah conquered the Alamut fort in northern Iran in 1090–91 and consolidated the base of the Nizari branch of Ismailism. Hasan's date of birth is not known, but scholars speculate that he was born in 1050 into a Shiite family. Because of Sunni oppression he was forced to deny his faith. He was converted to Ismailism by an Ismaili priest, Abdul Malik Attash around 1071–72. Four years later he was sent to Cairo to meet the Ismaili Imam, Al-Mustansir. In 1081 he returned to Iran to preach the Ismaili doctrines.⁵

The period in which Hasan lived was characterized as a period of intense nationalist struggle against alien domination. During the Saljuqid rule, the Ismaili *dawat* (religious activities) assumed a millenarian character associated with the cults of dispossessed and downtrodden social classes. Hasan maintained that the key to victory depends on an organization capable of launching a quick offensive and sustaining a counter offensive, and a system of ideology (religion) to sustain the organization and inspire the *fidayis* (devotees). To accomplish his objectives Hasan created a small contingent of well-disciplined *fidayis* capable of striking at entrenched enemies. Hasan consolidated his base of organization by capturing more fortresses in areas in Kian, Khur, Khusuf, Zauzan, and Tun, and carried out his struggle against the Saljuqid dynasty. He was supported by the expropriated classes, artisans, and to some extent by the masses. Hasan did not claim to be an Imam, but said he was his deputy ruling on behalf of the hidden Imam. Islamic scholars argue that Hasan used this opportunity to strengthen his position by keeping his followers waiting until he was ready to reveal the Imam or decided to 'keep his lonely secret to his death, allowing his successors to trust in a future which to Hasan could no longer have any meaning of hope or fear.'⁶

Hasan developed special methods for training his loyal *fidayis*. He transformed the valley of Alamut into a garden where he erected pavilions and palaces. Runnels flowed with wine, milk, honey and water, and a number of beautiful damsels performed dances and sang to the delectation of all its inmates. In doing so Hasan believed that he would:

make his people believe that it was actually Paradise. So he had fashioned it after the description that Muhammad gave of his Paradise He kept at his Court a number of the youths of the country, from twelve to twenty years of age, such as had a taste for soldiering . . . then he would introduce them to his garden . . . having first made them drink a certain potion which cast them into a deep sleep, and then causing them to be lifted and carried in. So when they awoke, they found themselves in the Garden. When therefore, they awoke, and found themselves in a palace . . . they deemed it was Paradise If he wanted one of his Ashishins to send on any mission, he would cause that potion to be given to one of the youths in the Garden, and then had him carried into his Palace. So when the young man awoke, he found himself in the castle . . . when [he] wanted to slay any prince he would say to such a youth 'go thou and slay so and so, and when thou returns my angels shall bear thee into Paradise. And should'st thou die, nevertheless even so, will I send my angels to carry thee back into Paradise.'⁷

In this manner Hasan got his followers to believe in his promise and carry out his mission. For instance, one of his *fidayis* disguised himself as a priest and murdered the Saljuqid prime minister, Nizam Al-Mulk. Another *fidayi* entered into King Sanjar's tent while the king was asleep and plunged a dagger into the ground with a note stating: 'Did I not wish the king well that dagger which was struck into the hard ground would have been placed in his soft breast.'⁸ After Hasan's death in 1124 his successor, Kiya Buzurg-Umaid, and his son Muhammad ruled the Alamut. During their reign Ismaili *fidayis* continued to threaten

their enemies not to speak blasphemy about Ismailis. Fakhr Al-Din Razi, a prominent Sunni theologian who was an arch enemy of the Ismailis, was threatened to the extent that he stopped criticizing the Ismailis and also discouraged his followers from proselytizing them. In 1164 Muhammad's successor, Hasan, introduced three revolutionary innovations: (1) he proclaimed himself a divinely appointed ruler (Imam); (2) he abolished the Islamic Sharia (ritual laws); and (3) he predicted the resurrection of the dead or the end of the world. Hasan's revision of Islamic principles antagonized the Shiites and Sunnis. After a year and a half, he was murdered in 1166 and succeeded by his son Muhammad who supported his father's doctrines. In 1210 his successor, Hasan II, re-established the Sharia laws and tried to normalize relations with the Shiites and Sunnis.⁹ However, Ismailis remained esoteric in their religious and philosophical orientation and did not interact with non-Ismailis. The Nizari rule ended when the Mongolian forces, headed by Hulegu, invaded the region and executed the Nizari leader, Rukh al-Din Khurshah, his family and some 12,000 of his supporters in 1256. Ismailis maintain that Khurshah's son, Shams Al-Din and his successors remained hidden and their missionaries conducted the Ismaili doctrines.

