

AFGHANISTAN

A MODERN HISTORY

Monarchy, Despotism or Democracy? The Problems
of Governance in the Muslim Tradition

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PART II: THE DESCENT INTO CIVIL WAR AND ANARCHY

CHAPTER 6

The 'Saur Revolution' (1978-79)

The so-called 'Saur Revolution' was in fact a military coup carried out by leftist officers of the armed forces under the direction of the PDPA without any popular participation. It is generally agreed by the two PDPA factions that the putsch was planned for the late summer of 1978. But it was precipitated by the murder of the Parcham ideologue, Mir Akbar Khyber, who was led out of his house and shot dead by two gunmen on the night of 17 April. The funeral procession organized by the combined PDPA turned into an impressive demonstration by some 15,000 mourners, with both Taraki and Karmal making incendiary anti-imperialist speeches, as it was believed at the time that the CIA had had a hand in the assassination.

The PDPA alleged, however, after it had taken power, that the murder had been arranged by Daoud in order to flush out PDPA leaders and activists and to gauge the extent of the support they commanded. This is a more plausible theory¹ since, in the days following the murder, Daoud had the army cantonments carefully watched before arresting Taraki, Karmal and a few other known leaders on the night of 25-26 April. Strangely enough, Hafizullah Amin was not taken at the same time as the others. His house was searched, but no incriminating documents were found, and he was placed only under house arrest, until he was taken to the detention centre on the evening of the next day.

The episodes that were crucial to the success of the planned coup appear entirely fortuitous; indeed it is doubtful that it could have been carried out had they not occurred in this way. In the first place, the delay in placing Amin under detention with the others cannot be explained. Amin was the most dangerous of the PDPA leaders and the delay, combined with other circumstances, equally fortuitous, turned out to be of crucial importance. When the police knocked on his door on the evening of 25 April, Amin handed over his written plan of operations to his wife, to be hidden under a mattress in the children's bedroom. The police did not find it, and after they

left he sent his eldest son to Taraki's house to find out what was happening. The boy returned to report that Taraki had been taken away that evening. Taraki's arrest, which was expected, was the pre-arranged signal for the plan's execution by Khalqi officers in the armed forces.

But Amin, who was under house arrest, was in no position to pass on the plan to his courier, Faqir Mohammad Faqir, until Faqir himself arrived by chance at Amin's house on the morning of 26 April. Faqir had a low-profile position among the Khalqis and was not on Daoud's surveillance list. He was a frequent visitor at Amin's house and the police guards let him in as they mistook him for Amin's elder brother, to whom he bore a close physical resemblance. Thus Faqir was able to pass on Amin's written instructions to Syed Ghulabzoi, a junior officer in the air force, who had been designated in advance by Amin for the important task of briefing Khalqi officers in the air force and in the Fourth Armoured Corps based in Kabul on the details of the plan. On the evening of 26 April Amin was moved to a detention centre close to the presidential palace where the other PDPA leaders were being held pending a decision on their fate. In the meantime Amin had also been able to pass on a message through his son to another Khalqi activist, Engineer Zarif, with instructions to be transmitted to those responsible for the take-over of the radio station, once the coup got under way the following day.

Other episodes that greatly assisted the PDPA also turned out to be somewhat fortuitous. After the crackdown on the communist leaders, parties and entertainments were held in the cantonments to celebrate the arrests. According to a PDPA assessment quoted by Anwar:

The Defence Minister had ordered that all armed forces detachments to be on a war footing and celebrate the occasion the next morning with folk dancing and meetings. This treacherous order proved very useful to the forces of the revolution, as the Khalqi elements participated in these meetings where they contacted their unit commanders for instructions without raising suspicion.

On the morning of 27 April a Khalqi officer of the Fourth Corps, Major Aslam Watanjar, called on his commander with a request to draw six shells for each of the 12 tanks in his unit so that it could be in combat readiness as instructed, to which the general readily complied. However, by adding a zero to the requisition order signed by his commander, Watanjar was able to draw sufficient ammunition to arm ten times that number of tanks. According to Amin's plan, a squadron of the air force from the Bagram air base was to buzz the presidential palace at noon. This was to be the signal for the Fourth Corps to move in on the palace.

But things did not go strictly according to plan. The senior rebel officer at the Bagram air base, Abdul Qadir, a Parchami and a former vice-commander of the Afghan air force during Karmal's brief honeymoon with Daoud, was to

take over the base and command the entire air operation in Kabul. Instead, possibly confused or nervous, he locked himself in his office. The planned low sorties over the presidential palace at noon did not therefore take place until 4.30 pm, after a number of tanks from the Fourth Corps were rushed to Bagram by Watanjar to take over the base. Ghulabzoi and Asadullah Sarwari, a former officer and Amin's chief recruiter for the air force, had been at Kabul airport since morning. The failure of Qadir and his squadron to appear over the Kabul skies at noon prompted them to take over the airport with the help of two tanks dispatched by Watanjar.

