Kohdaman Uprising of 1930

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The Kohdaman uprising of late July - early August 1930 in Afghanistan was the most daring attempt to overthrow the new Afghan King, Nadir Shah, who came to power in October 1929, after a nine-month interim (commonly called by Afghans themselves as "Inquilab" or revolution). The Kohdaman events developed into a large-scale national mutiny that subsequently into a civil war, the second of its kind within a short period of time. It originated in, and was mainly confined to, Kohdaman and Kohistan -- both second-rank districts north of Kabul, the Afghan capital. Kohdaman and the surrounding area is known as Shamali (northern), which was mainly inhabited by ethnic Tajiks, who, in turn, were termed Shamalwar (northerners).

Several events contributed to the unrest in the region. Following the Inquilab of 1929, the Nadir government proposed several measures, including the confiscation of a portion of Kohdaman lands for the settlement of Pashmh tribes. This was to be a reward for the tribes that served in favor of Nadir during the Inquilab fighting. The land transfer was scheduled for no later than the fall of 1930, an event that triggered the uprising.

Another contributing factor was the forced disarmament of Kohdamani, who had a considerable amount of arms since the time of Habibullah Kalakani (popularly known as Bache-e-Saqaw). From here on, he will be referred to as Habibullah. The efforts to take people's property and possessions, angered local notables and clergy who were either Nadir repression survivors or pardoned individuals of saqawid government.

One additional circumstance served to incite the uprising: in early summer of 1930, the government had appointed Mohammed Yusuf Khan, a very influential area landowner to the position of haakem (governor). M. Yusuf had high family connections. He was the brother of assassinated M. Hussain Khan, Secretary of Finance before Amanullah Moustafi. M. Yusuf's tenure included the position of Habibullah's private secretary, Logar Province Haakem, and Chairmanship of the Reconciliation Commission in the Eastern province, both under Habibullah's regime. Shortly before his new appointment M. Yusuf was released from prison on the request of his nephew Habibullah, a young militant Saqawist, recently pardoned by Nadir.

Yusuf's surprising appointment at the time, in Kohdaman could be explained by several considerations including rejection of the position by a number of candidates. Nadir may have expected through this appointment to reconcile the troubled region and at the same time to share responsibility for other harder measures, such as the calculation of confiscated lands for subsequent transfer to Pashtun tribes, etc. The land transfer was, indeed, the crucial point. It was a two-fold project to reward these tribes for their support at the time of Nadir-Habibullah fighting, and to settle Kabul suburbs by Pashtun tribes for regime's security. The disarmament of Shamali was another sensitive duty of the new haakem. A number of highly sensitive duties (recollecting valuables brought earlier by Habibullah's
supporters from Kabul, exposing disloyal individuals, etc.) colorfully featured the whole load of M. Yusuf's assignments.

Available data suggests that Nadir almost fatally miscalculated the situation. This argument and some other points of discussion outline the scope of this paper, the main purpose of which is to summarize the events, simply labeled in existing archives and published records as "Kohdaman Uprising (Rebellion, etc.) of 1930", therefore placing them into the context of controversial Afghan Interbellum. The hypothesis is that those events had marked the first and actually final considerable effort of regional/ethno-minor elite to reconsider the outcome of the first Afghan civil war – the so-called Inqilab of 1929. By raising and proving it, this paper is strictly arguing the statements of existing, but limited available literature on the subject.

Most disputable among them are those by Russian Afghanologist V. Kogun, who features Kohdaman events as "a first joint Tajik-Pashtun uprising against the ruling regime", socially centered on and politically led by local peasantry. The given paper intends for a fresh and balanced point of view on the subject under investigation, which became possible primarily due to new data drawn from the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs Archive (the files of the embassy in Kabul), declassified and recently opened for access, and the re-appraisal, partial or general, of the whole, post-Amanullah era.

By the start of the mutiny the Kohdaman's top circle included, besides M. Yusuf Khan, the following persons:

1. Mohammad Azam Khan Tutumdarri, established land owner with a household of about 600,000 Afghani, former Habibullah Chairman of State Council
2. Mir Baba Charikari, former Habibullah governor-general in Badakhshan
3. Umra Khan, land owner with a household of up to 200,000 Afghani
4. Abdul Kadir, Taraki tribe of Ghilzais, with a household income of about 1 million Afghani, former Habibullah governor-general in Kandahar (his sister married Habibullah Kalakani)
5. Mirza Abdul Qayoom, household of 400,000 Afghani, Habibullah's Mous-tufi, by the event – office head in Koh-daman Khanate.