Ismailism in Afghanistan

During the Fatimid reign, Ismaili missionaries were active in propagating the Ismaili doctrines. Ghiyath was the first missionary who visited Afghanistan. He was well versed in the Ismaili doctrines and was forced to flee his native town, Ray, in southern Tehran in Iran when a Sunni cleric, Al-Zafarani, incited people against him. He fled to Marw where he met and converted Al-Husayn Al-Marwazi, an influential tribal chief who ruled over Maymana, Taliqan, Herat, Gharjistan, and Ghor. Many inhabitants of these regions professed Ismailism as their ruler accepted Ismailism. Ghiyath returned to his native town and mysteriously disappeared. Al-Marwazi was elected chief of the Ismaili communities in Afghanistan. Ismailis suffered a tremendous setback during the reign of King Mahmud of Ghaznavid dynasty, 997–1030, and many were massacred, the remainder living in total secrecy.¹⁰

Abu Muin Nasir-e-Khosraw was another prominent Ismaili figure who conducted Ismaili affairs and elaborated its doctrines. Nasir was born in 1004 in Qubadian, a district of Balkh province. He belonged to a wealthy family of landowners and served as government financial administrator in Marw and had access to Ghaznavid court at Balkh prior to the Saljuqid invasion in 1040. At the age of 40 Nasir made a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 1045 and then proceeded to Cairo, Egypt, where he met the Ismaili Imam, Al-Mustansir.¹¹ He was delegated the task of preaching the Ismaili doctrines. Nasir returned to his native town, Qubadian, Balkh, in October 1052 and began to preach the Ismaili gospel. In doing so he antagonized the Sunni clerics who accused him of being a *mulhid* (heretic). They incited people against him, demolished his house, plundered his property, and threatened him with assassination. Nasir sought

refuge in the valley of Yumgan, a mountainous district in the upper Amu (Oxus) river.

In Yumgan, Nasir concentrated on writing and elaborating the Ismaili doctrines. He wrote poems and prose. His theoretical works on religious issues include: *Kitab-e-Jami al-Hikmatain* (The Sum of the Two Philosophies), *Zad al-Musafirin* (The Travellers' Viaticum), *Wajhi Din* (The Fundamentals of Religion), *Safar Nama* (Memoirs of a Journey), *Diwan* (Collection), *Shash Fasl* (Six Chapters), *Khan-ul-Ikhwan* (The Brotherhood), *Gushayish wa Rahayish* (On Salvation), etc. Nasir died around 1072–73 and was buried in the Yumgan valley.¹² After his death Ismailis in Afghanistan remained isolated from their centre in Iran, maintained total secrecy of their faith, and did not mix with neighbouring communities except in business matters. Several years later two Iranian Ismaili missionaries visited Badakhshan. The first, Sayed Shah Malang, resided in Sheghnan and established his authority in the region. The second, Sayed Shah Khamush, supervised the Ismaili affairs in Sheghnan and its adjacent areas. The Nizari movement weakened after the death of Shams Al-Din Muhammad in 1310. There was a dispute over succession and their followers became known as Muhammad Shahi and Qasim Shahi branch of Ismailis. During the reign of Abu Saeed of the Timurid dynasty in 1451–69, Shah Radi Al-Din visited Badakhshan and preached the Ismaili doctrines until he was killed by a local Timurid ruler in 1509.

