

Chapter 1

Afghanistan's Internal Situation: Background of Taliban's Emergence

1.1 *Brief History before Taliban's Emergence*

Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest countries (see Reference Material 1). A least less developed country, Afghanistan's per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) was just an estimated \$276 as of 1979, and kept shrinking since then because of the continuing civil war (for example, the per-capita GDP in 1985 was \$248). The average national literacy rate was only 10% (1979).

In 1973, former Prime Minister and then the military commander Sardar Mohammad Daoud, a cousin of King Zaher (Zahir) Shah, seized power in a coup, which he called the "Republican Revolution," riding the tide of democratization that was then sweeping the world. This happened when King Zaher was on a visit to Italy. He thus found refuge there. In 1978, a group of military officers revolted against Daoud and transferred the political power into the hands of socialists. This came to be known as the "Saur (April) Revolution."

The new government tried to follow an exceedingly dogmatic communist policy line, and was not necessarily submissive to the Soviet Union. Fearful of Afghanistan's political instability spreading to Central Asia, its "soft belly," the then Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev decided on a military invasion of Afghanistan, which took place in December 1979, to establish a pro-Moscow government in Kabul. Soon afterwards, however, a civil war erupted between the Soviet Union - Afghan Government coalition forces and anti-communist guerrillas.¹ The civil war killed 1.5 million people by early 1989, and Afghan refugees who fled into neighboring Pakistan and Iran reached 5.4 million.² The area along the Afghan-Pakistani border is called the Pashtun (Pakhtun) Belt (see Reference Material 2) because the geographic belt is inhabited by the Pashtun ethnic group. The Pashtuns live on both sides of the border. Pashtuns who found refuge with relatives or in refugee camps in Pakistan studied at local madrassahs (madrassah is an Arabian word for a religious school at a mosque), and also acquired fighting skills to fight in the "holy war" (jihad) against the coalition forces of the Soviet Union and

the Afghan government. Those mujahideen³ won on the strength of U.S. military and economic assistance and cooperation from the Pakistani government and military also helped. After losing the Afghan war that lasted nine years and two months, Soviet troops finally withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989.

Even after the Soviet pullout, the pro-Moscow government of President Muhammad Najibullah stayed in power. But the seven groups of mujahideen groups based in Pakistan entered the Afghan capital of Kabul in 1992 to establish a new government. But it was not long before the power struggle intensified between the president and the prime minister and another civil war began.

The civil war raged amid intensified rivalry among many warlords. Former mujahideen turned into gangs of bandits to fund war efforts, and the fighting by former mujahideen could not be characterized as a "holy war." The general public no longer recognized them as mujahideen, or holy warriors. That was when the Taliban⁴ emerged as saviors of the country and were enthusiastically welcomed by the people in general, who had grown sick of the continuing civil war. The Taliban did not arrive as "terrorists." They rapidly expanded their influence with the support from the Pakistani government and military.

1.2 *Taliban's Reign*

The Taliban was reportedly created as an organization of just several people in Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. Its founder Mullah Muhammad Omar⁵ is known as a strict Islam fundamentalist.

The Taliban declared that their objective was to establish an Islamic divine state to bring peace and security to Afghanistan, and its supreme leader Mullah Omar assumed the post of Amir ul Muminin or the commander of the faithful. Under Mullah Omar's leadership the Taliban militia launched another "holy war" to disarm and disband the group of so-called mujahideen. They captured Kabul in September 1996, and upon entering the capital, declared the establishment of the Islamic State and

an interim government. The Taliban kept expanding areas of their control, and by May 1997 ruled 90% of the entire country.

It soon became clear that the Taliban regime's policy was very strict. It conquered warlords in various regions of the country and prohibited their narcotics trading, executing violators in public. Because of the Taliban's rigid security policy, public peace and order gradually returned to areas under their control.

The Taliban regime followed the fundamental policy of strictly implementing the Sharia (Islamic law) in order to establish an "Islamic divine state," but details of specific policy measures are not immediately known. As the Taliban used their military force to have the Afghan people abide by the Sharia, various press reports began to emerge saying the people were frightened of their reign of terror. The steps taken by the Taliban regime include the following.

The Ministry of Religion's Bureau for Encouraging Virtue and Banning Evil Acts (the so-called "religion police") prohibited music, singing and dancing, photography, smoking, long hair for men, school attendance by girls, and out-of-home work (including medical institutions) by women, in principle. Offenders were subjected to harsh punishment, including flogging in public. The Afghan people, as well as the entire world, were shocked and shivered when the Taliban in September 1996 hanged former pro-Moscow President Najibullah and his brother in public and left the bodies dangling for a while.

The Taliban regime's extremely strict policies frightened the Afghan people and made people the world over feel uneasy. The Taliban's "Islam" policy spawned controversy in other Islamic countries, and

its unique interpretation of Islam invited strong condemnation.

How the Taliban regime performed in economic management is not clear, but their sources of funds included economic assistance from friendly foreign governments, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Taliban also reportedly collected something like "opium cultivation tax" from farmers. According to a survey by the U.N. International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) and others, the Taliban had 96% of opium growing areas in Afghanistan under their control. The spirit of "social reform" the Taliban had espoused in its nascent years appears to have given way to the realities of running the "government."

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Notes:

1. The author (FUKAMACHI) defines the civil war between the Moscow-backed socialist government of Afghanistan and anti-communist guerrillas as the "first civil war" and the infighting among the former guerrilla factions the "second civil war" (see FUKAMACHI's piece in *Ajia Tendo (Asian Trends)* No. 69). It seems appropriate to term the Afghan fighting after the emergence of the Taliban at the end of October 1994 the "third civil war."
2. Ahmed Rashid, "Bin Laden and the Taliban: 'Endless War'" (translated into Japanese), *Gendai*, November 2001 Issue, p. 28.
3. Mujahideen is the plural form of Mujahid (holy warrior) in Arabic.
4. The Taliban is the Persian plural form of the Arabic word "talib" (meaning a religious student).
5. Or Umar.