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# RESEARCH STUDY

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## PAKISTAN: PATHANS AND POLITICS

Ethnic and tribal identity is a substantial determinant of political loyalty in Pakistan. The revival of civilian politics in the country following the disastrous events of 1971 has exposed the deep divisions between the constituent peoples of what was West Pakistan. We examine below the political role of the Pathans of Pakistan's frontier provinces, as one of the determinants of whether or not Pakistan is likely to suffer further dismemberment.

### ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of war and the loss of Bangladesh, the cohesion of the disparate peoples who make up Pakistan is open to question. President Z. A. Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) controls a national majority but is not a national party, having almost no strength in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan Province. The separateness of the Pathans and Baluchis of these provinces underlines the absence of a genuine Pakistani national identity. The Pathans, in particular, may provide the key to whether the present Pakistan is likely to disintegrate or will be able to survive as a unified state.

There are probably about eight million Pathans among Pakistan's total population of 60 million. Like their Pushtu-speaking cousins

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in Afghanistan, the Pathans traditionally were regarded as robust and unruly mountain warriors and a menace to their lowland neighbors. Parts of the Pathan territory remain formally-designated Tribal Areas, where Pathans are governed largely by their own traditional leaders and tribal law with some influence by Pakistani Political Agents. Most Pathans, however, now live under the ordinary laws of Pakistan in the remainder of the NWFP and elsewhere in the country. These Pathans cling strongly to their tribal identities and to some extent to the tribal code of behavior (the "pushtunwali"), but their style of life inevitably has changed from the stereotyped "free" life of the mountains.

While never a united people in most respects, the Pathans give their primary loyalties in national politics to leaders who represent Pathan interests against those of the more numerous Punjabis and Sindhis who dominate Pakistani politics. Khan Abdul Wali Khan, son of the famous Pathan leader Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, enjoys the widest support among both tribal and settled Pathans at the present time. As leader of the National Awami Party (NAP), Wali Khan has established an alliance of autonomy-minded Pathans and Baluchis which controls a majority in the provincial assemblies of both the NWFP and Baluchistan. In addition, his party is in a strong position to become the rallying point for other left-of-center opposition groups seeking an alternative to Bhutto's ruling

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PPP. These factors would indicate that the Pathans (or at least Wali Khan) have more to gain from playing a role in Pakistan's internal politics than they would have from pursuing separatist aims.

Any assessment of Pathan aims in Pakistan is complicated, however, by the fact that they do have ties with their fellow-tribesmen in Afghanistan. Pushtuns\* make up nearly half of the population of Afghanistan. Many Afghan Pushtuns favor the creation of an independent "Pushtunistan" (comprising the Pakistani provinces of Baluchistan and the NWFP) or the incorporation of the Pathan areas into Afghanistan. These views are not shared by the King of Afghanistan, himself a Pushtun. King Zahir must pay lip-service to the demands of his Afghan tribesmen, but he clearly wants to avoid a recurrence of the strained relations with Pakistan caused in the past by the "Pushtunistan" issue. Internal conditions in Afghanistan make it unlikely that the King will ever see much merit in changing his position, though Afghanistan could well be pushed into asserting claims to the Pathan territory if Pakistan were to show definite signs of disintegration. Short of that, the King is likely to limit Afghan activities to encouragement of Pathan

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\* "Pathans" and "Pushtuns" are the same people; the different names are used here merely to distinguish those in Pakistan from those in Afghanistan.

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autonomy and power within Pakistan. The strength of the NAP's position among Pakistan's Pathans will probably force the Afghans to support Wali Khan as the most likely vehicle to meet Afghanistan's needs in this situation, though they will do so with some reluctance.

Within Pakistan, responsible Pathan leaders are unlikely to see much merit in exchanging the presently-known advantages of the Pakistani connection for the uncertain benefits of independence or association with Afghanistan. Wali Khan in particular has little sympathy for separatism, but may use the "Pushtunistan" issue to achieve autonomy for the Pathans within Pakistan.

