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ANALYSIS BRANCH

FROM : Amembassy KABUL DATE: June 24, 1970

SUBJECT : Afghanistan's Clerical Unrest; a Tentative Assessment

REF : Kabul 3343, 3233, 3197, 3172, 3130, 3102, 3004, 2873, 2811, 2703, 2621, 2541, 2480, 2435; A-49; NHK 3931

SUMMARY

The past month has seen an abatement in the clerical and tribal unrest which has dominated the Afghan political scene for the past two months, and in this period of calm, it is possible to make the following observations: 1) The original demonstrations in Kabul were inspired by the Mojadedi family, probably with tacit support from some elements of the government and Royal Family. However, as the situation developed, the Mojadedis left the field more to the provincial mullahs whose aim was to set back the clock socially on a wide front. These men reflected, in part, the latent dissatisfaction of the hinterland with the lack of economic progress in the provinces as contrasted with the capital. 2) The left did not react strongly to the demonstrations and avoided a major confrontation. For their part, mullahs probably did little to change the views of the segments of the society at which the communist appeal is aimed, but the agitation still set back the leftist cause, at least in the countryside. 3) The Soviets here were caught off balance and annoyed by the demonstrations, and the impact of the events on their attitude towards the RGA is a pertinent question for the future. 4) Religious conservatism, for the first time in many years, vividly demonstrated that it remains a force with which the government must contend. Nevertheless, the existence of a reasonably strong army, the absence of outside assistance and a basically conciliatory government policy, has so far prevented the situation from getting out of hand. 5) If all goes well, the demonstrations may ultimately come to be regarded as proof of the mettle of the society and the democratic experiment.

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THE EVENTS

The referenced messages have given a reasonably full account of Afghanistan's mullahs' hour at center stage, and the events will only be summarized here. Beginning on April 24, a group of clerics held demonstrations and meetings at Parliament and in the Pol-e-Kheshti mosque, Kabul's principal place of worship, to protest the use by the pro-communist newspaper, Parcham, of a religious term praising Lenin on his Centenary. The mullahs' speeches deplored the spread of "atheistic communism," the RGA's soft attitude toward the threat from the left, and the general decay of the moral fiber of the nation. The clerics also denounced the government from time to time for its contribution to this sorry state of affairs, and on occasion were indirectly critical of the King. During the early days of the demonstrations, Afghanistan's best known religious family, the Mojadedis, were very much involved. On several occasions, Sebghatullah Mojadedi, an articulate, well-educated cleric who had been in prison in the early 1960's, made speeches at the mosque and at Parliament and was active in organizing his colleagues.

In late April, the mullahs presented a list of demands to the Lower House of Parliament calling for the suppression of Parcham and the trial of Barak Shafii, one of its writers. The list also included objections to Afghan womanhood appearing in public bare-faced and mini-skirted, to the showing of allegedly risqué movies, to the production of wine at Pol-e-Charkhi and to other un-Islamic social practices. The Lower House responded to these demands by asking the Government to appear for an interpellation. This call remains unanswered so far.

In retrospect, it appears that the first phase of the demonstrations ended on May 5, the day after a large group of mullahs had staged a march through the city. At this time, Sebghatullah Mojadedi told two American newsmen that a compromise had been reached with the government, and security precautions around the Pol-e-Kheshti mosque were relaxed considerably. The only immediate issue which appeared outstanding was that of the arrest of a number of clerical demonstrators, but this question seemed to fade away in the next few days.

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By May 10, however, it became clear that the demonstrations were not to be finished so easily. Men of the cloth continued to gather at the mosque, and both in the mosque and the streets, to attack the government bitterly. Their periodic calls for banning higher education and travel abroad for women represented a level of purifying zeal not achieved in the list of demands presented to Parliament. During this period, reports of religiously-inspired disorders in the provinces were numerous, and the flow of mullahs and villagers from the provinces into the capital, a movement which had begun in late April, increased rapidly. The provincial delegations organized themselves in the mosque under banners bearing the name of their area. Lastly, as time passed, it became apparent that the Kabul bazaar was prepared to offer the material support needed to keep the mullahs in the city for a protracted period of more or less orderly protest.

In the face of the obvious staying power of the demonstrations, the seeming unwillingness, or inability, of the mullahs to prevent the influx of villagers, and the outbursts of anti-government oratory from the pulpit, the government announced on May 24 that "agitators" had infiltrated the clerical ranks and that therefore the demonstrations should cease. This move was probably urged by Sardar Abdul Wali. After a tense day on May 25, the mullahs were evicted, forcibly in some cases, from the mosque in the early hours of May 26 and returned to the provinces in government trucks. Although a substantial number of arrests were made, there was little violence reported at any time during this period, and life in Kabul returned to normal at once.