In fact, the most important role in the coup was played by Watanjar and his Fourth Corps which had ringed Daoud's palace and fired the first shell, as planned, at the Kabuli 'hour of the cannon'. Traditionally, like Hong Kong's famous 'noon gun', the hour was sounded by the firing of a cannon. This was the signal for all the other tanks to enter into action despite the fact that the squadron from Bagram had failed to appear. Daoud brought to a stop the cabinet meeting he was chairing at the time, advising his ministers to escape from the palace and save their lives. Only the defence and interior ministers managed to escape in order to rally the loyalist forces they could muster, unsuccessfully as it turned out. The other ministers sought refuge at the royal mosque in the palace grounds. The sound of firing from the palace was the signal for Khalqi supporters everywhere to take over the armouries and command centres in Kabul, summarily shooting those officers who resisted and placing under arrest those who did not.

The fiercest resistance, however, was offered by the 2000-man presidential guard at the Arg palace commanded by a closet Parchami and, like Daoud and his royal clan, a Mohammadzai Pashtun who had evidently not been apprised of the coup.² The guard fought almost to the last man and the last round to defend the fortress-like palace before it was taken in the early hours of 28 April. Two infantry divisions also offered resistance. One of them tried to prevent the take-over of the radio station. But infantry was no match for an armoured force led by determined officers.

The rebel officers had no choice but to continue once they had started. The arrests of the PDPA leaders implied that their sympathizers in the armed forces had to take urgent action to forestall their own arrests and certain execution by Daoud. The palace meeting was called to discuss the fate of the arrested PDPA leaders, and there could have been no doubt that the penalty for treason would be death for all those involved if the coup failed. Daoud and his family were killed in a burst of gunfire after he drew a gun and wounded one of the rebel officers who had entered the palace in the early hours of the morning of 28 April to arrest him after the annihilation of the presidential guard.

But Daoud was still alive and fighting on the evening of 27 April when Qadir (in Persian) and Watanjar (in Pashtu) announced on Radio Kabul that a 'military council' headed by Qadir had taken power. This announcement was followed by the traditional Muslim invocation and then by a brief statement to the effect that future policy would be based on 'the preservation of the principles of the sacred teachings of Islam' and the 'promotion of the advancement and progress of our beloved people of Afghanistan'. Neither Marxism nor socialism were mentioned.

As was to be expected in the circumstances, there was much confusion in people's minds about what was really happening. The coup was carried out in a general atmosphere of indifference as far as the man in the street was concerned. The presidential guards at the palace resisted what they thought were reactionary right-wing elements in the armed forces who were opposed to Daoud's progressive policies. But the rightists themselves were confused and divided over the nature of the change. In Pakistan a member of the Mujaddidi family issued a press statement saying that 'Islam-loving' elements had taken power. The Soviet news agency, Tass, referred in the next three days to a 'coup d'état' rather than a revolution. Except for a strong note from his government protesting against the arrests of the PDPA leaders, which the Soviet ambassador was unable to deliver to the foreign minister on 27 April, there was no Soviet involvement in what was purely an Afghan affair, notwithstanding Cold War-biased Western reports to the contrary.³

There was even greater confusion for several years in the media and in the literature as to the relative weight of the roles played by the various PDPA actors in the putsch. The communist practice of rewriting history did not help. There was the Taraki version in the flattering biography of the 'Great Leader', the Amin version produced after the overthrow of Taraki, and the Karmal version that prevailed after the Soviet invasion and the assassination of Amin.⁴

Three days after the coup, the formation of a Revolutionary Council of the People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was publicly announced, with Taraki named as chairman and Karmal vice-chairman. According to Anwar, the Council consisted of 30 civilians drawn from the joint PDPA Central Committee, and five officers. The Council met on 1 May to choose a cabinet. Portfolios were evenly allotted to both Parchamis and Khalqis, with Taraki as prime minister, and Karmal, Amin and Watanjar as deputy prime ministers. The portfolios of Defence and Public Works were assigned respectively to two Parchamis, Abdul Qadir of the air force and Mohammad Rafi of the Fourth Armoured Corps, who were thus rewarded for the important roles they had played in the military operations.

