

Afghanistan Conflict Continues

Afghanistan is no longer a remote country. It has been the focus of world attention for some time. It has seen four coups since King Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1973. And the last one involved Soviet troops, which fed to a strong American reaction.

What are the roots of Afghanistan's troubles? When in April, 1978, a Marxist government seized power in a bloody coup and announced plans for dramatic changes, the country was soon in open revolt. Many Western journalists reported that the changes were badly needed and attributed the uprising of the tribesmen to Islam and anti-Russian reaction. But the reasons for revolt go far deeper than religious anti Soviet feelings.

Afghanistan is a land with some of the most ancient traditions in the world. The majority of the population live in rural areas and the urban centres are small. The rural and urban groups have never accepted each other. They mix like water and oil. Even dress separates the two groups. In the urban areas, it is inappropriate to wear Afghan robes and a turban, but in the rural areas one is expected to wear the local dress, including the turban. The style of dress reflects the conflicts within Afghan society. Marxist President Babrak Karmal must overcome the rural-urban gap if he wants to govern and control the nation.

Afghanistan is predominantly an Islamic country. Most of its citizens belong to the Sunni sect. The tribes and ethnic groups of rural Afghanistan, representing 90 percent of the population, do not subscribe either to the Western or Soviet oriented secularism of the urbanites. They have no use for any kind of materialistic philosophy of life. The rural people hold on to their traditional values and mores.

Rural Afghanistan doesn't have a cash economy. It has always been independent of urban and world economics. The main occupation is agriculture, sheep raising and handicrafts. The tribesmen believe themselves self-sufficient and are opposed to social and economic reforms. Reforms have been tried before and they have been seen as interference with local affairs.

In the 1920's, King Amanullah attempted the modernization of Afghanistan following the example of Attaturk in Turkey. He opened secular schools, instituted the first Afghan constitution, by which controls were taken away from religious leaders and given to secular officials. A revolt in 1925 forced the king to change his plans. In 1928, after having visited some European nations, Iran and Turkey, the king redoubled his efforts to bring Afghanistan into the 20th century. However, his program didn't affect the rural areas.

Kabul, the capital city, was the main centre of change. The social changes were rejected by the tribesmen. They revolted and the king went into exile.. In the 1950's and 60's, under Prime Minister Mohammed Daud, the pace of change was stepped up."

Roads and airports were built, modern communications were installed to link cities; the army was reorganized and equipped with modern Soviet arms. Aid was received from the U.S., Russia, the World Bank, West Germany, France and Sweden.

But the military, economic and liberalizing developments didn't reach beyond the urban centres. Through an expanding education system, a system set up by Americans in the 50's and modeled along the secular U.S. lines, many Afghans received an academic training. There are now many graduates looking for jobs. The intellectuals revolted against the Daud government and brought the Marxists to power. The people in the rural areas don't want to have any part in it. According to a Pakhtun tribesman, an ideal government is: "No passports; no taxes."

The tribesmen are fiercely independent and quarrelsome. Some measure of unity is achieved only when an outside enemy threatens. A Pakhtun proverb outlines the Afghan tribesman's loyalties: "Me against my brother; me and my brother against my cousins; me, my brother, and my cousins against the world."

So the root problem in the current struggle against the Russians is the conflict between urban and rural values. And Afghans have never forgotten the Russian role as imperialists in Central Asia. In the early part of the 18th century, the Afghans halted the Russian advance into their nation. They also joined, in 1890, the British to redraw the Afghan borders. And another key to Afghan's resistance to the Russians is the fact they view them as kafirs, unbelievers.

What will happen to Afghanistan? Will the West's current concern lead to the withdrawal of Soviet troops and an Islamic state? Among diplomatic analysts, the impression is growing that Moscow is maneuvering to get a communist (and pro-Soviet government accepted by the West before it "officially" withdraws from Afghanistan. Western nations are pushing for a neutral Afghanistan. Asia Week (March 14, 1980) comments about recent events that one way or another the Russians seemed bent on making the shift to communism an "Afghan" fait accompli.

I believe that Afghanistan will follow the lot of other nations invaded by the Russians - such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia. When these nations were overpowered, the West threatened, talked and surrendered.

From the Christian perspective, the fate of Afghanistan has been and is tragic. Preaching, proselytizing and even personal witnessing have been and are strictly forbidden. Christian missionaries have never been allowed to openly work in Afghanistan. Through medical missions some contacts have been made with Afghans. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) opened some mission hospitals at the foot of passes into Afghanistan - Bannu, Peshawar, and Dera Osmail Khan - dates from 1893, 1898 and 1899 respectively. CMS hoped that the frontier hospitals would open the way into Afghanistan. In 1909, a little hospital was started in Thal, on the Afghan frontier between Bannu and Peshawar, by the CMS pioneer doctor, T.L. Pennell, who thought that the village was an ideal site, as it lay on a popular route from Afghanistan

and India. But the work never flourished. In 1919 an Afghan raiding party attacked the place and some of the villagers burned and looted the hospital to the last table and chair.

Today the best opportunities to reach Afghans for Christ appear to be Afghans studying in North America and Europe, some of whom have had meaningful contact with the Christian church. Perhaps some of these students will get the opportunity to witness for Christ after they have returned to their homeland.

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