In the provinces, however, the situation was different. A mullah-led mob in Jalalabad sacked a number of public buildings, and similar incidents were reported in several other provincial centers, notably Laghman and Ghazni. It is likely that there were several deaths in these disorders. Moreover, the predatory Shinwari tribe in southeastern Nangarhar Province, inspired by one Mullah Ramazan, is reported to have occupied a Gendarmerie post and even to have held the governor of the Achin district of Nangarhar prisoner for a brief period. This action seems to have stemmed in part from the outrage of tribal leaders that lands reclaimed by the Soviet-assisted Nangarhar Valley Authority, which had allegedly been promised to the Shinwari, were being given to others to farm. Still, the mullahs' grievances almost certainly played a catalytic role in the uprising.

The government reacted to these developments by sending a high-level investigating team to Jalalabad and large contingents of troops to reinforce the garrison there and to deal with the Shinwari. Leaflets calling for an end to the insurgency were airdropped, and jet fighter aircraft based at Bagram to the north of Kabul also overflew the area to point up the government's displeasure more clearly. Although Mullah Ramazan remains at large, the Shinwari are said to have been routed with little or no violence, and order was restored.

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in Jalalabad. Large numbers of arrests, in Jalalabad and in other centers of trouble, have been reported.

At this writing, no new incidents are known to have taken place, and some of the troops sent from Kabul to Nangarhar have begun to return to their bases. Moreover, a number of clashes which were rumored a week ago have since proved to have been insignificant. The only tangible result the clerics have to show for their efforts is that Parcham, although not formally banned by the government, has not appeared since the fateful Lenin Centenary issue.

Still, before they were disbanded, the mullahs are reliably reported to have agreed to continue the good fight in the provinces. They did this to good advantage in Jalalabad, where recent returnees from Kabul appeared in clothing allegedly bloodied during the Pol-e-Kheshti eviction. The Shinwari problem, although quiescent, is apparently not settled. Here in Kabul, there have been some efforts to keep the flame of religious fervor burning in the bazaar. It will probably not be known for some time how much staying power the clerical militancy has.

CONCLUSIONS

In the month of calm since the disorders in the east, the Embassy has had some opportunity to sort out its thoughts on the events just described, and, while a definitive assessment is not possible at this short distance, there are some observations to be made. Because of the nature of the situation, much of what follows is highly speculative.

Origin and Development

The first phase of the demonstrations was probably a creature of the Mojadedi family and a few other Kabul-based mullahs. These men saw in the Lenin Centenary an opportunity to strike a blow for the religion and reassert their own influence, which had been on the wane for some time. They were quickly able to find sufficient support to mount a limited, and easily controllable, operation.

The Mojadedi effort was probably cleared, and tacitly approved, in some Establishment quarters on the theory that a small group of outraged clerics could be used to show that the field of political action was not the exclusive province of the left. It is unlikely that this clearnace went "through channels" since the Prime Minister and leading security officials do not appear to have been informed. Elements of the Royal Family--notably Marshal Shah Wali Khan and Sardar Abdul Wali--are considered the most likely points of contact with the Mojadedis and their supporters, and the King, by his own statement, (Kabul 3130) met with leading clerical agitators during May.*

* The Embassy believes that CAS's report of the King's giving his consent to limited clerical agitation (NHK 3931) is accurate, but none of our sources have confirmed this information.

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Once underway, however, the demonstrations found a resonance in the clerical community which was either not anticipated or simply ignored by the Kabul mullahs. The meetings in the mosque continued into mid-May ostensibly because the Government and Parliament had failed to make a satisfactory response to the mullahs' demands, and the Mojadedis probably supported this prolongation. Nevertheless, as the days passed, the provincial mullahs, particularly from the south and east, became increasingly prominent in the mosque, and there were even periodic calls from the faithful for the Mojadedis, "whose past was well known," to leave the field.

Thus, as May drew to a close, the demonstrations took on a "grass roots" complexion which finally prompted the government's move to end them. The speeches in the mosque began to dwell more on the need for shielding women from education and exposure to the world outside the harem than on Parcham and Lenin. Indeed, a second list of demands, reportedly far more reactionary than the first, is said to have been prepared. Also, latent dissatisfaction with the low level of economic development and progress in the Afghan hinterland began to find expression in the mullahs' oratory, and governmental corruption became a well-worn theme. In short, the size, base, and focus of the demonstrations expanded to a point which became intolerable for the government.

The Mullahs and the Left

The attitude of the left and the mullahs towards one another was for the most part cautious. There were three days during May when students of the Parcham, Khalq, and Sholai-ye-Jaweid groups demonstrated in the streets of Kabul, but, with the exception of the Sholai, they ignored the clerics both in speech and action. At one point, a group of mullahs paraded past a Sholai-ye-Jaweid demonstration, but neither side reacted in any way. Only from Kandahar and Jalalabad has the Embassy received reports of clashes between the left and the right, and the nature and scope of these disorders is not known at this writing.