But the power structure reflected in reality the outlines of an incipient struggle between Karmal and Amin, with the ineffectual and indecisive

Taraki in the background as a figurehead. What appeared on the surface as an equitable political balance was in fact a fearful symmetry, with the 'tiger' Amin, the actual architect of the revolution, waiting to pounce when the opportunity arose. As Anwar states:

What the Party had done was to set up not one but three governments within the government in an effort to maintain what it thought was a political balance. Taraki was a sort of federal head of three governments. For the Khalq Ministers, Amin was the Deputy Prime Minister, while the Parchamite members of the cabinet were answerable to Karmal only. The (Khalqi) Watanjar controlled his (Parchamite) army colleagues, Qadir and Rafi. No Deputy Prime Minister was supposed to interfere in the working of the Ministries which were not under his direct control. In other words, these three mini-cabinets were three distinct and conflicting groups. They even used to hold separate sessions. Karmal had succeeded in wresting the army from Amin's direct control, whose portfolio (Foreign Affairs) was really a device to distance him from his former constituency, namely the armed forces.⁵

But Amin needed Parchami support at this stage because of their widespread presence as moles in the civilian bureaucracy during the Daoud presidency, while he himself had concentrated his efforts on infiltrating and subverting the armed forces.

The Revolutionary Council was soon replaced by a Soviet-style Politburo where all major decisions were taken. Amin was not a Politburo member, neither were the military members of the cabinet. The inclusion of PDPA-inclined officers in the civilian Central Committee had been a bone of contention between Parchamis and Khalqis since the reunification of the two factions in 1977. But after the coup, the astute Amin changed his previous position to argue cogently for the inclusion of the officers who had played such an active role and risked their lives in bringing the Daoud regime to an end. This he did in a document produced and circulated by the army's political department, which his own men controlled, before a meeting of the Politburo scheduled for 24 May.⁶ This blow-by-blow account highlighted the role of Amin and the Khalqis in the revolution at the expense of Karmal and his Parchami followers, such as the commander of the presidential guard who had put up such a stiff resistance. The Parchamis, who now occupied half the cabinet posts, were painted as political opportunists, implying that they had been brought to power on the coat tails of the truly revolutionary Khalqis.

At the 24 May meeting the Politburo agreed, despite Karmal's opposition, to induct four officers into the Central Committee. Karmal's objections to the use of the term 'Khalq' to designate the victors without reference to the Parchami role were overruled by Taraki. The latter maintained that the term 'Khalq' was a true reflection of the party's unity, while Parcham was a symbol of factionalism. Karmal also proposed that the army pamphlet, with its

exclusive reference to the Khalqis, be withdrawn and confiscated on the grounds that it would give rise to internecine feuds, and be replaced by a more representative account to be produced by the Politburo itself. On the issue of the pamphlet, which included for the first time flattering references to Taraki as the 'Great Leader' and the 'Great Teacher', the wily Amin had correctly concluded that if Karmal objected to the pamphlet, it would become evident to Taraki, who was susceptible to flattery, that he was not willing to accept Taraki as the 'Great Leader' of the unified PDPA or Khalq (People), as the party was named when it was founded in 1965.

When reading the history of the period before the Soviet invasion of December 1979, it is easier now, with the benefit of hindsight, to discern a pattern, a truly Machiavellian design on the part of Hafizullah Amin. His first objective was to get rid of Karmal, towards whom he bore a congenital hatred and with whose policy of a 'national front' he disagreed, and next, to overthrow his own leader, Taraki.

On the very first day of the coup two incidents occurred when the fighting was still going on in which Taraki had openly sided with Karmal rather than bowing to Amin's own views. After they were released from detention and taken to the radio station, Karmal expressed the opinion that until there was complete certainty that the revolution had succeeded, it was inadvisable to remain at the station where they would be sitting ducks. Amin vehemently opposed the proposal, asserting that at this critical juncture the party leaders should stay close to the officers and to the scene of action and take direct command of the fighting. The cautious Taraki agreed with Karmal and went with him and others to seek the relative security of the airport. Amin stayed back to organize a makeshift operations room from where he could keep in touch with and encourage Khalqi officers in the various cantonments.⁷

The second incident occurred after Taraki and Karmal had returned to the radio station and a public announcement was being prepared. Against Amin's insistence that the party leader himself should read the announcement, Karmal argued that at this stage the direct involvement of Taraki, a known communist, could rally the opposition, especially right-wing officers in the armed forces. He proposed that the announcement should be made in Dari (Persian) by Qadir, known for his nationalistic views, to which Taraki agreed, offering Amin a compromise in the form of a Pashtu version to be read by the Khalqi Watanjar. Such incidents must have brought home to Amin the urgent need to wean Taraki away from Karmal's influence through flattery and sycophancy, and to put him off his guard before taking a shot at the indecisive dreamer and drunkard, Taraki himself. Amin did not waste time. In less than 18 months he had achieved both objectives.