Radi Al-Din was identified as the 30th Imam of Muhammad Shahi branch of Nizari Ismaili. Radi Al-Din II was succeeded by his son Shah Tahir Al-Husayni Al-Dakkani, the 31st and the most famous Muhammad Shahi Imam, which continued to have supporters in Badakhshan and Kabul until the 17th century. In 1490, the Qasim Shahi Ismailis under the leadership of the 33rd Imam, Abd Al-Salam Shah, extended an invitation to Muhammad Shahi Ismailis in Afghanistan to transfer their allegiance to him. It is believed that Muhammad Shahi Ismailis reverted to the Qasim Shahi branch at the beginning of the 19th century. The propagation of the Ismaili doctrines is also attributed to Sayed Suhrah Vali Badakhshani in 1452 and Sultan Husayn Ghuriyani Herati, known as Khayrkhaw-e-Herati, who died in 1553.¹³ Khayrkhaw-e-Herati was a prolific writer and poet and used the pseudonym Gharibi in most of his literary works. His works include: *Fasli dar Shinakht-e-Pir* (On the Recognition of the Imam) and *Kalam-e-Pir* (A Treatise on Ismaili Doctrine). He was an ambitious man and claimed that he was appointed by the Ismaili Imam as his chief representative (to succeed his father) to supervise religious and social affairs of Ismaili communities of Khorasan, Badakhshan and Kabul.¹⁴

The Qasim Shahi branch of Ismailis began to reassert themselves as a power in local politics when their leader Hasan Ali Shah, known as the Aga Khan Mahalati, rebelled against the Shah of Iran in 1838. He was defeated and he and his supporters remained captive in Kirman for eight months. The Shah pardoned him on the grounds that he must peacefully retire in his native town, Mahalat. In 1840 Aga Khan again organized a strong army and rebelled against the Shah. He was defeated and was 'forced to flight and with difficulties made his escape,

attended by a few horsemen, through the desert of Baluchistan to Qandahar'.¹⁵ While in Qandahar, Aga Khan received Ismaili dignitaries from Kabul, Badakhshan and other regions. The British political agent Major Henry Rawlinson welcomed Aga Khan and provided a daily stipend of one hundred rupees. Aga Khan forged a convenient alliance with the British hoping to use them to facilitate his return to Iran. The British used Aga Khan and his army against the Shah to block Iranian intervention in the British occupied territories in Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent.

During his stay in Qandahar Aga Khan informed William Macnaughten, the British political agent in Kabul, that he was interested to rule over Herat on behalf of the British. Although the British agreed to appoint Aga Khan as the ruler of Herat, the Afghan rebellion in Kabul and Qandahar forced the British to evacuate their forces from Qandahar. Aga Khan then proceeded on to Sind. In Sind Aga Khan:

raised and maintained a troop of light horse . . . and during the latter stages of the first Anglo-Afghan War in 1841-42, he and his cavalry were of service to General Nott in Qandahar and to General England when he advanced out of Sind to join Nott. For these services and for others which he rendered to Charles Napier in his conquest of Sind in 1843-44, my grandfather (the Aga Khan) received a pension from the British government.¹⁶

During the Baluchi uprising against the British forces Aga Khan sent his brother Mohammad Baqir Khan to help the British defeat them. He sent his other brother, Abdul Hasan Khan, to capture the fortress of Bampur in Baluchistan, Iran. Hasan Khan was defeated and remained a prisoner in Tehran, released a few months later and was allowed to remain in Tehran to look after his family's property. In 1884 Aga Khan left Sind for Bombay. With the departure of Aga Khan from Iran the Ismaili centre had been transferred to India.

Aga Khan died in April 1881 at the age of 90 and was succeeded by his son Aga Ali Shah as Aga Khan II and his grandson Sultan Mohammad Shah as Aga Khan III. Aga Khan III played a major role in helping his followers in Asia and Africa by promoting various development projects. He stressed the principle of non-violent action and restrained his followers from participation in any kind of violent activity. Following World War II Aga Khan III launched a major campaign to convince world powers to help him in establishing an independent homeland for all Ismailis but they did not respond favourably.¹⁷

Ismailis in Afghanistan maintained regular contacts with their religious leader, Aga Khan, in Bombay. Sayed Jafar, chieftain of the Ismaili community of Baghlan and its adjacent areas, and Shah Abdul Rahim, head of the Ismailis of Badakhshan, collected tithes from their subjects and delivered them to Aga Khan. The Sunni-dominated governments suppressed Ismailis, barred their entry within the state bureaucracy, and regarded them as informants of Aga Khan and of the British government of India. According to Aga Khan, his followers were not informants but they had been engaged in a 'secret diplomatic mission'.¹⁸ Fear of persecution or discrimination forced Ismailis to maintain complete secrecy of

their religion, and this situation persisted until Afghanistan gained its independence in 1919.