Kabul authorities tried to run the situation from their side: Shah Mahmud, Nadir's brother and Minister of War, conducted mass meetings in Jab-ul-Seraj, Charikar and Kohdaman. Sons of local notables were called to Kabul as hostages. Amanists, the followers of dethroned King Amanullah, who took refuge in Europe, were another distinctive anti-Nadir group in Afghanistan. They dispersed propaganda among Kabul officials, traders, etc., seeking to restore their failed leader's rule. According to Soviet diplomatic sources, the Amani network was ill-organized and split in several factions, each pursuing their own personal aims. The same source particularly distinguished youth and military circles, and personally Hafiz-Allah, once Consul-General in Tashkent.

Approximately mid-July of 1930, both conspirators, Amanists and Kohdamanis, reached an agreement on joint action against Nadir. The date of action remained the only disputed point. Kohistani scheduled it for after the harvest while Amanists preferred a later start. They expected to increase their numbers by enlisting the Mohmand tribes, Hazara and Ghilzai support. As a result, they managed to postpone the action until the fall of that year. The scheme of the aforementioned action was as follows: Kohdaman forces should rise first throughout all northern provinces, and Amanists simultaneously follow them in Kabul itself, releasing imprisoned Saqawists and their own followers. Most eminent among those to be released was former regent Mohammad Wali Khan, who had been declared interim state leader, right up to the arrival of Amanullah.

The third anti-Nadir hub was located in northern Afghanistan, with its socio-political and core human resource being Bukhara emigrants. Umra Khan maintained contacts with émigré leader Ibrahim Bek, and both sides agreed that Bukhara emigrants should rise in Katta-ghan immediately after the Kabul-Kohdaman coup.
The existing situation was sharpening by another socially and ethnically colored intra-Afghan conflict. Probably the most tenacious among the challenges of the moment was the Ghilzai issue. It had several dimensions, historical and strategic. One was caused by the Ghilzai-Waziri controversy: the former claimed back their lands at Shah-Juyaa, taken away during Amir Abdul-Rahman rule, and then transferred to the Waziris for their timely anti-Ghilzai services. During the Inqilah of 1929 the Waziris, who supported Amanullah instead of Habibullah, therefore lost their land for a second time. Nadir, in his turn, counterbalanced this long-time dispute, by restoring those lands to Waziris, but soon he was forced to revoke his decision in favor of Ghilzais. Waziri's pride was partially restored by land allocated to them in the Kandahar area.

Another dimension of the Ghilzai issue was shaped by the Ghilzai-Durrani historical competition for state leadership. Because of the tension in the disputed areas, the government assigned considerable military force to Ghazni and Moqur, together with a special reconciliation commission. The head of this commission, Sher Agha Modjaddedi, well known strongman of Afghan politics and pir (spiritual guide) of many Ghilzais, clandestinely inspired his murids (disciples) to pursue ambitious claims. Amanists entered into direct negotiations with Ghilzai, and Sher Agha; although the negotiations produced zero results. Sher Agha did not totally reject the idea of an alliance, but without Amanullah at his side, he minimally maintained Amanists contact through former Minister of War, Abdul Aziz.

The Course of Kohdaman Events: Summer 1930

All preliminary work for the uprising was concentrated in the hands of the above-mentioned Kohdaman close circle, led by haakem M. Yusuf Khan. On July 20, 1930, an official, occasionally crossing Kohdaman, sensed something was wrong. He informed the Minister of War. The latter asked Haakem M. Yusuf about the state of things. The crafty haakem calmed the Kabul boys, just requesting for the occasion 1-2 infantry kandaks (battalions). The Minister dispatched the requested detachment of 1 ½ kandaks to Kohdaman (actually this command consisted of two groups: one of 150 from Agcband, another of 250 from police gward, respectively transferred on 8 and 15 motor vehicles) under the command of General Abdul Wakil Khan, while letting Haakem know the time of its arrival. He was not yet aware that on the 21st of July Umra Khan Daudzai attacked the government garrison at Kalkan and killed all its staff. This intervention allowed conspirators to make an ambush north on Qala-e-Murad-Bek and demolish Kabul reinforcement. The initial triumph inspired rebels to schedule subsequent attacks on Pagman, Nadir's residence in Kabul.