Within three months of the coup, Amin had deftly outmanoeuvred the Parchamis. At a meeting of the Central Committee on 27 June, it was de-

cided that state policy would be decided exclusively by Khalq. Amin was inducted into the Politburo and appointed to the key post of general secretary. Karmal's idea of a united national front was abandoned in favour of a party-centred centralized authority on the Stalinist model. The powers of the provincial governors appointed in line with Parchami recommendations were transferred to provincial party secretaries, with party functionaries eventually assuming power down to district and sub-district levels. Khalqis were also appointed to organize and run movements of peasants, women and youth.

Karmal and other leading Parchamis were shunted off to live in glorified exile as ambassadors. The 27 June decisions had virtually ousted Karmal from the government. But as a party veteran he could not have given way so easily before the machinations of a relative newcomer like Amin. It appears that before leaving to take up his post in Prague, he had laid down plans to take power with the help of Parchamis who were still in place, notably Defence Minister Qadir and the Army Chief of Staff, General Shahpur Ahmedzai. The coup was planned for 4 September, on the day of the major religious festival of Eid, when soldiers and officers would be on leave and the atmosphere relaxed. A situation was to be created in which Qadir and Shahpur would intervene on the pretext of fighting in defence of the government, assume power, and form a 'United National Front' with Qadir at its head. As Anwar says, the plot was ill-considered in political terms: Qadir, who was to play the central role, was a non-Pashtun, and a Shi'ite from Herat, while the majority of the officer corps were Pashtun, Sunni and solidly pro-Khalqi.

As it turned out, the conspiracy was blown in August. The Afghan ambassador in New Delhi, a Daoud appointee who had been left in place as he had become a closet Khalqi supporter (unbeknown to Karmal who had trustingly confided his plans to him), tipped off Taraki and Amin. The 'Eid plot' played well into Amin's hands. Qadir, Shahpur and others were promptly arrested. It is said that Asadullah Sarwari, Amin's intelligence chief, made Qadir 'sing like a canary'. Amin went on a witch hunt for Parchamis, eliminating them and their sympathizers from key government and party posts and filling the jails with them.⁸ Parchami ambassadors, including Karmal and Najibullah, were recalled but did not return, absconding, it was alleged, with their embassy funds. With the defence portfolio vacant after Qadir's imprisonment, Taraki and Amin fell out openly on the question of a replacement, the former favouring the appointment of Watanjar to counterbalance Amin's influence over the officer corps. Taraki compromised by taking over the portfolio himself with Amin as his deputy.

The Afghan communists were deeply aware of the fact that they were a minority striving to bring about a revolution in a country with a small working class concentrated in Kabul and a few other cities, and an apathetic peasantry. They had gained power through a military coup and felt they had

to strike swiftly and ruthlessly before a 'counter-revolution' was able to organize itself. They tried to achieve this by three means: repression, made possible by the existence of a loyal and well-equipped army; agrarian reforms, which they thought would win the support of rural people; and a mass literacy campaign to wean the people away from the influence of the clergy and to spread the communist ideology. The arbitrary manner in which this 'revolution from above' was carried out in a rural society whose inner workings they were not aware of, or which they simply misunderstood or ignored, was a prime cause of the spate of spontaneous uprisings that took place before the Soviet invasion.

The triumphant PDPA ruled by decree, establishing Taraki as the supreme leader (Decree No. 1), setting up a government (No. 2), and abrogating the Daoud constitution (No. 3). Subsequent decrees elevated the Uzbek, Turcoman, Baluchi and Nuristani languages to the status of 'national languages' to be promoted by the media (No. 4), deprived members of the royal family of their citizenship (No. 5), cancelled land mortgages (No. 6), gave equal rights to women (No. 7), and ordered land reforms (No. 8).

Decree No. 6 was aimed at abolishing the mortgage system that went hand in hand with rural debt. Peasants owning smaller plots of land had been forced over the years, because of their lack of capital to buy seed, fertilizer and tools, to mortgage their sole asset to landlords or money lenders. Debts and mortgages incurred by peasants owning five acres or less were cancelled by the decree, and the land returned to its owners without further encumbrance. It was assumed that 81 per cent of the rural population would benefit from such a humane and equitable measure. The decree did not apply to mortgaged lands above the five-acre ceiling. But the implementation of the fiat from Kabul was doomed to failure.