The new government lifted restrictions imposed on Ismailis and other national minorities by previous governments. The 1923 constitution accorded equal status to all national minorities and individual citizens, permitted the Shiites and Ismailis to freely practise their religious rituals without persecution by individuals or public institutions, abolished the practice of slavery and accorded non-Islamic minority groups (Jews and Hindus) equal status with other citizens of the country.¹⁹

Ismailis supported the state and relied on it for their protection and enjoyed a degree of freedom in practising their faith. The hereditary Ismaili chieftain Sayed Nadir Shah, known as Sayed-e-Kayhan, remained subservient to the ruling classes in the Afghan bureaucracy. He was a cultured man who wrote prose and poetry and published a few of his poetry collections outside the country. His literary works did not introduce any new theoretical perspective to the Ismaili doctrines but was for the most part a rehash of the existing theological literature. In 1955 Aga Khan III appointed his 20-year old grandson Karim Aga Khan as his successor because he believed that in the changing world, the interests of Ismailis would be best served by having a young leader educated in the spirit of the modern era. Aga Khan III died in 1957 and was duly succeeded by his grandson, Karim Aga Khan, the 49th present Ismaili Imam.²⁰ Aga Khan IV confirmed the reappointment of Sayed Nadir as the leader of the Ismailis in central Afghanistan. In the absence of a personal visit by Aga Khan to Afghanistan Ismaili chieftains built their own cults of personality. This led to a division of the community in the 1960s.

The period between 1950s and 1960s marked the growing capitalist development in Afghanistan. Like many other entrepreneurs, the Nadiri family and a number of middle class Ismailis also engaged in commercial trade. The Nadiris invested heavily in real estate, the service industry, and established a joint stock company: Shirkat-e-Sahami-e-Doshi. Ismailis gained further recognition after the promulgation of the 1964 constitution. During the last parliamentary election of 1969 Sayed Nadir's son Nasir Nadiri ran for a seat in the parliament. In order to secure a seat for himself, he encouraged his female followers in the Doshi district, Baghlan province, to go to the election polls and cast their vote for him. For the first time in Afghan history rural women were able to cast their votes in a parliamentary election.²¹

Although Ismailis did not produce well-articulated religious theorists, philosophers and scholars to expand scholarship and to elaborate the Ismaili doctrines in light of modern developments, they made a remarkable progress in education. In the 1960s a large number of Ismailis attended schools, colleges, and universities. Their numbers increased substantially in subsequent years. Ismaili intellectuals were divided into three ideological groups: (1) revolutionaries; (2) reformists; and (3) traditionalists. The first group belonged to several splintered organizations of Sazmani Demokratiki Navin-e-Afghanistan, or the Neo-Democratic Organization of Afghanistan (NDOA), known as Shula-e-Jawid (Eternal

Flame). These organizations included Akhgar, SAMA, Surkha, etc., and their members supported revolutionary armed struggle as the only means of establishing a genuine socialist society, albeit through different strategies and tactics.²² The second group included Ismailis affiliated with the Parcham (Banner) and Khalq (People) factions of the pro-Soviet Hizbi Demokratiki Khalq-e-Afghanistan, or People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Both Parcham and Khalq supported social and political reforms, although they vocally supported a revolution from below. The traditionalists included Ismailis who remained loyal to Ismaili chieftains and did not espouse any political ideology but Ismailism. Inspired by changes in the national and international arena, Ismaili intellectuals of the reformist school were eager to transform the traditional social structure of their communities. They perceived their own backwardness and underdevelopment in isolation from the declining economic situation of the country. Instead of condemning the system, they blamed chieftains of the Ismaili communities for the deteriorating living standards of the people and began to criticize them for not improving the lot of the disadvantaged social classes.