Pathan separatism, as an issue in Pakistan's politics, will probably subside in proportion to the rise of Wali Khan's fortunes in the Pakistan National Assembly. Should the NWFP ever suffer the degree of repression experienced in Bangladesh, or should the Pathans come to believe that the new regime in Pakistan is a threat to their ethnic identity, the secessionist impulse is likely to reappear. The current trend appears to run in the opposite direction. Wali Khan and the other frontier leaders are giving parliamentary processes a try. Goodwill and some mutual trust will be needed on both sides, but as long as compromise solutions are possible, it is unlikely that the leaders of the frontier provinces will embark on a course that could cause the disintegration of Pakistan and would

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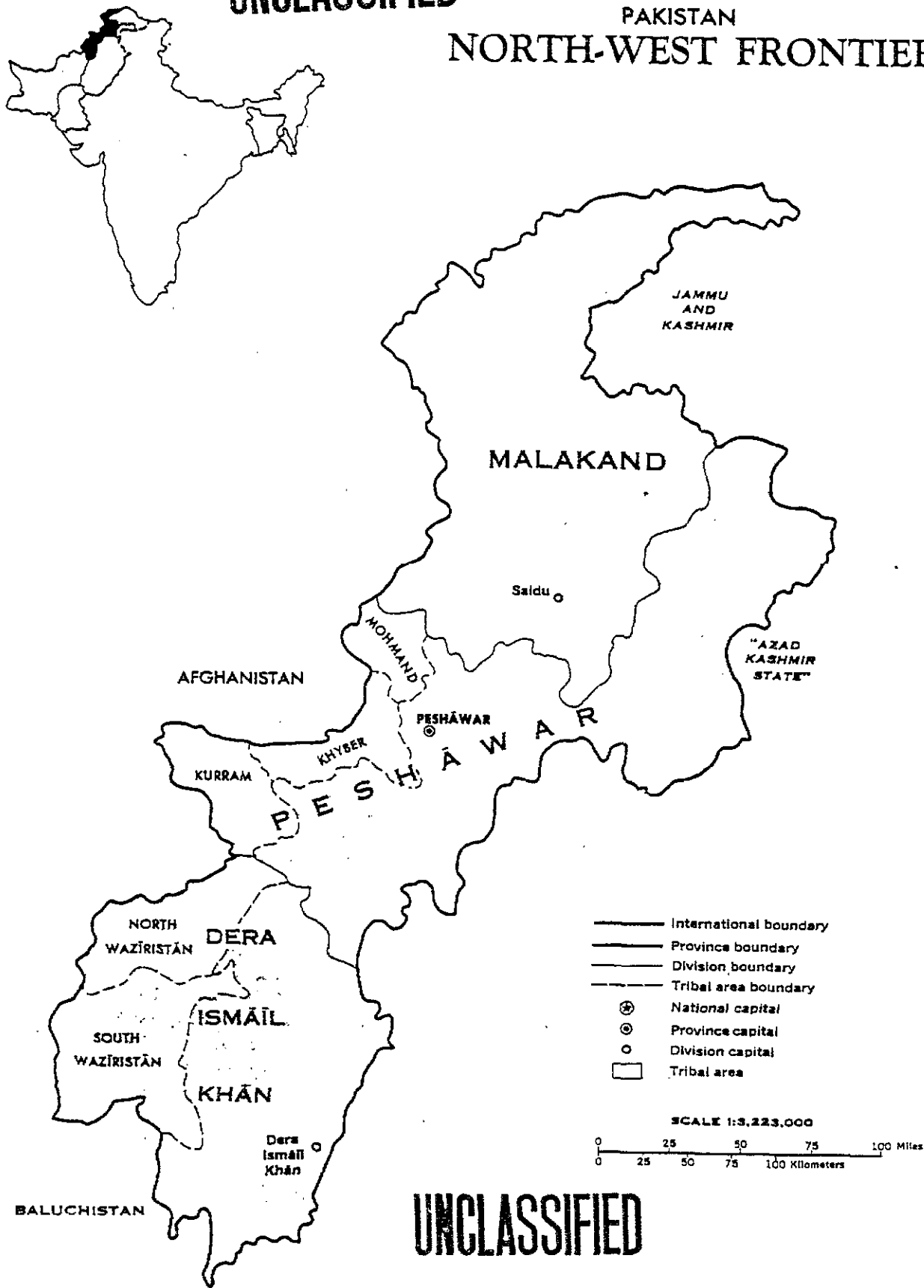
be fraught with danger for all concerned.