In the first place, almost all land deals were contracted orally, with no written or documented records to cover the bulk of the mortgages. Secondly, the decree was implemented by inexperienced party officials, usually primary school teachers, as the PDPA lacked the organizational resources at the grassroots level to see the reforms through. Also the intruding presence of district officials, perceived by the local qawm as representatives of the much-resented central authority, precluded any meaningful cooperation with them. Thirdly, in the absence of rural credit facilities backed by the government, smallholders and landless peasants could only obtain financial help for the purchase of seed, fertilizer and other capital inputs from money-lending nomads, traders, landowners and tribal khans, often at exorbitant rates of interest. Thus when the decree was published, money lenders stopped extending loans to their impoverished clients. The overall effect of the decree was to short-circuit the traditional and informal system of rural credit that enabled the peasants to survive. One result was that those few farmers who

had managed to repossess their holdings re-mortgaged them to their old creditors. Another was that those directly hit by the decree, the landlords and the money lenders, joined hands to resist the change. They found ready allies as usual among the mullahs and ulema, often landowners themselves, who gave their blessings to the unholy cause of defending the marriage of Islam and usury that was a mark of tribal economic relations in Afghanistan.

This paper decree was complemented by another (No. 8) that set an upper limit of 15 acres on landholdings. This meant in theory that 50 per cent of the agricultural land in the country would become available for distribution to landless peasants and others with holdings under five acres. At the same time all sources of irrigation were nationalized. The Ministry of Agriculture and the newly created Land Reform Commission were entrusted with the task, traditionally assumed by the qawm, of determining the allocation of water resources, leaving village cooperatives and water supply departments to handle the local arrangements. Financial help was in theory made available from the Kabul-based Agricultural Bank set up by Zahir Shah, whose main beneficiaries in the past had only been important landowners.

Another assumption made by the PDPA was that 40 per cent of the agricultural land was not cultivated due to lack of seed, fertilizer and water, and the prevalence of 'feudal' conditions in the countryside,⁹ and that if the uncultivated land could be made productive, the country could achieve self-sufficiency in food. The land reform decrees were aimed at accomplishing this task. But the means employed were not only inadequate but showed the ignorance of the PDPA's activists of the complex rural realities.

Committees were set up in every district to implement the reforms. They were placed under the overall supervision of a provincial committee headed by the governor. Squads of city-bred youth, long on revolutionary zeal and pitifully short on knowledge and experience, would descend on villages, harangue the assembled peasants, and hand out title-deeds to the landless. Anwar cites an incident when a Party worker used derogatory language to describe a local landlord, whereupon one of the recipients reprimanded him for his lack of respect towards the khan and shot him dead. Such incidents took place across the country and attested to the PDPA's failure to appreciate the internal dynamics of the rural communities they were trying to change.¹⁰

Olivier Roy advances the hypothesis that the agrarian reforms were intended to break down the traditional socio-economic structures and not to create a system of modest individual landholdings backed up by an efficient system of rural credit that would have made them economically viable:

Later on the government planned to set up cooperatives which would group small farmers who had benefited from the land reforms, and who would have now come to realise that it was impossible for them to make a living from their farms by themselves. In support of this view we might add that the official document which

published the article dealing with the establishment of agricultural cooperatives appeared in September 1978, that is to say before Decree 8. The agrarian reform may not have been a collectivist reform, but it seems that it was worked out with the clear intention that it should be the first stage on the route to a collectivist society of the future.¹¹

The natural resistance of landlords to the agricultural reforms had a further dimension in that they counted among their ranks some of the country's most influential political, social and even religious leaders, such as the heads of the Mujaddidi and Gailani clans. Private property is considered sacrosanct in Islam, and the landlords found natural allies in the religious establishment of the mullahs and the ulema in a symbiotic relationship. As a Russian historian cited by Anwar states:

It is important to note that Muslim theologians were the first to form into a privileged estate of the Pashtun society, and it was they who made the first breach in the system of agrarian relationships based on common ownership ... *seri* - a land benefice granted to the clergy can and must be regarded as the initial form of feudal land tenure.

This situation prevailed because *seri* lands once granted were never revoked. To cultivate them the mullah had recourse to members of other tribes who either sought refuge in the *qawm* or who had been vanquished in tribal conflicts, and as such were outsiders having no social status in the host tribe and easily exploitable as landless labourers.

These decrees, carried out without adequate preparation and with the hasty zeal of doctrinaire Marxist reformers, resulted in a disastrous drop in agricultural production. In an average year Afghanistan imported some 200,000 tonnes of wheat to offset the deficit in domestic production. The unrest in the countryside and the spreading civil strife soon caused a steep drop in domestic production. In 1979 some 350,000 tonnes of wheat had to be imported. In the spring of 1980, after the Soviet invasion, Babrak Karmal informed the country that out of a total cultivable area of 9.5 million acres, only 8.75 million acres had been cropped, reducing the average annual yield from 6.5 million tonnes to 5.9 million tonnes. There were similar falls in the production of other food crops, as well as cash crops like cotton, which registered a drop of 30 per cent.

