

## The Conflict between the Modernists and the Traditionalists: An Overview of the Early Twentieth Century's Afghanistan

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*Based on the clash of values and interests between the traditionalist and modernist forces in twentieth-century Afghanistan, this paper analyzes the tactics and ways employed by the former to counteract the regime of modernization and reform introduced by Amnauallah Khan. Through an examination of various modernist movements that emerged during this period, the paper provides an insight into the ideological basis of a modern constitutional government that aimed to meet the needs of the new world of the twentieth century. This study contributes to the existing scholarship by shedding light on how this conflict affected Afghanistan's political and social landscape, and the challenges that the country faced in transitioning from a traditional tribal state to a modern secular society. Ultimately, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of the struggles for power and control between the old and new systems in Afghanistan's modern history.*

**Keywords:** Traditionalists, Modernists, Mullayn, Sardaran, Intellectuals, Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan

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## Introduction

Afghanistan in the twentieth century was a country undergoing significant social and political transformations. The arrival of Amanullah Khan to the throne in 1919 marked a turning point in the history of modern Afghanistan. For the first time, the Kabul-based modernists came into direct conflict with the century-old traditionalist forces that had governed the country for centuries. Amanullah Khan was a member of the constitutionalist movement, which advocated for modern values of the state, such as democracy, secularism, and individual rights. He introduced various reforms that aimed to replace the old norms and values of the traditional tribal state and transform Afghanistan into a modern secular society. However, the traditionalist forces were not ready to relinquish their power and interests to the new legal system. They saw their position and control threatened by the reforms, and so they set out to oppose and topple the regime of modernization.

To understand this clash of values and interests, this paper analyzes the tactics and ways adopted by the traditional power holders to counteract the regime of modernization and reforms. By examining the different modernist movements that emerged in the twentieth century, such as Anjuman Sirajul Akhbar, Jamiat-i-Siri Milli, Anjuman-i-Siri-i-Jawanan-i-Afghan, Majlas-i-Janesaran-i-Islam, and Akhwan-i-Afghan, this paper provides an insight into the ideological base of a modern constitutional government that aimed to meet the needs of the new world of the twentieth century.

This paper contributes to the existing scholarship on Afghanistan's modern history by shedding light on the collision between the Kabul-based modernists and the traditionalist forces. It shows how this conflict affected the political and social landscape of Afghanistan, and how the struggle

for power and control played out between the old and the new systems. Overall, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of Afghanistan's transition from a traditional tribal state to a modern secular society, and the challenges that this transition posed to the country's social and political stability.

### **The Process of Reforms and Modernization**

During the reign of Amir Sher Ali Khan (r. 1863-1866: 1868-1879), a modern institutional structure was introduced, although his primary focus was on building a strong military force. Additionally, he implements some administrative reforms, including the establishment of a state council consisting of twelve members, which was the first of its kind since Ahmad Shah Abdali's reign (r. 1747-1772). However, the Amir himself had the sole authority to select members of the state council. Furthermore, officials were promoted to ministerial positions with prestigious titles in Pashto, and no members of the royal family were part of the ministerial cabinet (Kakar, 2006: 20).

Amir Sher Ali Khan was the first Afghan ruler to organize (or reorganize) the state or more specifically the government along relatively modern lines. He started an extremely important movement, which his successors strengthened. It is then fitting to describe him an enlightened and visionary ruler and relate him to the "beginning of a new Afghanistan" as some historian has done (Kakar, 2006: 22).

Abdur Rahman Khan succeeded to the throne in 1880, after his uncle Amir Sher Ali Khan's death. During that time, Afghanistan was governed by feudal, tribal leaders, and religious establishment. To bring about reforms, Abdur Rahman Khan asserted the divine right of the king and established religious justification for the monarchy. His primary objective was to transform Afghanistan from a tribal state into a unitary central state. This involved suppressing opposition from different tribes and religious leaders, as well as using the previous rivalries between tribes

to subdue them to the centralized government. He issued proclamation and edicts, wrote pamphlets, and informed his subjects of their responsibilities to the king and their country. The king's army was used to quell and resistance, pitting different tribes and religious groups against each to ensure their loyalty to the centralized government system. For example, Durranis were used against Ghilzai, orthodox Sunnis were used against the Hazara Shi'a, and Pashtuns were used against the uprising of the northern Tajik and Uzbek tribes (Misdaq, 2006: 86).

In 1901, Habibullah Khan, who had already been declared the heir-apparent by his father, Amir Abdur Raman Khan, assumed the throne without any resistance following his father's death. Olesen suggests that his peaceful succession was the result if the repressive policies implemented by Amir Abdur Rahman, who had effectively suppressed all opposition from various power factions within Afghanistan (Olesen, 1995: 94).