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The year 1971 saw the removal of the East Wing-West Wing issue from Pakistani politics, the end of military rule in what remains of Pakistan, and, probably, an end to Pakistan's desire to play the role of a counterweight to India in the subcontinent. As a result of the cataclysmic events of 1971 the internal contradictions that have bedevilled Pakistan since its formation in 1947 stand out in sharper relief than ever before. The Islamic state of Pakistan originated in the desire of the Indian Muslims to have their own state, free of Hindu domination. Its basis was thus largely religious rather than ethnic or geographic. Nevertheless, Islam and fear of India held East and West Pakistan together for twenty-four years, and it took the shock of military repression on top of a history of neglect by the central government for the East Bengalis to abandon their ties with their coreligionists in the West.

The cohesion of the rest of the disparate peoples who make up Pakistan is open to question, especially in light of the Bangladesh experience. Autonomist and even separatist movements, held in check earlier by the non-party "national regime" of the Pakistani generals, are once more evident. It remains to be seen whether centripetal forces can be strengthened to weld Pakistan together into a state that can in fact embody the dream of subcontinental Islamic unity that led to the creation of "Pakistan." Some critics have always maintained that the country was no more than a haphazard collection of the peripheral peoples of British India, united only by inertia, fear of India, and an army.

Z.A. Bhutto's accession to power on the collapse of the military regime can be seen as adding even more weight to this charge. Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) won a substantial majority of West Pakistani votes in the December 1970 elections, but is not a truly national party. The PPP is the largest mass-based party which crosses provincial boundaries in Pakistan, but it does so only from Punjab into Sind. These two provinces hold 90% of the population of the country, but the remaining two provinces, the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan, are both very large areas and are of substantial importance to Pakistan strategically and politically. The PPP's failure to capture the votes of the Pathans and Baluchis who inhabit these provinces demonstrates that the traditional ethnic divisions have not been bridged over.

The Pathans, in particular, may provide the key to whether Pakistan will suffer further dismemberment or will be able to survive as a unified state. The Pathans have strong ties with their kinsmen across the border in Afghanistan, and have in the past exhibited some separatist tendencies. Nevertheless, they too have much invested in the idea of a Muslim state of Pakistan. Bangladesh has proved that Islam is not enough. The question now is whether or not there are enough other benefits to being part of Pakistan to keep the Pathans in the fold.

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## The Pathans - Romantic Image vs. Current Realities

According to the best estimate, there are probably about eight million Pathans\* in Pakistan; a more definite number is difficult to determine. Census figures exist which claim to fix the total more precisely; on close scrutiny, however, they prove to be unreliable. Whatever the exact number may be, the key fact is the small size of the Pathan community when compared with Pakistan's total population of about 60 million.

Together with their Pushtu-speaking cousins in Afghanistan, the Pathans are descendents of Aryan invaders from Central Asia. They have inhabited the mountains east of the Indus River for several thousand years. The Pathans, who have always been viewed with uneasiness by the rulers of the Indian plains, have a tradition of fierce independence and a habit of looking upon neighboring lowlanders as sheep to be shorn by periodic raids. The most dramatic example in recent times of their predatory traits occurred in 1947, when a tribal war party of about 50,000 Pathans rampaged into the Vale of Kashmir during the disorders of Partition; some observers think they could have held Srinagar against the Indians if they had not been more occupied with plunder.

During the 20th century, however, the image of the Pathan tribes as robust, undisciplined mountain warriors and raiders has become blurred. Pacification and settlement schemes pursued by both British and Pakistani administrators before and after 1947 have succeeded, at least partially, in reducing the boisterous Northwest Frontier of Kipling's day to an administrative combination of Settled Areas and Tribal Areas (see map, opposite).

Probably as many as two million Pathans live in the Tribal Areas of the NWFP and Baluchistan province to the south. They fall into two basic categories. Those living in the more accessible areas closest to the Settled Areas are governed internally by their own tribal laws, but are subject to some extent to control by the political agents of the central

\* "Pathan" is a British term taken from Hindi. Depending on dialect, the local terms are variously Pakhto, Pashto, Pushtu, Pushto, or Pukhto for the language and Pakhtoon, Pashtoon, Pushtun, Pushtoon, or Pukhtun for the people. While some Pushtu-speakers consider "Pathan" derogatory, it is at least familiar and convenient, since it distinguishes between the Pathans of Pakistan and the Pushtuns of Afghanistan. They all speak the same language with regional variations.



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government who pay subsidies to tribal leaders (maliks) and can call in armed force if public security is threatened. Through their tribal councils (jirgas), the tribal Pathans of the NWFP indirectly elect seven "independent" members of the Pakistan National Assembly. These seven MNA's are normally regarded as safe government supporters, as the subsidies paid to their maliks outweigh most other loyalties.