Another source of tension was the implementation of the literacy campaign throughout the country: children and adults, young and old, had to learn to read and write within one year. The programme called for 18,500 teachers to be sent into the countryside, 16,000 of whom would be volunteers. The response of the rural people to the campaign was mixed. Previous regimes had spared no effort in bringing education to the countryside by establishing village schools, encouraging villagers to participate in the con-

struction of the school buildings, with the government taking responsibility for the payment of teachers' salaries. The opportunity to learn was welcomed and teachers enjoyed a certain esteem as long as they did not overturn tradition. The PDPA's campaign came to be resented for a number of reasons: the teachers employed in the campaign were usually student volunteers supportive of the regime but who came from outside the qawm, often from Kabul and other cities, and who behaved in an authoritarian and arrogant manner; village elders and other old men who were forced to attend the courses were profoundly humiliated; the texts used had a Marxist slant that disturbed the devout, for one of the aims of the campaign was political indoctrination. But what sparked open resistance leading to revolt was the mixing of the sexes in the literacy classes, conducted mainly by adult males and adolescents from the cities because of the dearth of female teachers. Roy observes that there was a close correlation between the regions targeted in the literacy campaign and those where uprisings took place. By the winter of 1979-80, the literacy campaign had come to a halt in the countryside and now only affected the urban areas that were firmly in the grip of the regime.

Decree No. 7 related to the rights of women: child marriages were declared illegal, the minimum marriageable age for boys was set at 18 years, and for girls at 16, and the mutual consent of the bride and groom was declared essential. The aspect of the decree that provoked the most controversy was the upper limit of 300 afghanis placed on the *haq mehr*, or money payable to the wife in case of dissolution of the marriage. Generally, the bride-price payable by the groom's family was negotiated in advance by the two parties, the actual sum arrived at depending on the economic and social standing of the families. The provision of freedom of choice came up against other traditional practices such as the 'barter' arrangements whereby a daughter would be married to a brother's son, with a view not only to settling them but to keeping property within the extended family. Marriages were also used among the more influential classes to forge strategic alliances. It was also not unusual for marriage contracts to be negotiated when the prospective bride and groom were no more than infants. The decree was welcomed in more advanced urban circles where young people were able to marry the partners of their choice for the first time in Afghan history. But it was perceived as a frontal attack on tradition by the backward and unlettered people of rural Afghanistan.¹²

Repression during the Taraki-Amin period was at first selective, aimed at the complete elimination of certain social categories that were thought to be potential counter-revolutionaries. In the towns the victims were drawn from the higher ranks of the clergy, intellectuals, liberals and Maoists. In the countryside the targeted victims were drawn from among the clergy, leaders of the Sufi orders and people of influence in the local communities. Promi-

ment among those executed were the prestigious head of the Naqshbandiya Sufi order, the Hazrat of Shor Bazar, and all male members of his Mujaddidi family present in Kabul. Some 200 Islamic student militants, who had been arrested by Daoud and had remained in the Pul-i-Charki prison without trial since 1975, were executed in a single night in June 1979. In February 1980 the government put in place by the Soviets admitted that 12,000 people had 'officially' died, meaning that they had disappeared. The number of those executed or missing in the countryside was uncountable: Roy estimates that in all some 50,000 to 100,000 people disappeared.

Another kind of repression was in response to spontaneous uprisings that began as local reactions to heavy-handed attempts by governmental authorities and their militant agents to impose their land reform and literacy programmes, or to make arrests. The revolts typically took the form of an attack led by religious leaders, village headmen and elders on a government post, with heavy casualties on both sides. If the attack was successful, the communist militants were executed, and non-communist soldiers and officials were allowed to leave. Then the revolt would spread to surrounding areas where ethnic affiliation or tribal solidarity operated, and stop when the frontier of the ethnic or tribal territory was reached. The earliest such revolt took place in Nuristan in July 1978. Another successful revolt took place in the Shi'ite Hazarajat in December 1978. Both these regions remained autonomous for the duration of the civil war. Generally speaking the uprisings occurred in non-Pashtun or in detribalized Pashtun zones.

Those who remained passive or neutral during these uprisings or even collaborated actively with the Khalqis were drawn from the urban lower middle class of officials and employees dependent on the state, modern in their outlook, and cut off from their roots in the countryside. Many high officials retained their positions even as real power passed into the hands of young and incompetent militants of the PDPA and their Soviet advisers. The regime was even able to draw support and recruit militias from among those peasants who had benefited from the land distribution programme at the expense of rival tribes or clans. Roy states that 'as a general rule, zones which had a strong mixture of uprooted tribal elements, migrants of all kinds, and a hotch-potch of ethnic groups were more subject to government influence (which was able to play upon the rivalries and frustrations plaguing subordinate groups) than zones that were homogenous from an ethnic or a tribal point of view.' Even in the latter zones, Ghilzai Pashtun tribal solidarity could sometimes prevail over other factors as the Khalqi leadership was Ghilzai, the first to take power in Afghanistan since the Durrani ascendancy began in the second half of the eighteenth century.