In the 1960s dissatisfaction grew and culminated in a split of the community. Ismailis of Parwan and Wardak provinces rallied behind their tribal chiefs, broke off their ties with the Nadiri dynasty and laid the foundation for a separate Jamatkhana, or house of worship, in Kabul. Sayed Mansoor was recognized as the leader of the splinter group. The split was not based on ideological or philosophical differences but was generated by cults of personality among the tribal chiefs and communal politics. When Aga Khan removed his distant cousin, Amir Asad Shah Khalili, from the leadership position of the Ismaili communities of Mashhad and Tehran, Iran in the early 1970s and delegated the task of administration of Ismaili affairs to committees of intellectuals elected by the people and endorsed by him, a number of Ismailis in Kabul also were eager to initiate similar changes in their communities. As a result another faction emerged in the early 1970s. The leader of the new group, merchant Mullah Ramazan, was assisted by Pro-Soviet intellectual reformist Maharam Ali and his associates. Maharam Ali recruited numerous Ismailis to the Parcham faction of the PDPA while he was teaching in a high school in Kabul, and during his tenure as President of the Kabul Municipal Inspection Department (appointed by President Mohammad Daoud during his republican regime, 1973-78). Relations between them grew bitter to the extent that members of one community did not attend the other community's religious services.

Sayed Nadir did not take part in politics. After serving the community for 45 years he died at the age of 83 in early 1971. After his death, Aga Khan appointed Nasir Nadiri to succeed his father. The Nadiri dynasty suffered crises of leadership when two dissident intellectuals, Sayed Ahmad Barkhurdar, a maverick opportunist, and Ebrahim Arzu, a member of the Khalq faction of the PDPA (assassinated in the mid-1980s) from Kayhan district, published articles claiming that the Nadiri dynasty is unsuitable as community leaders because of their extravagant life-style, etc. However, Barkhurdar took bribes during his

tenure as a local administrator in Herat Province, and played a key role in the arrest and execution of revolutionary socialists and Mujahid fighters during his tenure in Afghanistan's Secret Service Department (known as KHAD) in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. A few months after the establishment of the republican regime in July 1973, Nasir and his four brothers, Mansur Nadiri, Nuruddin Rawnaq Nadiri, Gauhar Khan and Abdul Qadir were arrested. The circumstances of their arrest are not known but they were sentenced to a two-year prison term. They were imprisoned again during the rule of President Noor Mohammad Taraki and his successor, Hafizullah Amin, in April 1978–December 1979. Nasir Nadiri and Mansur Nadiri survived the onslaught of the Kabul regime and were released after the Soviet invasion in December 1979, but their brothers were presumed to have been executed. Pro-Soviet Ismaili intellectuals who held important positions in the government bureaucracy seem to have played a key role in their arrest and execution as well as those of a number of their supporters and loyalists.

The Ismailis of landowning and business classes also suffered heavy losses when the democratic regime introduced a number of reforms. Decree No. 6 exempted peasants from payment of debts and interest to feudal landowners. Decree No. 7 concerned the emancipation of women, and abolished the practice of arranged marriages, limited the amount of dowry to 300 afghanis (local currency equivalent to US\$10), and promoted literacy programmes for women. Decree No. 8 limited the size of landholdings to six hectares, the remainder to be confiscated by the state.²³ The implementation of these reforms antagonized feudal landowners and conservative clerics. The manner in which the reforms were carried out was harsh and generated public dismay and periodic revolt in various parts of the country. Ismailis also revolted against the Kabul regime. Nasir Nadiri's uncle, Sayed Manuchehr, who was his longtime rival and had an unsettled dispute with the Nadiri dynasty over inheritance rights, led the Ismaili struggle in Samangan, Balkh, and Baghlan provinces. In Shibar-Shunbul district, Bamiyan province, Captain Noor Muhammad was in charge of the community affairs. Noor Muhammad learned revolutionary politics as a student at Kabul's military academy in the early 1970s and became active in the revolutionary movement prior to and after he graduated from the academy. He was arrested a few months after the establishment of the democratic regime in April 1978. Secret service agents tortured him in order to extract information about his party, Akhgar, and its supporters. Having failed to obtain any information, they released him and kept him under surveillance. Noor Muhammad seized his opportunity and fled to Shibar, where he organized the Shiites and Ismailis and led a successful partisan war against the Kabul regime and liberated the area.