In the more remote parts of the mountainous Tribal Areas, there is little pretense of government control of the Pathans. Though not subject to outside control, these tribesmen are governed by an elaborate Pushtun tribal code of great complexity (the "pushtunwali" - "the way of the Pushtuns").

Both categories of Tribal Area Pathans are seasonally nomadic, moving freely between Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is some evidence that in recent years some mountain tribes are finding their freedom less satisfying when measured against the relatively greater material advantages enjoyed by their settled kin. At their present state of development, however, their political loyalties do not appear to go much beyond the tribal level. The maliks command quasi-feudal ties of personal allegiance from individual tribesmen or families of tribesmen.

Nearly 5 million Pathans live in the Settled Areas of the NWFP. Pathans have been filtering down out of the mountains for generations. Many have long been sedentary agriculturists or stock-raisers, while a substantial number are town-dwellers. Pathans predominate in the largest city in the NWFP, Peshawar (pop. about 275,000). In many cases, Pathans have settled outside the NWFP altogether. They are strongly represented in Quetta (pop. about 125,000), close to the NWFP in neighboring Baluchistan. The city of Karachi, in Sind, is believed to have the largest concentration of Pathans of any city in Pakistan, but their number is not known with any exactitude. As a result, while Pathans in the settled districts and urban areas cling strongly to their tribal identities and, to a lesser extent, the "pushtunwali," their style of life inevitably has been altered from the stereotyped "free" life of the mountains.

#### Wali Khan: Party or Pathan Leader?

The Pathans have never been a united people. While the outsider may discern a broad cultural similarity uniting the linguistic and ethnic community labeled "Pathan," those living within that system are too conscious of tribal identities to permit generalizations about their cultural patterns to go unchallenged. The maximum they will agree on is that they are all Muslims, and that there exists in the "pushtunwali" a code of social and moral behavior recognized to some degree by all Pushtuns. Nevertheless, most Pathans in Pakistan draw a distinction between themselves and other

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groups such as the Punjabis, Sindhis, or Baluchis. They may admire, or on occasion support, individual national leaders who have some claim to being Pathans (Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan) even though they gained national prominence by advancement in non-tribal avocations like the army, but they reserve their primary loyalties in national politics for leaders who represent Pathan interests against other ethnic groups within the state.

The current political leader with the clearest claim to this title and the widest support among both traditionalist tribal, and politically-active settled, Pathans is Khan Abdul Wali Khan. Wali Khan, now 55, is the second son of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the octogenarian "Frontier Gandhi" and Red Shirt leader now in exile in Afghanistan.

In his long career, Ghaffar Khan is credited with having "awakened the Pathans to the importance of politics and social progress." His political activity in the NWFP dates from before World War I, and includes the formation in 1929 of a tightly organized Pathan political movement, the Khudai Khidmatgar or "Servants of God," better known as the "Red Shirt" movement.\* Largely because of the success of this group in the NWFP, Ghaffar Khan was seen as a rabble-rousing menace by both the British and their Pakistani successors. However, he is still greatly admired by nearly all Pathans. He is also admired in India, both for his benign image of pacifistic social concern and for his longtime connection with the old Congress Party and Mahatma Gandhi. As an ally of the Congress Party, Ghaffar Khan opposed Partition; he developed the idea of "Pushtunistan" as a Pushtu-speaking homeland to counter the Muslim League's religion-based appeal in the 1947 Partition plebiscite.\*\* Pakistan's rulers have consistently asserted that Ghaffar Khan's goal was separatism and have characterized it as treason. They have generally described his vaguely socialist political and social notions as "communist"; however, this characterization may have been designed as much for consumption abroad as at home.

\* The name "Red Shirts" derived from Khudai Khidmatgar members' wearing distinctive shirts dyed with a locally-made natural reddish dye. Their enemies frequently suggested that this indicated an alliance with the Russian Communists.

\*\* The July 1947 Partition plebiscite in the NWFP gave the Pathans a choice between India and Pakistan, with no third option.