Amir Habibullah Khan, who ruled from 1901 to 1919, maintained his father's policies but in that he granted concessions to various power groups to expand his base of power. He also extended invitations to political figures who had been exiled by his father. After Habibullah Khan was assassinated, his younger son Amanullah Khan came to power after a brief power struggle with his uncle Nasrullah Khan. Amanullah Khan's primary goal was to free Afghanistan from British Imperial control in her foreign policy, which he achieved through the third Anglo-Afghan war in August 1919. This event is commemorated each year on August 19 as the Day of Independence, also known as *Yaum e Istiqlal*. Amanullah Khan's next objective was to modernize and transform Afghanistan's traditional and conservative society into a modern, nationalist society through various royal proclamations known as *faramdeen*. Sher asserts that Amanullah Khan aimed to modernize Afghanistan quickly and drastically (Sher, 2012: 43-44).

### Amanullah Khan's Modernization

The declaration of war against the British in 1919—referred to by the Afghans as the War of Independence—was the very first move the government of Amanullah Khan took towards achieving political sovereignty and led to Afghanistan's eventual independence in terms of foreign policy. Amanullah Khan fundamentally altered the organization of the government after seizing control. There were various darbars—courts presided over by the princes—when he came to power. People with complaints could visit that darbars to find solutions. One court's rulings could be contested in another prince's darbar. Each prince had the power to render a different judgment on a matter that had previously been decided by another royal court. Beginning with the court, Amanullah Khan directed his foreign minister, Mehmud Tarzi, to organize the country's traditional political structure into a more contemporary one. Tarzi fashioned a contemporary government after the Ottoman model, with Abdul Qodus serving as prime minister and him as foreign minister. The new Cabinet of constitutional monarchy took the role of the royal family's historic darbari system (Misdaq, 2006: 62–63).

The elimination of beegar was one of Amanullah Khan's three goals, which he stated at his coronation. Beegar means "to seize" in the literal sense. It was a form of corvee<sup>4</sup> forced labour from the middle Ages. In Afghanistan's non-Pashtun region, the beegar was widely used (Misdaq, 2006: 62). Slavery was totally banned under article 10 of Nizam-Namah-i-Asasi Dawlat-i-AliyahAfghanistan, commonly referred to as Nizam-Namah—the fundamental law. Article 22 of the *Nizam-Namah* abolished *beegar* and forced labor (Nizam-Nama, 1923:

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<sup>4</sup> Corvee is a form of unpaid labor which lasts for limited time. The obligation for tenant to perform corvee was widespread in western world before the industrial revolution. The corvee was the imposition of free work by the state on the people for public works. (Wikipedia)

Article 10, 22). Prior to Amanullah Khan, citizens had to carry out tasks that the state should have hired workers to complete. For instance, the poor were required to work in shifts without receiving any payment other than a hot meal if the king needed to construct a fort or wall surrounding the court. People living in poverty had no choice but to execute these tasks, therefore they did so without complaining. The phrase "the government beegar is better than the jobless life" is an old saying in the Pashto language, *Tar Wozgartya Da Hakumat Beegar Hum Kha De*. The beegar was outlawed throughout the nation, except for the construction of roads by Amanullah Khan (Bakhtyar, 2019: 49-50). The justification for continuing to use forced labor for building roads was the nation's fragile economy. The British stipend granted to the Afghan Amir before Amanullah Khan was terminated following the independence war. The majority of internal customs fees were reduced, which had an impact on Afghanistan's economy as a newly independent state.

The department of *Diwan-e-Meezan wa Tahqiq*—Assessment and Research Center—formed a committee in 1919 to research Hanafi legal theory and codified Turkish laws in order to develop legal changes. The committee was made up of people from many walks of life and interest organizations. Eminent Kandahari academics led by Mawlawi Abdul Wasi and Justice Minister Muhammad Ibrahim Barakzi, a group of writers from the Young Afghan Party led by Abd al Rahman Ludin, and others (Senzil's radical liberal), Several Muhammadzi Sardaran and the former head of the Turkish police, Badri Beg, were members of the group. The Loya Jarga, which was made up of 872 people from the Mohmand, Bajaur, and Afridi tribes and met at Jalalabad in February 1922, approved the draft that the committee had prepared. In April 1923, the constitution was enforced. *Nizam-Namah-i-Asasi Dawlat-i-Aliya Afghanistan*, which had 73 articles and 9 sections, was Afghanistan's first written constitution (Senzil, 1987. P. 103).

