



Anti-slavery investigator Peter Willey: he exposed link between narcotics and exploitation.

AFGHANISTAN CRISIS

POPPY POWER



News Analysis by
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THE PEOPLE of Afghanistan have been betrayed by both western individualism and collectivism.

Both ideological systems were imposed on the 15m. people of this rugged country, and neither was able to offer a stable value system within which citizens could develop their social and economic interests in the context of freedom.

While Carter in Washington moralises about the Russian invasion, and Brezhnev in Moscow rants about western imperialism, most Afghans continue to suffer under an exploitative land tenure system which is at the heart of their country's problems.

In 1978, 82% of the peasants farmed 35% of the land, while 5% of the biggest landowners held 45%.¹ And while landlords made fat profits from opium, millions of peasants laboured under a system of debt bondage which was *de facto* slavery.

For when the Marxists assumed governmental power, they proved as helpless as their "capitalistic" predecessors in their efforts to end human degradation. The peasants were betrayed and alone, and this played straight into the hands of the mullahs, resulting in bandit-style opposition which was the reason for the Russian invasion.

THE LONDON-based Anti-Slavery Society had established beyond doubt the connection between narcotics and the landlord system of exploitation. One of their investigators, English schoolteacher Peter Willey, disclosed

"a squalid and corrupt system, based on the total supremacy of the landlord, in which all forms of economic pressure, intimidation, blackmail and personal violence are used in ensuring the permanent subjection of the peasant in order to obtain a rich profit from the sale of illicit opium and other harvests."²

To understand the current problems, it is important to note another feature of that society: the deep conservatism of the Islamic mullahs, who were closely identified with the landlord class and the political power structure.

Writing in 1971, before Khomeini had overthrown the Shah of Iran, Willey offered an account of Afghanistan which helps to explain why the Iranian "revolution" is bereft of a constructive programme for change.

"The linch-pins of the religious establishments are the mullahs, who wield enormous power. They are deeply opposed to any change in the religious or social structure of the state and are determined to protect their own powers from the erosion that has occurred in Iran. For this reason they fight fiercely against any proposals for land reform, the establishment of a Literacy Corps and all foreign influence. The alliance of mullah and landlord has effectively blocked any Bill presented to Parliament to introduce reforms. In the country districts the mullahs hold undisputed sway together with the landlords."

A flourishing narcotics trade with the West increased the profits of the landlords, who employed ruthless methods against the peasants to increase output of their death-dealing crops. Wrote Willey:

"In order to protect accumulated hereditary wealth, land ownership is kept within a small and exclusive club of landowners. Probably no more than five or six great landlords control each province. The landlords appoint the headmen of the villages and have absolute control of their tenants . . . summary justice is often administered before a case even reaches the courts. The tenant is told exactly what crops to grow (wheat, fruit, opium, etc). He cannot move to another village without the permission of the landowner or his representative, and if he does he will be unable to gain further employment . . . and runs the real risk of starvation."

Poverty could not be explained in ecological terms. Valleys of the Hindu Kush and Badakhshan offered enormous potential for growing corn, fruit and vegetable

crops; water was abundant, and a properly-educated labour force would have been capable of turning the area into a rich granary. But:

"Only the landlords working with the government can provide the necessary capital; instead, the majority prefer to cling to their old methods, fortified in their beliefs by prejudice and the vested interests of the mullahs."

BETWEEN 1945-55, the US pumped aid into Afghanistan. This was cut off with the rise of Mohammed Daoud, the so-called "Red Prince" who was Prime Minister for 13 years.

Washington, however, during its time of influence, failed to promote an enlightened programme of land reform which could have solved two problems:

- create geo-political stability in a region which had strategic attractions to the USSR (offering a potential route to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea);

- reduce – if not eliminate – the attractions of opium-growing, the costs of which, in terms of human misery to American citizens, has now assumed appalling proportions.

So, if western ideology was not able to promote economic reform, the conditions were evidently ripe for flirtation with the Marxist alternatives. The first important left-wing newspaper was founded in 1966. *Khalq* (The People), published by Nur Mohammad Taraki, articulated the need for land reform. It immediately became the target of reactionary elements in Afghanistan, who held such notions to be contrary to Islam and the constitution.