Ghaffar Khan participated in 1957 in the formation of the Pakistan National Awami Party (NAP). The NAP came to be identified primarily with the cause of provincial autonomy, and in West Pakistan with the demand for revival of the separate provinces of Sind, Punjab, NWFP, and Baluchistan which had been integrated into a single province ("One Unit") in 1955. The NAP has been highly factionalized since its beginning, but by 1971 two major factions had emerged, both more or less leftist. In East Pakistan, the NAP branch led by Maulana Bhashani is generally characterized as "pro-Peking." In West Pakistan, the major NAP faction (the NAP/R, for "Right" or "Revisionist") is regarded as moderate and dubbed "pro-Soviet." Under the leadership of Wali Khan, who was elected President of the NAP/R in 1968, that faction of the party became an alliance of autonomy-minded Pathans and Baluchis, with some support in Sind and Punjab from those who favored the party as a leftist alternative to Z.A. Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The abolition of One Unit and the elections of 1970 left the NAP/R in a position to control the NWFP and Baluchistan once provincial assemblies were reestablished, and with a strong base on which to form an opposition in the National Assembly once it was convened.

With the departure of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the NAP/R has become simply the NAP. The Bengali Awami League being removed from contention, Wali Khan has emerged as the principal opposition to what is now the majority party in Pakistan, the PPP of President Z.A. Bhutto. Wali heads what is at once the political instrument of an ethnic bloc of some importance, and the rallying point for a national opposition.

While the NAP is the primary vehicle for Pathan (and Baluchi) aspirations, it also includes radical ideologues whose interests run along other lines besides ethnic politics. The "progressive" stance of such members as the Baluchi Mir Ghaus Baksh Bizenjo and the refugee from India, M. H. Usmani, creates tensions with the more traditional Pathan maliks and Baluch sardars aligned with the NAP. In Sind province, and particularly Karachi, NAP party activists as a group tend to be ideologically-oriented radical socialists (many of them Partition-era refugees from India) who see the NAP as a vehicle for socialist policies without Z.A. Bhutto. Their alliance with the Pathans contains some elements of discordance in background and orientation, not only in relation to the party's membership in the two frontier provinces but also to Wali Khan himself. Wali is believed to be alert to infiltration of the NAP by outright communists (and is alleged to have purged known communists from party offices under his control in 1968), but the socialist spectrum in Pakistan covers a wide span of radicalism. Many of Wali's non-Pathan colleagues in the NAP probably range considerably to the left of his own rather tepid socialism. Personally, Wali is considerably less of a radical than Bhutto, but the net result of the tensions within the NAP presents a party image which is probably to the right of the PPP

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in program terms, but which appears to be accepted as probably to the left of the PPP in parliamentary terms since the PPP will now bear the responsibility and make the compromises inherent in the role of a ruling party. In any event, the NAP's ideological position is of less importance than the political requirements of putting together a united parliamentary Opposition to Z.A. Bhutto.

Wali's strongest support lies among the more sophisticated Pathans of the Settled Areas since he is a "city Pathan." It is unclear just how far his support goes among the tribal maliks, but as Ghaffar Khan's son he enjoys a certain measure of automatic eminence among both tribesmen and the ranks of the greater and lesser chieftains.

As an opposition leader on the national level, Wali's power base rests on the Pathan/Baluch alliance within the NAP, and on the external parliamentary alliance he has created in the NWFP and Baluchistan with the faction of the religious-oriented Jamiat'ul-Ulema-i-Islam led by Maulana Hazarvi [for brevity's sake the JUI(H)]. The expansion of this base in the National Assembly will require systematic exploitation of controversial issues as they arise. Since the NAP is the strongest opposition party, other opposition elements may well gravitate toward it as time goes by, at least in terms of parliamentary maneuvering.

#### Parliamentary Strength of the NAP

In the present National Assembly, based on the December 1970 elections, the NAP holds only six seats. However, as a result of subsequent changes in party alliances and defections from other parties, Wali Khan controls directly 15 seats against Bhutto's nominal PPP strength of 85 seats. It is noteworthy that when Wali staged a brief walkout in the opening session of the Assembly on April 14, he is reported to have taken 45 members with him. The total membership of the Assembly is 146.

In the Provincial Assemblies in the NWFP and Baluchistan, Wali's position is stronger. He controls 22 of 40 seats in the NWFP, and at least 11 of 20 in Baluchistan. The PPP holds no Provincial Assembly seats in Baluchistan, and controls only one in the NWFP. If the provinces retain some degree of autonomy under the new constitution, Wali will be firmly in control of two of the four provinces of the country and in a fair position

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to dominate the national opposition. Thus, the Pathans (or at least Wali Khan) may have more to gain from playing a role in Pakistani internal politics than they would have from pursuing separatist aims.