Government response was late, but progressively effective. The king returned urgently to the capital and announced the Pashm un tribes to mobilize. The promised prize for loyalty and support was all rebel property, or cheer (the right to loot). The response was speedy: first armed tribal groups from Garder arrived in Kabul by 1:00 pm, on July 22nd. Nevertheless, throughout the week the situation remained critical: Kabul authorities dispatched at the moment just 1,000 Waziris and Wardakis, all recent government recruits, to Bagh-e-Bala. What's more, part of this garrison guarded the Khair Khaana Pass and blocked the road to Kabul. On July 23rd, Premier Hashim Khan, another Nadir brother, appealed to Eastern tribes. His call was considered totally wrong, perhaps fateful, by Mohammad Gal Khan, Minister of the Interior, sarcastically describing it as the best move considering Nadir's loss of the throne, due to easterners' underlying hostility towards him. The tenacity of the situation in the capital was also increased by Major Abdul-Rahman Khan, who ordered order to close the bazaar. This order was viewed by the Council of Ministers as a crime, causing growing panic among the residents. Other repressive measures were the arrests of the members of the National Council Miza Jahan Khan and Haji Mohammad Khan, then Kandahar wakil (District Attorney).

While Kabul leaders awaited tribal reinforcements, rebels extensively recruited the Shamali population, but succeeded to involve only the residents of Kohdam and Charikar districts. Despite the refusal of Kohistan, Riz-e-Kohistan, Panjshir, Ghorband and Tagab peoples to join the revolt, the total number of those involved reached 25,000, with only about 8,000 armed. The developments were so dynamic, that several days after the start of the event, on July 25th in Charikar, the khutha was not read in the name of Nadir, but to an unidentified "inflame pulsbah". The reason was that rebel leaders disagreed in regard to premiership in the on-going uprising. Tajik
chief, Mohammad Azam-khan, in his turn, claimed leadership because his followers dominated the area. Finally they agreed to resolve the leadership dilemma after capturing Kabul.

Five days passed while government troops, reinforced by volunteer Pashtun tribesmen, started a counter-offensive against rebels, consequently recapturing Sarai-Khoja, Kalakan and Istalif. From July 31 to August 1, the rebels were finally defeated, and their survivors escaped to different directions, those with M. Azam Khan went to Qattaghan-Badakhshan while Umra Khan’s followers crossed the Koh-e-safid mountain to the Eastern province (Umra himself was killed on the way). August 1, M. Azam Khan’s house near Jab-ul-Seraj was looted and destroyed. The next day, the government requested the Hazaras to close all passes, so as to encircle the surviving conspirators and thus end the uprising. The same day Nadir attended the Amir Abd-ur-Rahman Khan’s mausoleum and, leaving it after the prayer, addressed those surrounding him saying “The man buried here, was the only ruler who knew how to managed and run Afghan domestic policy”.

The authorities were seeking to prevent or to stop the mass looting of Kohdamanis by Pashtun tribes, fearing a new and bigger uprising in all of the northern provinces. To this end the government dispatched a special Mangal tribe detachment, which itself joined the looters. Basically Nadir did not hurry to pardon all involved, in turn, some of them were sentenced to death. Former Habibullah follower, Aslam, was stabbed in front of Nadir in Dil-Kusha and sixteen others were hanged in Chaman-e-Huzuri in Kabul. But perhaps the most vindictive measure was the forceful deportation of the regime’s opponents to Deidun, British India, a former place of Nadir’s own exile during the Abd-ur-Rahman reign. Their long list of deportees was announced just two hours before departure, with three cars available per family for their use. The deported were also permitted to appoint their representatives for keeping the remaining property; indeed a useless and demagogic measure under the circumstances.

