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By es NARA Date 10-19-01

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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ANALYSIS BRANCH August 1, 1970

SUBJECT : King Zaher's Experiment: Some End-of-Tour Observations

REF :

SUMMARY

The "experiment in democracy" launched seven years ago is the supreme expression of King Mohammed Zaher and will doubtless be remembered as his contribution to Afghan political and social development. Zaher is no visionary, but his knowledge of his country and countrymen is vast and his grasp on the levers of political power firm. He is obviously uncomfortable with the ideals of the experiment and its architects and has been reluctant to see some of the institutions it envisages develop. At the same time, he recognized from the start that the new system would serve his own political interests by allowing him to be its master, and today he calls the tune while leaving everyday decisions to the Government. That he is reluctant and unsure when and how to intervene in the decision-making process and that his attention focused more on political maneuvering than on political development are the foremost obstacles to the experiment's putting down roots.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that, because the experiment is for the moment hamstrung by royal indecision and caution, the situation is stagnant. Afghanistan's development has been proceeding, albeit in fits and starts, over the past ninety years, and this process will continue. The gradual change in the national attitude towards education and towards religious fanaticism are good examples of this development. Moreover, the three Prime Ministers who have served since 1963 have been able to affect the course of events considerably, and if a man with the right personality and abilities were found for the job,

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the development of the new system would come to complement the underlying changes more than it does today. In short, the experiment, the Dari word for which is rendered by the King as "experience," is one of many experiences the country has had, and will continue to have, as it moves towards modernity.

* * * * *

The reporting officer arrived in Afghanistan with the "experiment in democracy" exactly four years old and so has been present for something close to half the life of the undertaking. Many of the following end-of-tour observations have been made in other reports submitted by the Embassy, and the entire report should not be regarded as a new thesis on the state of Afghan political development. The effort here is simply to state, in very general terms, the opinion of one observer on the present state of political development in Afghanistan and on the significance of the democratic experiment to this development.

Any consideration of Afghan politics and the experiment must be conducted with the personality and political posture of Mohammad Zaher Shah at center stage. Indeed, the experiment is the ultimate expression of the complex personality of the monarch who has reigned continuously for longer than any of his peers throughout the world. History will almost certainly count the course adopted in 1963 as King Zaher's major claim to a place in its annals.

The adjectives--indirect, cautious, furtive, clever, et al--which come to mind when one thinks of the King well represent the difficulty which observers here, both Afghan and foreign, face in trying to assess both the man and his creature. He has written no memoirs or autobiography, his public pronouncements are infrequent and generally anodyne, and in his contacts with a wide cross section of Afghan society, he prefers to listen rather than to declaim, a preference which frequently leads to confusion about his views. When he takes a decision, his wishes are made known and carried out quietly and without fanfare.

Characteristics of the King which stand out are his pragmatism, caution, and profound understanding of the sources of political power in Afghanistan. Clearly, he is no visionary with a sense of mission and direction comparable to that of his neighbor to the west, and is uncomfortable with great concepts and their conceivers. This feeling, together with a caution bred of a knowledge of Afghan history, may account for the Constitution's failure to permit the development of certain democratic institutions in the absence of implementing legislation, such as the laws on political parties, provincial councils, demonstrations, and the independent judiciary. It is certainly responsible for the failure of such legislation to come into force. Lastly, his intimate knowledge of the political ropes has meant that, in an often troubled period, potentially dangerous political problems--notably clerical unrest, inter-tribal frictions and rumblings from the North--have been handled effectively.

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The pros and cons of Zaher's experiment as it has evolved since 1963 have been the subject of much discussion and will only be touched upon lightly here. Essentially, the King has created a system which is responsible and responsive to him, a situation which probably works to the national advantage in terms of stability. In 1963, with two of his uncles dead and a third aging fast, the King saw a unique opportunity to assert himself over Sardar Daud and the rest of the Royal Family and at the same time was aware that the time had come for some sharing of political power.

These objectives were accomplished, but, partly because of the King's fear of moving too fast, the system has developed very slowly and at an undoubted cost to the economic development programs. The executive branch of government has not adjusted easily to the task of dealing with a non-rubber stamp Parliament, and in any case has made little progress in setting its own house in order. Indeed, the government has used potential problems in Parliament as an excuse for inaction.

For its part, the Parliament is almost totally lacking in political organization, and therefore has no group or groups with which the Government can deal in pushing for passage of its legislative program. Some groupings, both pro- and anti-government, have emerged, but these are very small and entirely incapable of enforcing discipline over a period of time. Thus, in the absence of political pressure for passing laws, the deputies for the most part have proclaimed themselves "independent" and have concentrated on defending their own, and the public, interest against nefarious officialdom.

Finally, the King is essentially content with a system in which he is the lynchpin and he is supremely skilled at maneuvering within it to preserve his own position. However, during a period in which this system must look to him for leadership, he is unsure as to when and how to intervene. This indecision has been the foremost obstacle to economic modernization and indeed, to the development of the sort of system of government envisaged by the Constitution.