Other proclamations were made by the Amanullah Khan administration in addition to the Nizam-Namah-i-Asasi, the Afghanistan first Constitution, which established a more contemporary legal system. The legal changes were implemented with the intention of bureaucratizing Afghanistan's judicial and legal systems. The Penal Code, which was published in 1923 and codified Islamic criminal law, was based on Islamic principles, but it followed a European legal system. In order to eradicate legal corruption and limit the *quza*—judges' autonomy, the unified judiciary was essential. According to article 72 of the Nizam-Nama-i-Jaza-i-Umumi, the General Penal Law, public servants who influenced court proceedings with the help of their positional authority might face imprisonment for six to 36 months as well as termination from their positions. In addition to the punishments set forth by the Penal Code for public officials, the same Penal law also protected their dignity. Articles 89 and 90 dealt with the consequences of intentionally insulting or threatening any official government personnel (Nizam-Nama-i-Jaza-i-Umumi, Article 72, 89 and 90).

It was made unlawful to consume wine, smoke marijuana, and use opium. In Afghanistan, it was not permitted for girls to dance in public. A culture of dancing boys, known traditionally as *bachabazee*<sup>5</sup>, has existed as a substitute. Additionally, it was outlawed by Amanullah Khan's administration. Those foreign residents of Afghanistan were required to abide by Afghan law. Foreigners were also prohibited from openly drinking alcohol. Shah claims that Amanullah Khan attempted to combine the Pashtunwali—Pashtun Code of Conduct—with Sharia (Shah, 2019: 29).

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<sup>5</sup> The practice of *bachabaze* is practices in Afghanistan for centuries. Boys of young age being forced to dance in public gatherings wearing women dress. They are constantly a victim of sexual abuse. The practice *bachabaze* was outlawed by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1990s. After the invasion of Afghanistan by the US Forces, once again the practice of *bachabaze* started in Afghanistan. In January 2017 the Afghan government criminalizes the practice of *bachabaze*. Human Rights Commission reports on *bachabaze* in Afghanistan, 2013.

According to the information that is currently accessible on Afghan society, Afghan women have been denied a number of extremely basic rights. Both Amir Abdur Rahman and Amir Habibullah Khan had a large number of mistresses in their harems and courts. Along with Amir's other personal property, the heir to the throne inherited them as an inheritance. Amanullah Khan had a keen interest in issues pertaining to women. He released them and let them go and pursue their own interests. 1920 saw the introduction of the first code pertaining to the condition of women generally and the marriage issue in particular. The Nizam Nama-i-Nikah Arusi, Wa Khatnasuri was initially issued as a marriage law in 1922, later altered and amended in 1924. The Hanafi School of thinking served as the basis for this code. All the three version of the marriage code open with the following paragraph:

Since most of the cases brought before the Shari'a courts are related to extravagant marriage expenses and the mistreatment of women by their husbands. the following provisions are issued to remove the causes of discord, disunity, and suppression of women, and to reaffirm the equal rights of women provided by the law of Shari'a and by the principles of the Hanafi law (Nizam Nama-i-Nikah Article. 1).

The first marriage code, which was published in 1920, deals with fundamental issues such as the status of women in Afghan society, the issue of child marriage, bride price (walwar), and excessive wedding expenses, which made the wedding festivities more significant than the marriage itself (Senzil, 1987: 124). The first article of the marriage code prohibited early marriages, and it set the New Year's Day, Nawruz, of the solar year 1300 (1921), as the deadline for the annulment of any marriages that had already been decided before the publication of that Nizam Nama. In the Nizam Nama-i Nikah, there was no mention of the penalties for breaking this commandment (Ibid.: 126).

Under article 4, forced unions were prohibited. The law's article 5 forbade betrothal feasts, the giving of pricey gifts, and other lavish expenditures. According to article 6, the maximum dowry was set at Rs. 500 for the Amir's family, Rs. 200 for the Durannies, and Rs. 30



for the general populace. The new code forbade the trousseau (bridal items) from being provided to the bride by her relatives. However, upon the marriage, the parents were free to gift their daughters whatever they desired. Articles 3 and 5 forbade the expensive customs of shab-i-hena, or the "night of hena," khatnasuri—circumcision and the shirinkhuri—distribution of sweets. If a husband neglected his or her religious obligations to them, a wife could file a complaint with the court under article 13 of the Constitution (Nizam Nama-i-Nikah, Article 3, 4, 5, 6 and 13).