The political consequences of the Kohdaman events were, the eventual, though incomplete, defeat of Amanists (more as a socio-political network/grouping/part of an establishment, than as a national-liberal trend and reformist ideology). Nadir’s victory also substantially undermined the position of the Kohdaman/Kohistan nobility, one of the last remaining nuclei of Saqawists, and a source of considerable, more socio-political than ethnic, opposition for the last decade of the
A careful study of the Khojdman’s top circle and its grand design, including tactical patterns, provides the grounds to evaluate it as an intra-elite coup d’etat (by center-near periphery/distant periphery, as well as ethnic/inter-ethnic/inter-clan lines). Coup leaders managed to involve a pretty large part of the Shamali population, but not the majority of it; common people hadn’t enough stimulus to revolt against the regime, being tired from recent Inqlab disturbances and the following purges. Conspirators also failed to advance fresh and attractive slogans. Local peasantry, in its turn, was aware that the suggested Pashtun colonization would more threaten their khans than themselves. Notwithstanding this, common Khojdman were forced to share responsibility for the unrest with its designers, Charkar, Istalif, Kalakan, Sarai-Khoja, Qala-e-Beq and some other settlements were demolished and partly burned down.

The coup’s internal lack of coherence (leadership dilemma, poor orchestration of the whole event, mutual distrust between the different actors) became another contributing factor to its imminent failure, the only uniting element being the overthrow of Nadir Shah.

One of a few positive consequences of the Khojdman’s anti-Nadir test became the cancellation by Mushtahan (Nadir family/clan self-name) of their regional Pashtun colonization project (the formation of Pashtun settlements arcs north of Kabul, a kind of distant guard). This project seemed to be too costly — at stake was Afghan unity and integrity. Nadir’s scheme of Pashtun resettlement to the Kabul area itself, at the expense of local, mainly Tajik/Tajikized (Safi, etc.) nobility, many of who were recent Habibullah adherents and even top officials, had been mainly roused by post-Inqlab political repercussions. But there were also some general socio-economic constraints (the lack of infrastructure, free lands and pastures in southern Afghanistan), which determined the objective need to restructure the whole Afghan national economy and society by an appropriate migration, (industrial, etc.) with disregard to the regime’s political and personal profile.

Surviving pretty massive, though ill-orchestrated, efforts to overthrow it, Nadir thus demonstrated his ability to run the situation in the country, even if by force, and at the expense of inter-ethnic peace (Eastern and other Pashtun tribes versus Shamali, etc.). The main course of Afghan politics had been heavily influenced by the lack of available means and resources, and, decreasingly, by the political incompetence of the new regime and the ignorance of ongoing changes in the domestic and international scenes. But even such considerable shortcomings of Nadir were tolerated by the main international Great Game players, including the Soviets — all of them were ultimately interested in keeping Afghanistan integrity and fragile consensus, mainly associated at that moment with Nadir-shah, his family and the close circle of liberal-conservative Pashtun modernists.

Born in Kabul in 1957, Zolaykha Shirmzad remembers Afghanistan as a country full of richness and happiness. An intensity of light, of people, of colors, joy, etc. As she recalls "nothing like what they are describing today as my country. Exile and new cultural context, new values, the shock of losing its bases. Adaptation, desire to succeed, to survive, to be part of a new society. The integration (in Switzerland) was possible only by giving up part of my Afghan identity. Artist, trying to redefine my own sense of values (a mix of Asia, Europe & the US) Voluntary exile to New York, where I start to choose my own set of values. Trying to extract the best from each of the three cultures I had the (fortunate?) chance to encounter. Proud of my name and my cultural background. I feel I can be an artist, an architect, a teacher, a mother who has accumulated different knowledge and who want to share their qualities and beauties.

A slide presentation accompanied the discussion.

Following the panels the audience became involved in the discussion. A lively and profound discussion took place, where women and men of different background participated. Among the most heated debates was the role of religion on the individual life. Some called for renunciation of religion in favor of democracy or the reinterpretation of religious laws and moral codes to fit the western lifestyle. However, the majority of women and men opposed changing religion, but called for better communication between the two genders and the better participation of more men in achievement of women’s full rights under Islam. Alas, in this corner of the earth, this gathering thought that one could remain Muslim while being modern in the liberal sense of the term. In fact, tolerance and equality of gender are firm indications of a true Muslim.