Khalq was banned after six issues, a move even held to be a mistake by many non-leftist Afghans.³ For now the possibility of evolutionary transformation of the socio-economic system, based on the free play of ideas, was suppressed.

THE FALL of the monarchy and the rise of Marxism was not engineered by a proletarian revolution or a peasant uprising. In 1973, the 40-year reign of King Zahir Shah came to an end in a mud-bath on the island of Ischia, off Naples, where he was on holiday. His cousin, Daoud, the former Prime Minister, declared himself President.

Daoud's rise to absolute power was made possible by his close links with Moscow-trained leaders of the Afghan Army. But a family feud rather than an international conspiracy is the best explanation for Afghanistan's transition to the status of a republic.

Daoud, however, proved to be ineffective. The restless army officers, many of them members of the Communist Party, overthrew him in May 1978. The new head of state was Nur Mohammad Taraki, the 61-year-old poet and former journalist.

Taraki's programme of reforms was calculated to antagonise the mullahs and the peasants. His Prime Minister, Hafizullah Amin, explained in an interview that land reform would be based on the collectivist model.⁴

Western communists were at first delighted at the determination of the new regime.⁵ Moscow, however, soon realised that their puppet was pulling his own strings – and jerking them hard, at that.

Decree No. 8 called for the redistribution of 3.4m. acres of land to 680,000 landless peasants. On the face of it, this attempt to undermine the feudal structure should have been welcomed by the peasants. But an inept bureaucracy successfully antagonised people with its high-handed methods.

Decree No. 6 cancelled or reduced agricultural debts in a bid to break the grip of moneylenders. About 80% of the



● OPIUM SMUGGLER: on his way to the black market, the deadly wares on a donkey's back.

population are rural families chronically in debt. The government, however, failed to simultaneously provide an alternative credit system for the impoverished people (per capita income: \$180). So many peasants continued to honour their debts for fear of being deprived of the credit which they needed to buy seed for the 1979 planting season.⁵

THE CLEAR Marxist philosophy of the Taraki regime was interpreted as anti-Islamic by the mullahs, some of whom were arrested. Moscow counselled caution; the USSR was not pleased when 30 Russian advisers were decapitated by rebels.⁶ Still, Marxist apologists continued to justify the Taraki regime on democratic grounds. Bert Ramelson, a leading British communist who visited Kabul last September, argued that Daoud was not toppled by a military coup:

"It was a people's revolution . . . While army personnel took the initiative, it had the backing of the vast majority of the people, and was inspired by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (the Communist Party)."⁷

Within a few days of those words being written, Taraki was dead and his hard-line Marxist Prime Minister, Amin – a post-graduate of the Universities of Columbia and Wisconsin – was in power. Anthony Hyman summarised the Marxist strategy:

"Reforms meant to create a model socialist society in one of the most conservative of Muslim lands have been seriously affected by the Government's loss of control in many areas. Many observers believe that behind the brutal military action against opponents of rural reform lay the certain knowledge by the eager reformists in Kabul that their socialist revolution only had a chance of success if they broke down tribal resistance at once."⁸

On Oct. 11, 1979, Amin announced that "small property owners would be left alone and Afghan-owned industry encouraged," but this attempt to placate the rebels failed (Amin did not define the size of holdings which would be exempt from nationalisation). Two days later he suffered the humiliation of seeing a 1,600-strong army brigade surrender to rebels in Kunhar province.

Amin was still wedded to the principles of scientific socialism. He was not sufficiently disturbed by the Islamic revival in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Moscow, however, believes in pragmatic Marxism. It was therefore only time before the Russians had to do something about their devoted acolyte. Amin was killed last January. Babrak Karmal, 50, was flown back to Kabul from Moscow as the new head of state, a President without responsibility – the Russians assumed direct control, pouring 100,000 soldiers and tanks in to combat the rebels.

THE ATTEMPTED secular modernisation of Afghanistan failed because the Marxists placed their ideology above sociological realities.

Change, of course, has to be inspired by idealistic goals. Another imperative, however, is that the attempt at change will fail (unless backed by overwhelming coercive force), if it seeks a total rupture of the existing social structure – i.e., if revolution rather than evolution is chosen.