Although basically unsure how to proceed, the left, particularly the Sholai-ye-Jaweid, is widely believed to have at least explored the possibilities for using the clerical unrest to its advantage. One theory has it that leftist agitators infiltrated the ranks of the mullahs and made reactionary speeches in order to discredit the religious men as ignorant fanatics. The authenticity of such a report cannot be verified, but the Parcham group is well connected through family ties with the clerics and so might have had some success in pursuing this tactic. A second view is that the Sholai made sporadic attempts at forming a sort of united front with the mullahs against the government, particularly in Kabul's high schools, on the theory that any anti-government agitation should be encouraged. To the best of the Embassy's information, this effort was not supported either by the students or the mullahs.

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Although they probably had little effect on the attitudes of the students and younger government workers who are the left's "target audience," the demonstrations still appear to represent a reverse for the leftist cause in Afghanistan. Many Afghans, including some ministers, who normally have little sympathy for the clerical position, saw some merit in the agitation, which, after all, was the strongest and most sustained anti-communist manifestation in the country in fifty years and which prompted the conservative press to be openly critical of the Soviet system. In defending their position, these sources have used the classic argument that, in the absence of organization in the center of the political spectrum, only the society's traditional forces are in a position to counter the left. In the face of the impact the left has had on the students and, during the 1969 election campaign, on certain rural constituencies, such a counter had become highly desirable, in their view.

The Soviet Reaction

The Soviets here were surprised and vexed by the demonstrations. They appear to have followed the developments closely and expressed their concern at the agitation both to Afghans and officers of this Embassy. Naturally, the Afghans were quick to sense this attitude, and a rumor that a counter demonstration had been staged in front of the Afghan Embassy in Moscow accordingly made the rounds of the capital. To date, Russian unhappiness has had no visible effect on the formal relations between the two countries, but this matter is one which should be followed closely in coming months and years.

The Amanullah Comparison

Perhaps the most important fact about the clerical demonstrations is that, despite an obvious resemblance to the unrest which preceded the downfall of King Amanullah, they have not to date developed into anything approximating a major threat to the present order. The reasons for this are not far to seek. Unlike the late 1920's, the army, as its handling of the Shinwari problem showed, is now strong and mobile enough to nip a localized insurgency in the bud, and the task of "rallying the tribes" against the government is hence much more difficult than in the past. The relative competence of the army obviates the need for using one tribe against another in a crisis, a dangerous game which Afghan Amirs have been historically forced to play.

Leaving the army aside, there are other reasons for the failure of the demonstrations to present a real danger to the regime. First, the police in Kabul have had ample experience in handling demonstrations in the past four years, and so were able to avoid a confrontation with the mullahs which might have turned the capital's populace against the government. Jalalabad and Laghman, where the security forces have not been constantly exposed to crowds of demonstrators,

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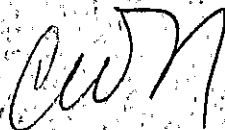
are good examples of what might have happened here. Also, the present government, and particularly the King, are probably better informed, and more adept, in tribal politics than was the case forty years ago. Finally, the essential ingredient of outside support for the mullahs' cause is almost certainly lacking in the present situation. Naturally there have been charges that arms, men, and even spiritual leaders have found their way into the country from Pakistan, but virtually all reliable sources, including high RGA officials, deny that this has been happening.

The Future

If for no other reason than that it is poorly understood, it is too early to close the book on Afghanistan's latest encounter with Islamic outrage. The mullahs may be expected to continue their efforts at propagation, in Kabul as well as in the provinces, and their are a number of outstanding tribal disputes which, in the right circumstances, could be exploited and turned against the government. Despite its ability to deal with individual insurgencies, the army would be hard pressed logistically to deal simultaneously with a number of such outbreaks over a protracted period of time. Further, other strains in the society, notably the ethnic tensions existing in the north and elsewhere, would likely come more into the open in a prolonged period of tension. Clearly, much depends in the present situation on how the government "tidies up" after the troubles; most informed sources favor a conciliatory approach to those arrested and to the wayward tribesmen.

In the short run, however, the present Afghan polity, and indeed, the society as a whole, have withstood a kind of strain which in the past has proved too much for them. The attitude of the Kabul bazaar notwithstanding, the sparks struck by the clerics have so far not ignited a major fire. If this continues to be the case, the 1970 religious demonstrations may ultimately come to be regarded as proof of the mettle of the "new order" introduced into the country forty years ago with the coming of the Yahya Khel and refined with the advent of the experiment in democracy.

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