Ismailis in Badakhshan are concentrated in Wakhan (7,000 people), Shegnan (6,000), Ishkashim (2,750), Kuran and Munjan (6,480), and Zibak (2,000).²⁴ Ismailis near the Soviet border at the Amu Darya (Oxus River) remained sympathetic toward the Kabul regime. They did not support the Sunni-dominated resistance struggle because: (a) in the past the Sunni majority oppressed them; and (b) they were impressed by the high living standard of the Soviet Central

Asian communities and were dismayed by the deteriorating living standards of their own. They supported the pro-Soviet ruling party in Afghanistan.²⁵ The Kabul regime was on the verge of collapse when the Soviet Union invaded the country in December 1979 and installed Babrak Karmal as the new president of the country.

President Karmal tried to strengthen his social base of support by coopting tribal chiefs and clerics via a 'carrot and stick' policy. In Kabul and other major urban areas Ismaili leaders supported the Soviet-backed government in order to protect their own interests. Ismailis in the countryside remained defiant of the Kabul regime. As the war of national liberation affected the Ismaili communities a number of Ismailis, including Manuchehr, Captain Noor Muhammad and Mullah Ramazan, visited Pakistan to report to Aga Khan and seek his guidance concerning the position of the Ismailis *vis-à-vis* the Soviet occupation forces and the Iran and Pakistan-based Islamic parties. Aga Khan did not take any position regarding the Soviet occupation and instructed his followers to work toward unity. He issued an epistle to his followers which read as follows:

I send my most affectionate paternal maternal loving blessings to all the beloved spiritual children mentioned on the enclosed list for their services submitted on the occasion of my last visit to Pakistan. All beloved spiritual children of my Afghanistan Jamats are constantly in my heart and thoughts. I send my Afghanistan Jamats my special blessings for unity and peace.²⁶

A year later another group of Ismailis went to Pakistan to inform Aga Khan about the situation in Afghanistan and to request guidance concerning the position of Ismailis in the war of national liberation. Aga Khan sent a telex to the effect that:

Fortunately, I am aware that it is not necessary for me to meet the leaders and the members of all institutions for them to do good work and I do not want those with whom I do not have regular contact to think that I am unaware of the wonderful service which they are rendering to my Jamat. I am well aware of it and I want them to remember this because I appreciate deeply the service which they are rendering. It is a service to which I attach the greatest value.²⁷

Although Aga Khan's message to his followers in Afghanistan before and after the Soviet occupation has been one of unity, peace and neutrality, Ismailis remained divided. In Kabul and major cities where the Kabul regime maintained its control, community leaders supported the Soviet-installed government. President Karmal influenced the Ismaili chieftain, Nasir Nadiri, to participate in the National Fatherland Front. A number of Ismaili intellectuals who espoused Soviet-brand socialism began to recruit Ismailis in support of the government. In 1981 Nasir Nadiri left Afghanistan for England and selected his brother Mansur Nadiri to lead the community. Karmal's successor, President Najibullah (1986–92) appointed Mansur Nadiri, chief commander of Baghlan province. Mansur organized his supporters in Kayhan and received substantial military equipment such as automatic machine guns, artillery, tanks, and technical personnel.

Mansur's son Jaffar was appointed governor of Baghlan province and was also made a full general in the army in command of 13,000 troops and militia comprised of Ismaili youth.²⁸ He was handed a position of great responsibility despite the fact that he lacks a formal background and experience in this area. Jaffar was 11 years old when he left for England when President Mohammad Daoud's government (1973–78) imprisoned his father and his uncles. He enrolled at the Blue Coat Preparatory school in Birmingham. A year and a half later he went to the United States and attended the Hiram W. Dodd elementary school and South Mountain High School in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He was expelled from the school 16 times on disciplinary grounds. He joined a local motorcycle gang and supported himself by working in a McDonald's restaurant. He was a fan of Heavy Metal and rock and roll music.²⁹ At present Jaffar not only commands the Ismaili militia but also arbitrates local disputes and officiates over formal ceremonies.

