The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study
Sayed Askar Mousavi
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Within the large literature on Afghanistan, there is scarce coverage of the Hazara. Among the numerous accounts of the still-ongoing war, Olivier Roy’s *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* is the only book that gives more than a superficial presentation of the Hazaras. But, as emphasized by the 1992 rise to
prominence of the major Hazara party, Hezb-e Wahdat, the political history of the Hazaras is important. It is important not only because the Hazara constitute a significant and deprived portion of the Afghan population, but also because any solution to the country’s crisis will have to accommodate their claims. During the war, the Hazaras were effectively excluded from the support directed to the Pakistan-based resistance, and they thus turned towards Iran for support. Mousavi delves further, however, and links the paucity of knowledge regarding the Hazaras to former governments’ campaigns to ‘Pashtunize’ the country both linguistically and culturally, as well as in terms of political power. A major proposition in the book is that former rulers successfully manipulated journalists and scholars, internationals and nationals, to neglect the non-Pashtun people of Afghanistan.

This is a book which covers many facets of Hazara society. Mousavi takes us back to 300 BC to look at indigenous production systems, but he also presents the most recent political developments after Hezb-e Wahdat lost control over Western Kabul in the spring of 1995. On the way, we are taken through a lengthy reconsideration of theories about the origin of the Hazaras, leading Mousavi to present his own rationale. He believes that the Hazaras have their roots some 2,300 years back, in what is now Hazarajat, and that they have been influenced in many ways by various migrations and conquerors, among them Moghol, Turkic, Arab and Persian. This, albeit only another hypothesis Mousavi admits, makes the Hazaras ‘(...) one of the oldest inhabitants of the region’ (p 43). One of the most fascinating chapters of the book deals with the Hazara uprisings of the 1890s, where Afghanistan’s first ‘modernizer king’, Abdur Rahman Khan, mobilized broadly and implemented the most brutal measures in order to gain administrative control throughout Hazarajat. The consequences were grave, in terms of casualties, migration, administrative and political subordination, and resulted in economic damage—including a carte blanche for Pashtun nomads to use Hazarajat for grazing their herds. Indeed, the events of the 1890s led to changes in Hazara social and political organization which prevented the emergence of ethnically or regionally based political organization among the Hazaras up to the 1980s.

As a result of the war of the 1890s, many Hazaras escaped—to Pakistan, to Iran, and some to Central Asia. Mousavi’s account of these ‘new’ Hazara communities includes an interesting comparison between the Hazara communities in Pakistan and in Iran. The Pakistani Hazaras have maintained strong contacts with their home communities in Afghanistan, and their (...) extreme sense of identity is rarely seen among the Hazaras inside Afghanistan (...)’ (p 147). In Iran, the Hazaras have integrated to a much larger extent; Mousavi believes this is partly due to a shared language and religion. The presence of Hazara communities abroad was an important factor in choosing a destination for those many Hazaras who in the past two decades escaped war-torn Afghanistan.

The account of the political changes in the 1980s and 1990s covers the transition from political marginalization and a non-existent organization on a regional or ethnic level, to the emergence of the Hezb-e Wahdat as a major party.
in 1992 post-communist Kabul. Resistance in Hazarajat erupted soon after the 1978 coup, and a regional organization, Shura-e Ittefaq, was established early the following year, characterized as ‘(...) one of the best examples of successful popular resistance movements anywhere in the developing world.’ (p 179). Already in 1983, however, Iran-supported groups challenged the Shura throwing Hazarajat into an internal war which was to last until 1989, when the Hezb-e Wahdat was established, signalling an entirely new level of political organization among the Hazaras. This unity prevails, argues Mousavi, beyond the simultaneous loss of Western Kabul and the death of the party leader Abdul Ali Mazari in March 1995, when Taliban first attempted to enter Kabul. Mousavi now see a strongly assertive Hazara population that has a place, reflected not only in politics and armed struggle, but also in an engagement in social and economic developments leading to community based construction and education projects on an unprecedented scale.

Mousavi has written a book which is more descriptive than analytical. However, one cannot but agree with the author that the sheer task of outlining the country’s history from the viewpoint of the Hazaras represents a major challenge. One of the major strengths of the book is the impressive collection of texts in Farsi (and some in Arabic) on which the author bases his text. To some degree, this has allowed him to compensate for the immense data problems that confront an attempt to document crucial events such as the Hazara uprisings (1888 to 1893) against King Abdur Rahman. Yet, like others who have dealt with the political history of the Hazaras in the last century, Mousavi’s account is weakest for the period from 1900 up to the 1960s. For the war-time period, much of Mousavi’s material stems from his own observations and interviews, and much of it is new. Lacking, though, is a clear positioning in relation to existing Western language analyses of war-time Hazara politics by authors such as Olivier Roy, Rolf Bindemann, and Jan-Heeren Grevemeyer.

Writing from the perspective of only one ethnic group may easily lead to essentialism. While we are all aware that the boundaries and the internal constitution of any ethnic group are a shifting and fluid phenomena, this is never easy to accommodate analytically. Mousavi points out how the social and political organization of the Hazaras was demolished during the wars of late last century, seriously reducing, until recently, the capacity to build larger-scale political organization. He also points out the political and military conflicts among the Hazaras throughout the period of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, essentialism is persistent. One crucial issue, which is barely touched upon by Mousavi, is that whereas most of Afghanistan’s Hazaras are Shi’ia, it is not the case that all Hazaras are Shi’ia, nor is it the case that all Shi’ia are Hazara. Indeed, one of the central questions of conflict involving the Hazaras from the onset of war up to the present has been the tension between a religiously based, Shi’ia Islamist definition of politics in an Iranian vein, and an ethnically based Hazara definition of a more independent stature. This tension continues up to the present, as seen in the struggle between the Khalili and Akbari factions of Hezb-e Wahdat. Mousavi is mute regarding the ongoing
battle; he neglects the inherent tension between Shi‘ism and Hazara ethnicism, hence Hazara political unity is seriously overstated.

The major strength of the book lies in the author’s strong identification with the fate of Afghanistan’s Hazara, as evidenced through the vivid accounts of oppression and resistance. Yet, such identification can easily become a weakness, as it does when the author presents a picture of a consistent policy of Pashtun oppression. In fact, the Pashtunization policy has been fraught with internal differences throughout this century. For example, there were major differences between the views of King Zahir Shah and President Daud regarding promotion of the Pashtunistan issue, as well as to the representation of minorities in the main decision-making bodies. These differences were an influencing factor, as they were part of the very structure-of-opportunities within which Hazara politicians acted. For example, we are told that the Hazaras ‘(...) did manage during the 1960s, to elect a handful of parliamentary representatives, and to hold two government ministerial posts’ (p 172–173). This statement makes sense only in its broader context, but we are not told that these positions were earmarked within an informal, zero-publicity, quota system.

In his introduction, Mousavi argues that this is ‘(...) the first serious study on the Hazaras of Afghanistan (...)’ which ‘(...) introduces a new approach to Afghanistan studies in general’ (p xiv). Unfortunately, the book lacks both the empirical solidity as well as the analytical distinction required to merit a reorientation of Afghanistan scholarship. Yet, Mousavi has given us the only up-to-date comprehensive account of Afghanistan’s Hazaras in a Western language, a vivid account based on a variety of sources. As such, it is a significant contribution in compensating a deficiency in the existent literature on Afghanistan. Let us also hope that it inspires others to delve more deeply into the complexities and undocumented aspects of Hazara political history.

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