This situation, when viewed at close range, appears static, and many observers are pessimistic about the future. The increasingly bankrupt leadership of Prime Minister Etemadi increases the gloom. Unless the King changes his approach--an unlikely eventuality--there is a general feeling that things will continue more or less as they are.

In the long run, however, the situation is more complex. In the first place, during the seven years' of the experiment, Afghans have become acutely conscious, and indeed jealous, of the personal freedoms guaranteed them under the 1964 Constitution. This consciousness has manifested itself in hitherto undreamed-of criticism of the government by members of parliament, students, and the free press. This criticism has done much to shape the course of events since 1963. Many educated Afghans carry the Constitution in their pockets and quote from it

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extensively, and it is clear that, however much they may criticize the experiment as a royally-inspired charade, they have developed some faith in the document as a guardian of their rights.

The relatively brief period of the experiment has also witnessed considerable swinging of the pendulum if not sustained political development. The period from May 1963 until October 1965, when Dr. Mohammad Yusuf was Prime Minister, was the heyday of the experiment when the men who wrote, and deeply believed in, the new Constitution were running the country. By their count, the Constitution, in order to come fully in force, required some thirty-two pieces of implementing legislation, and many of these statutes were put into effect during this period. In October 1965, the Government overreacted to student demonstrations, perhaps because such protest was so unfamiliar a phenomenon in Afghanistan, and after several days of crisis, resigned.

The ensuing four and a half years has seen two other men in the job, both as different from their predecessors, the "constitutionalists," as from each other. Although a member of the Yusuf Cabinet, Prime Minister Maiwandwal was neither particularly sympathetic to the constitutionalists as men nor dedicated to their program. Unlike his successor, however, he did have a long-standing commitment to democratization in Afghanistan and saw the building of a political organization as the best way both of achieving this end and of enhancing his own political strength. Clearly, the proposition of a Prime Minister with an independent base of political power was one which the King found dubious, and Maiwandwal's organizational efforts were so ham-handed as to alienate most of those he was trying to recruit. Thus, there was a sigh of relief in Kabul when Maiwandwal's illness forced his resignation, and this was probably echoed in the Palace.

Mr. Etemadi is the only one of the three experiment-era Prime Ministers lacking a strong proclivity for democracy. The only member of the 1964 Loye Jirga to vote against exclusion of the Royal Family from high office, Etemadi was no advocate of sweeping change and profoundly distrusted Maiwandwal's approach to politics. The central aim of the first Etemadi Government was to reduce the political tensions created in the preceding two years and to allow the Parliament, which Maiwandwal, through judicious use of money and political pressure, had held in check, a greater freedom of action. Thus, it was under a conservative that a major democratic institution came into its own, and, not surprisingly, the Government, with no background in parliamentary management, is now finding the task of pushing ahead with a legislative program extremely difficult.

Thus, while certainly not a continuum of progress, the experiment period has been one of considerable change, and further evolution may be expected in the future. Moreover, the system could probably be made to work more efficiently in terms of economic and political development were a Prime Minister with the necessary qualifications and abilities to appear on the scene. Such a man would naturally

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need to enjoy the total confidence of the King and at the same time have a definite idea of what he should, and, within the loose parameters imposed by the King, could do to speed the process of development. These are obviously high standards, and there are no men presently on the scene who would appear to meet them. Still, the criteria are not impossibly difficult, and it might even be that such figures as ex-Planning Minister Hamed and Mohammad Musa Shafiq Kamawi, Afghan Ambassador in Cairo, could eventually fill the bill.

In the last analysis, the experiment should probably not be viewed as a watershed in Afghan history but as one step in a much longer process of modernization. At the risk of oversimplifying, it may be said that the desirability of making Afghanistan a modern state began to be sensed during the reign of the Amir Abdul Rahman and the effort to achieve this end has continued, at various paces and in various ways, until the present time. Naturally, the time of King Amanullah is one in which progressive goals and programs were loudly proclaimed, but the Yahya Khel have also moved, if with more circumspection, to achieve more or less the same ends.

Two areas in which there has been a steady evolution of attitude are education and religion. In the space of forty years, Afghans in most parts of the country have moved from a posture of active hostility to the government schools to insistence on having as many such schools as possible in all parts of the nation. The demand for education and its repercussions are among the most pressing problems with which the government is now faced.

Similarly, the hyper-conservative religious position, while still very much a force to be reckoned with, has been eroded steadily since 1929 when it was instrumental in the downfall of Amanullah. Thirty years later, the army violently suppressed a mullah-led riot in Kandahar against the unveiling of women, but the incident can by no means have been said to have rocked the throne. Finally, the mullahs' demonstrations of the past spring, although widespread and occasionally violent, did not generate widespread support throughout the country and served as proof that unswerving devotion on the part of large segments of the population to reactionary religious causes was no longer a given in Afghanistan.

In sum, the experiment has served the interests of King Zahir well and is a part, but not the be all and end all, of Afghanistan's unsteady drive towards modernization. In discussing his creation with foreigners in French, the King renders the Dari phrase tajroba dar democracy as "experience," rather than "experiment, in democracy." The experience which the country began to undergo in 1963 was one of many which it has had, and will continue to have as it moves further into the modern world.

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