During the Soviet occupation many Ismailis lost their lives and many others were killed including Captain Noor Muhammad, the maverick Ismaili leader of the Shibar district. During an interview with Vladimir Sevruk, *Izvestia's* correspondent Mansur elaborated the Ismaili position as follows:

Our supreme authority Karim Aga Khan teaches us to strive for the light of knowledge, improve the life of faithful Muslims and work for justice . . . we must do justice to Babrak Karmal, who did everything in his power to return the true meaning of the revolution . . . he did a lot for Afghan Muslims and we sincerely respect him. The policy of national reconciliation proclaimed by President Najibullah fully accords with the fundamental principles of true Islam. . . . We want Afghanistan and the Soviet Union to be good neighbours. . . . We won't let anyone harm our Soviet neighbour. That is how we are instructed by the supreme authority of Ismaili, Karim Aga Khan.³⁰

When President Najibullah resigned after the UN-brokered peace negotiation which led to the transfer of power to a coalition of Islamic groups, Mansur Nadiri forged an alliance with General Abdul Rashid Dostam, a powerful military commander in several provinces in northern part of Afghanistan, and supported the establishment of the Islamic state in Afghanistan. Mansur remained on good terms with the leadership in Kabul and used his influence to persuade the newly established Islamic state to appoint two members of his family to diplomatic posts abroad.

The geographical location of Afghanistan's diaspora Ismailis is shown in Table 1.

Conclusion

Ismailis are one of the poorest religious communities in Afghanistan. They had been suppressed by the ruling classes within the state bureaucracy prior to the country's independence in 1919. The hostile environment and the esoteric nature of the Ismaili gnosis forced Ismailis to maintain their faith in total secrecy. In the post-independence period Ismailis, like other national minorities,

Table 1 Geographical location of Afghanistan's diaspora Ismailis, 1979

| Province | Village | Total Population in '000 | Estimated Ismaili pop. | Estimated % of Ismailis |
|------------|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Badakhshan | Darwaz; Ishkashim; Jurm; Kuran-Munjan (Yumgan); Khahan; Sheghnan; Wakhan; Zibak | 484 | 30,000 | 6.20 |
| Baghlan | Dahani-Ghori; Doshi (Kayhan); Pul-e-Khumri; Tala & Barfak | 486 | 30,000 | 6.17 |
| Balkh | Mazar-e-Sharif | 570 | 1,000 | 0.18 |
| Bamiyan | Iraq; Kalu; Shibar & Shun- bul | 285 | 20,000 | 7.02 |
| Ghazni | Nawoor | 701 | 2,000 | 0.29 |
| Hilmand | Hilmand | 570 | 100 | 0.02 |
| Kabul | Alauddin; Farza; Kariz-e- Mir; Qala-e-Fatu; Qargha; Shuhada; Taimani; Wazirabad | 1,372 | 20,000 | 1.46 |
| Kunduz | Charmu | 575 | 500 | 0.09 |
| Nangarhar | Shiga | 1,124 | 200 | 0.02 |
| Parwan | Charikar; Deh Muskin; Shikhali; Surkhparsa | 784 | 30,000 | 3.83 |
| Samangan | Bishgul; Darisuf | 275 | 3,000 | 1.09 |
| Takhar | Bangi; Khanabad; Shurab | 528 | 2,000 | 0.38 |
| Wardak | Churi; Hisa-e-Awali Bihsud; Kata Khak; Kubi Run; Marak; Markaz-e- Bihsud; Quli Khish; Sang-e-Sulakh; Taladeh; Uba Chura | 310 | 30,000 | 9.68 |

were accorded equal rights and status before the law. Ismailis supported the government and participated in the political affairs of the country. They regarded the state as an institution that defends and protects their rights. However, their leaders were subjected to coercion during the reigns of President Mohammad Daoud (1973–78) and President Noor Mohammad Taraki and his successor, Hafizullah Amin (1978–79). During the Soviet occupation and after, Ismailis did

not believe that their collective interests would be safeguarded by the policies and practices of the Iran and Pakistan-based Islamic parties. This situation and lack of financial resources and recognition by neighbouring countries to provide them sanctuary compelled many Ismailis to support the Kabul regime. In doing so, Mansur Nadiri, Ismaili chieftain of Kayhan district, succeeded in building a strong army capable of defending and safeguarding his vested interests. This enabled Mansur also to play a major role in politics after Afghanistan was declared an Islamic state in 1992.

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