According to Amanullah Khan, the traditional mindset of the populace was to blame for the backwardness of Afghan society and the government. He was confident that the general populace might be effectively prepared for the progressive reforms process through education. Every boy and girl were required to complete primary education, according to Article 68 of the Nizam Nama-i-Asasi (Nizam-Nama-i-Assasi, Article 68). A decree known as Nizam nama-i-Makattib-i-Ibtedaya and Nizam Nama-i-Makattib-i-Khangi was issued to appropriately control the primary and elementary schools. The Nizam Nama's first article on elementary schools specifies that the director of primary education must visit the institutions three times per month (Nizam Nama-i-Makatib-i-Ibtedaya, Article 1). It demonstrates how passionate Amanullah Khan was about learning. Amanullah Khan began to establish educational institutions in Afghanistan's remote regions. In Kabul and the provinces, many institutions were opened. Afghanistan has 322 schools and 51,000 students enrolled as of 1927 (Aman-i-Afghan, 1923).

### **Traditionalist's Response towards Modernization**

Afghanistan's society in the 20th century was uneducated and rigid. There were a small group of individuals who want to transform the traditional illiterate culture into a modern nation state; Ghoobar referred to them as Roshan Fikran (Intellectuals), (Ghoobar, 2015. P. 1038). Kakar contends that Afghan society did not have a strong modernist influence. Those scholars had no

family or personal ties to a society where tribal ties were quite strong. Their roles in government contributed to their popularity among the general public. Those modernist authorities would have influence and could put their ideas into action if the central government had dominance in the nation. After the uprising, when government lost control, those intellectual's influence waned (Kakar, 2005. P. 62). According to Kargar, the Pashtunwali gave the Afghan State its ideological foundation. However, this does not imply that Pashtunwali's code or codecs represented the society's intellectual discourse. Due to the fact that Afghan society was and still is divided into various ethnic groups, Islam has served as Afghanistan's traditional Islamic society's sole source of unification for centuries (Kargar, 2019. P. 307).

The traditionalists, on the other hand, lived side by side with the common people and observed their traditions and practices. Some traditions had assimilated into the faith. Some of the populace's customs were viewed as being a part of the religion due to the religion's significant influence on their mentalities. For them, Islam was not just a religion; it was also a whole political structure. The Molvis, Pirs, and Sayeds were revered by the general populace (Kakar, 2005. P. 62-63).

Amanullah Khan's reforms sought to improve the status of women in Afghan society by outlawing child marriage, putting a stop to extravagant wedding celebrations, discouraging polygamous unions, and ending the practice of giving girls in marriage to settle blood feuds (Swara). The Pashtun were obligated to follow the Pashtun moral code known as Pashtunwali. According to the Pashtun code of conduct, they placed a strong emphasis on individual autonomy and even fought the state's power if it meddled in their personal affairs. The latest attempt by Amanullah Khan to elevate women's status in traditional Afghan society was interpreted as an intrusion into family problems, particularly in Afghanistan's Pashtun region.

Barfield claims that the strong state structures in the Soviet Union and Turkey permitted the modernist reformers to implement their reform agenda. However, Afghanistan lacked the ability to implement the societal change that Amanullah Khan had envisioned for his country at the grassroots level. In Afghanistan's tribal regions, there was already concern that the State would erode the social structures based on Pashtunwali and Islam. The Pashtun were extremely careful with their moral code, the Pashtunwali. The Pashtun might fight for three things according to their rule of life. Women, land, and gold: Zar, Zan, and Zamin (Barfield, 2010, P. 185). By enacting new taxes (Zar) and social reforms (Zan and Zamin), particularly those pertaining to the status of women in Afghan society, Amanullah Khan has already stirred up controversy. The social and legal reforms of Amanullah Khan were a direct cause of the Khost revolt that erupted in 1924. The religious establishment favored maintaining the old Quza (judges) system because it constituted the legal component of the reforms. And to reinstate the ban on polygamy and the elimination of underage marriages, which were Amanullah Khan's social reforms (Ibid. P. 186).

According to a contrasting viewpoint put out by Ghubar, Afghanistan's history shows that its people have never rebelled against any sort of civilization. They have nothing against businesses, universities or madrassas, the press, art, or modern technology. Because of injustice and dishonest government practices, people have always complained or even rebelled against the establishment. The public embraced and supported Amanullah Khan's first reforms agenda when it was launched. Without receiving any payment, they took part in building roads, schools, and other development projects. Even though the community was impoverished, people continued to give cash donations to the ministry of education. The residents of Paktiya donated 75,000 Afghanis (the local currency) to build schools that could accommodate 4,000 children. Along with schools erected by the government, locals in Kandahar also built their own schools. Women

took involved in the effort to address women's issues as well. However, it was the incompetence and unruly behavior of the government employees that sparked the populace's uprising against Amanullah Khan. One had to pay bribes in order to work legally. Every reform was carried out improperly or in an evil manner. The government employees' actions distanced the King from the populace, which ultimately led to King Amanullah Khan's abdication. When Afghanistan was making progress, according to Ghobar, there were international adversaries present, and Amanullah Khan effectively carried out the changes in the early years of his administration. The invasion of traditional life incited the Afghan people to rebel against the modernist rule, but the dishonesty and corruption of government employees were crucial in toppling the Amanullah Khan government (Ghobar, 2015. P. 1034).