It took only seven feverish months in 1978 for the PDPA's Khalqi faction to get rid of Karmal and his Parchamis and initiate their reforms. But the

regime was vulnerable on many fronts. In addition to financial difficulties, the land reforms did not have the hoped-for result of an exploited and impoverished peasant population rallying gratefully and enthusiastically to the cause of revolution. The reforms, on the other hand, provoked unprecedented tensions in the countryside. The pressure brought on them forced many tribal chiefs and their followers to move into Pakistan where they were received with open arms by the unpopular Zia ul-Haq regime, eager for an anti-communist cause to support and the means to consolidate its rule with international assistance. Every arriving Afghan was given a daily stipend of four rupees – more than the average income of an Afghan peasant. By the end of 1978 some 80,000 Afghans had reached Pakistan according to government figures. Pakistan also claimed to have spent the equivalent of \$145 million on 'humanitarian assistance' to the Afghan refugees. In the meantime the forces of opposition were rallying in Pakistan: eight training camps were established in the North West Frontier Province to turn simple Afghan refugees into guerrilla fighters.

In December 1978 Taraki and Amin flew to Moscow to conclude a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. To most observers it seemed a routine renewal of the 1921 treaty signed by King Amanullah. But there was a new provision that called for Soviet military assistance if needed, subject to two amendments introduced personally by Amin that augured his future independent stance vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, and which was to bring about his downfall: first, any Soviet troops sent for would serve under Afghan officers, and second, their eventual return would be decided by the host government. Large numbers of Soviet military and civilian advisers were already present in the country before the new treaty was concluded. Its signature was also a signal to the US and its Pakistani ally that their support of counter-revolutionary forces would bring in the Red Army.

But Pakistan's Zia ul-Haq, fired by his Islamic and anti-communist zeal, was not to be deterred. In January 1979 a first contingent of some 5000 insurrectionists under the banner of Gullbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizbi-i-Islami entered Kunar province, attacked Asadabad, its principal town, and captured a strategically located government fort. Most ominously its success was due to the defection of the local army brigade led by Abdur Rauf, who had previously joined the Khalqis but now became a leading mujahideen commander. In February the abduction of the US ambassador by terrorists belonging to Badakhshi's Sitm-e-Melli group, who sought the release of their imprisoned leaders, provoked US hostility. Ambassador Dubs was killed when Amin's troops stormed the hotel room where he was being kept. On 15 March there was a major uprising in Herat involving Afghan Shi'ite seasonal workers who had returned in large numbers after the fall of the Shah. The 17th Army Division stationed there virtually collapsed. An artillery regiment and an

infantry regiment defected to the rebels. One of their commanders, Ismail Khan, led a successful attack on what was left of the garrison, and was to emerge later, in alignment with the Jamiat, as one of the most effective commanders of the mujahideen. The rebellion was crushed by paratroopers from Kandahar, at a cost of 25,000 lives. In April major attacks were mounted in Jalalabad, in Paktia province, and in Gardez, by mujahideen organized from Pakistan by Sayyed Ahmad Gailani and Mujaddidi. Fighting raged on till June and was quelled when the government brought into play for the first time helicopter gunships supplied by the Soviets. On 23 June there were violent anti-government demonstrations staged in Kabul by Shi'ite Hazaras.

Between March and July 1979 disagreements between Taraki and Amin came to a head. A bone of contention was the unresolved issue of the defence portfolio held by Taraki, but effectively under the control of Amin, his deputy. Despite Amin's manoeuvring, Taraki's favourite, General Aslam Watanjar, was appointed to the post. Amin's position was weak, as the failed army commanders in Asadabad and Herat had been his appointees. But Amin succeeded in having his brother-in-law elevated to chief of staff, while the head of the army's powerful political department was also an Amin man. At a meeting of the Politburo on 28 July, Amin overtly held Taraki responsible for the government's failures through his proneness to unilateral decision making, and proposed 'a collective leadership and collective decisions'. With Amin's faction now commanding a majority, the Defence Ministry was once more returned to Taraki's charge, with Amin as his deputy. Watanjar was shunted back to the Interior Ministry; the Foreign Ministry and the Deputy Premiership was passed on to an Amin loyalist, Akbar Shah Wali; and the Tribal Affairs Ministry to Mazdooriyar, with Amin-leaning deputies appointed to the Foreign and Interior Ministries. Other key appointments reduced Taraki to a mere figurehead, with Amin controlling the levers of power in the government and in the army. An Amin loyalist, Major Daud Arun, was appointed to head the presidential guard. Amin was now poised for a final showdown with Taraki when the opportunity arose.