Afghanistan may be a deeply conservative society, but her traditions did offer the prospect of progress. For example, the vexed problem of land reform is only seemingly intractable. Existing institutional arrangements could have been built upon to break up the large estates owned by absentee landlords, and increase government revenue with which to deal with other fundamental social problems (e.g., there is 90% illiteracy, and 50% of all children die before the age of five).

Agricultural land in Afghanistan is subject to a land tax. Had government policy selected this fiscal system as a tool for change, it would have been both understood and regarded as sensible by the majority of peasants, and it would not have represented an innovation threatening to undermine the established system.

Improvements in the tax system were urgently needed. For example, taxes were assessed only on land declared by the owners: and less than half the arable land was included on the tax rolls in 1968.

Just before its demise, the Royal Government instituted an ambitious programme to register titles to land. The cadastral survey was intended to

- identify boundaries and minimise disputes over land;
- improve the land tax administration and increase revenue; and
- provide statistics for development programmes.

At the time, it was believed that 20% of government revenue would be raised from improved administration of the land tax.⁹ Given the constraints – principally a shortage of valuers – all land was to be graded into one of five rating values calculated on the basis of water availability, soil classification and location. The calculation of tax was to be by electronic processing equipment, and billed automatically according to tax rate, value factor and site area.

The virtues of land value taxation as a model for socio-economic development in Third World countries have been described in detail elsewhere.¹⁰ They were not to be given a chance in Afghanistan: the western liberal ideology failed to promote these possibilities in time. The King fell, and the Marxists tried to bulldoze their alien alternative into the system. They, too, failed.

Once again, there are no ideological winners. The losers, as ever, are the ordinary people who just want the freedom to lead their individual lives without the hindrance of others.

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Social problems & the land tenure system

THE LAND tenure system is linked to all of Guatemala's social problems, reported Arqueles Morales from Panama City.

Of every 1,000 children born, 95 die. Over 300,000 children between the ages of five and 10 form part of the labour market, receiving wages three times less than adults.

There are 500 children to every teacher. Illiteracy gets worse every year: over 72% of Guatemalans do not know the alphabet.

The country has to import vast quantities of staple food because the large landowners use the best lands to grow cash crops for export. According to a recent census, the capital alone has a shortage of 356,000 dwellings.

"Linked to all these social problems, and fundamental to the backwardness of the country, is the land tenure system. Seventy-five per cent of cultivable land is in the hands of 2% of the population." (The Guardian, 22.12.79).

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IN A REPORT presented to President Carter, the Commission on World Hunger said that 500m. people throughout the world live in abject poverty and starvation. Developing countries grew about 87% of their food, but by the end of the century, on present performance, the figure would have fallen to 74%.

'Land reform' too late?

EL SALVADOR is close to civil war. Left-wing groups are trying to put an end to the oligarchic rule of the dominant "Fourteen Families". They own most of the land. Two per cent of the 4.5m. population owns 60% of the land. This has left the country with a teeming landless population unable to earn decent wages.

To try and head off further bloodshed, Col. Adolfo Majano, a member of the ruling junta, announced on Feb. 12 that they would nationalise private banks and implement land reform. But he did not specify details of the land reform.

Meanwhile, the National Security Council in Washington has tentatively approved a plan to give up to \$7m. worth of arms to the junta.

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THE DEAD SEA has been brought to economic life. Israeli engineers have demonstrated a solar power plant which could solve the country's energy problems within 20 years. The plant needs a pond where the density increases with depth. The energy from the sun penetrates the lighter, upper layer, and is retained as hot water at the bottom. The difference in salinity prevents heat loss through convection. The water, holding a temperature of about 80 Centigrade, is then used to power a low-temperature turbine and supply electricity.

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GLASGOW's Labour MP, Michael Martin, wants to know why the Government sold the 600-acre site of an old hospital to a speculator who, a year later, made nearly £2m. profit on the deal. The buyer paid £410,000 for the "agricultural" land, then sold 20 acres for £650,000 and 84 acres for £1.5m. Outline planning permission has now been granted for about 700 homes on the site, which is on the north-eastern fringe of Glasgow.

NEWS IN BRIEF