Amanullah Khan proposed a brand-new method of managing municipal government in 1925. New tax regulations were put in place during that era. The residents were required to pay their taxes directly to the revenue officials twice a year. The revenue officers issued Nizam-i-Nama-i-Taqawe-i-Tejarya to appropriately govern the new tax system. The Nizam Nama-i-Akhaz-i-Rusum-i-Gumrak special code was used to govern all imports. It was composed of 151 articles, all of which included properly taxed goods and luxuries. The authority of the maliks and qaryadars (village headmen) was eliminated by the new tax collection system. The new reforms of the Amani government destroyed their function as a middleman between the state and the citizen (to collect taxes for the state from the people). By replacing the qaryadari system with the installation of government revenue officers, the reforms established the relationship between state and citizen and destroyed the previous system of state versus subject interaction. The new rules benefited the state and the farmers, but also diminished the standing of the Maliks,

Khanans, and Sardaran.<sup>6</sup> Their connection to the centre as representatives of their various villages was broken when their source of power was shut off. Because Amanullah Khan's new contemporary reforms eliminated their personal interests, the maliks and qaryadar opposed the changes. Their exclusion by eliminating their source of income and influence constituted a severe danger to the new government of modernity because they were powerful characters in Afghan society (Olesen, 1995. P. 145).

## Conclusion

The Afghan society was religiously conservative and desired to maintain its old customs and gods. The ancient way of life and system of government were contested and rejected by the modernization movement that King Amanullah Khan initiated. Through social and administrative reforms, the social imbalance between elites, the general populace, and men and women were contested. The intention was to eradicate social inequalities, but the traditionalist tribal and religious leaders rejected the reforms.

Amanullah Khan attempted to enact reforms in every aspect of Afghan society for the first time in the country's contemporary history. After his peaceful initial round of reforms from 1919 to 1923, however, his modernization programme encountered very strong opposition. Different segments of the traditionalist tribal society provided resistance. Because their social standing and economic interests were challenged by the social changes that granted women an equal status to men and themselves through the elimination of the Qaryadari system, tribal chiefs turned against the reformist King. The tribal leaders' opposition was divided on two points. First

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<sup>6</sup>A report "Class Analysis of the Afghan Society" issued by the "Afghanistan revolutionary Organization" (ARO) narrate that During the Durrani Empire in Afghanistan, the *Durrani* tribe received more power and support from the government than the *Ghilji* tribe among the Pashtuns. Among the Durrans the *Barakzais* and *Muhammadzais* clan enjoyed more power. Between the above two Clans, the leaders of the *Muhammadzais* received the title of "*Sardars*" and monthly Allowances from the Durrani Court.

of all, they weren't ready to accept any modification to the established system of government. They wanted King Amanullah Khan to rule Afghanistan in the same manner as his forefathers, where they participated in governance, particularly with regard to army recruitment. In the event of foreign assault, they were required to provide tribal militia. With the implementation of the HashtNafari system, their role in recruitment was diminished. They rebelled against the modernist regime since the modernization process also harmed their personal interests.

The Nizam-Namah-i-Jaza (Penal Law), which limited the power of the Quza, and other social reforms, like the ban on child marriages and limits on having more than one wife, sparked the religious class of Afghanistan to condemn all of these changes as being contrary to the Shari'a. The reforms implemented by the Amanullah Khan administration, however, were founded on Hanafi legal theory and were approved and scrutinized by an Ulama commission, which affirmed their conformity to Shari'a law. The religious faction's hostility to the proposed changes was not just religious in nature; they also saw it as a danger to their own vested interests. Without the ministry of Justice's approval, they were not permitted to act as quza or muftis. Amanullah Khan established Maktab-i-Quzat to provide quza training under the guidance of the ministry of education. Additionally, he prohibited Madrassa-i-Deoband graduates from working for the government. They were charged with being British spies. These changes led to the unemployment of Ulama who lacked ministry of justice certification. Because of their financial concerns, the clergy was unhappy with the measures.

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