By August the Khalqi PDPA had polarized into Taraki and Amin factions, the former led by Watanjar, Ghulabzoi, Mazdooriyar and Asadullah Sarwari, formerly an assiduous Amin supporter who, as intelligence chief, had hounded the Parchamis and had now defected to the Taraki cause.¹³ They came to be known as the 'gang of four'. In August, according to Mrs Taraki, Taraki chided Amin by saying: 'We are a Marxist Party, but people accuse us of nepotism. You have appointed Abdullah Amin [who was not even a member of the Party] Supervisory Governor of the four northern provinces, and your nephew has been made Deputy Foreign Minister.' Amin replied angrily: 'So, should I murder my family?'

On 4 September Taraki left for Havana by way of Moscow for a summit meeting of 'non-aligned nations' including Pakistan. Two days before Taraki's departure, Sarwari confided to the Soviet adviser attached to his Department of Intelligence that 'it is my information that Amin has decided to kill Taraki and take over power'. None of the 'gang of four' slept at his own house thereafter, out of fear that Amin might have them killed. On 7 September Sarwari telephoned Taraki in Havana to tell him that 'Amin is planning to either arrest us or have us all killed so that he can take over the government before your return'. This call may have prompted Taraki to arrange for a secret meeting with Brezhnev during a stop-over at Moscow airport on his return journey from Havana on 12 September. Babrak Karmal may also have been present. At the prompting of the Soviet foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, it was decided that Amin should be sent into diplomatic exile and a 'national democratic' government be formed, with Karmal as prime minister and half the cabinet nominated from outside the PDPA.

The events of the next three days, as narrated by Anwar citing first-hand sources, can only be described as a bizarre combination of cloak-and-dagger politics taking place in a cowboys-and-Indians scenario, with ambushes planned by Sarwari, and with Amin keeping a step ahead, thanks to his spies at every level. In the end, as in a western, Taraki and his Indians lost out. The 'Great Leader' himself became a prisoner in his palace. On 15 September Amin announced to the Central Committee that Taraki had tendered his resignation on grounds of ill health. The chief conspirators against Amin - Sarwari, Watanjar and Ghulabzoi - sought refuge in the Soviet embassy. The precise circumstances of Taraki's death on 8 or 9 October - whether he was hanged in prison or suffocated with a pillow at the Arg palace - have not been elucidated.¹⁴

During Amin's 100 days in power, the dice were already cast against him. Three-quarters of the country was in a state of rebellion. In September 1979 the powerful Jadran tribe in Paktia province rose in revolt. The government launched a full-scale military operation that ended in a decisive defeat. Because of widespread desertions and defections, the effective army had already been reduced to a third or less of its full complement of 100,000 before the coup d'état. Sixty out of 62 generals had been relieved of their commands after the April 1978 communist putsch and replaced by PDPA supporters from the ranks of captains and majors. The morale of the Afghan armed forces, the mainstay of the regime, was low, as a contemporary Soviet Defence Ministry evaluation revealed.

In the autumn of 1979, after his overthrow of Taraki, Amin must have realized that his position was vulnerable: the country was in a ferment, his army in disarray, and he could not nurture the illusion that Pakistan would withdraw its support of the Peshawar-based Islamic opposition parties, al-

though the material support was very minimal at this stage, compared to the levels that were to be reached after the Soviet invasion. Nevertheless, in addition to some conciliatory gestures on the domestic front, Amin began to make friendly overtures to Pakistan. He was considering a trade-off: Afghan acceptance of the Durand Line as an international frontier in return for an end to Pakistani support of the regime's enemies. He extended an invitation to Zia ul-Haq to send his foreign minister, Agha Shahi, to Kabul. He did receive a positive response from Zia but the scheduled visit in December was called off at the last moment.

At the same time, Amin initiated some overtures to the US with whom relations had soured since the Dubs episode and the suspension of US assistance programmes. In an interview given by Amin to correspondents from two leading US newspapers in October, he invited the US to study the Afghan situation 'in a realistic manner' and 'provide us with more assistance'. It was probably not material assistance that he meant as he was getting enough of that from the USSR. Washington was aware of the growing tensions between Amin and Moscow. As early as July 1979 the US chargé d'affaires was told by the East German ambassador in Kabul that Moscow considered 'the key ingredient' in a political solution to the regime's problems to be 'the departure of Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin'.¹⁵ Some US diplomatic contacts with Amin had taken place in the autumn but nothing had come of them. Amin was in a Catch 22 situation: his complete dependence on Soviet support could not be reconciled with a manifest desire to follow an independent course in foreign policy. Moscow on its part may have come to perceive in Amin an independent-minded nationalist, a fledgling Tito who would not be Moscow's puppet. The murder of the less ambiguously pro-Soviet Taraki was the last straw.