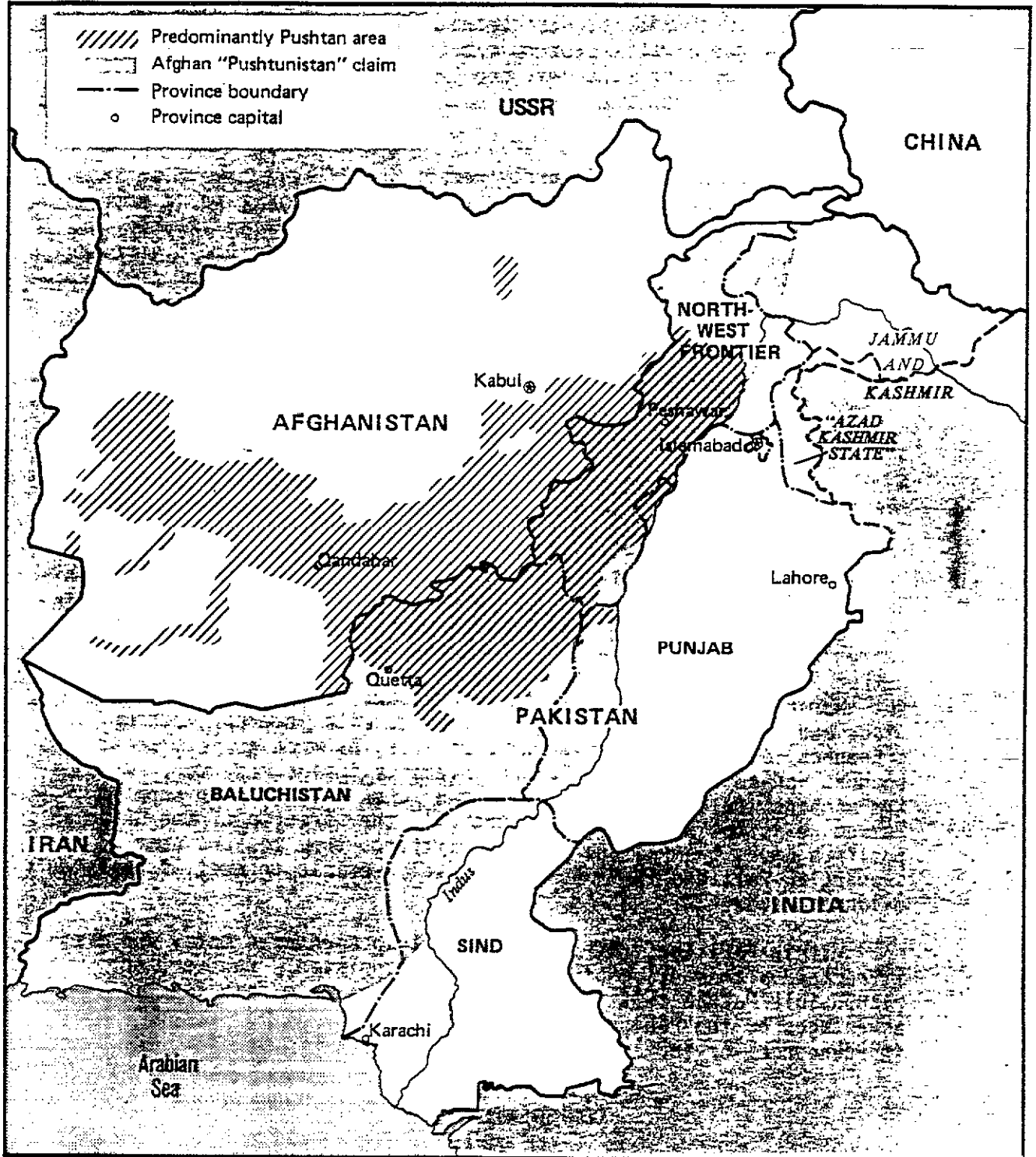
"Pushtunistan"

An independent "Pushtunistan" comprising the Northwest Frontier Province and most of Baluchistan (but not including Afghan Pushtun areas -- see map) is largely an Afghan conception. It grew out of Ghaffar Khan's 1947 proposal for a Pushtun province, but was expanded by the Afghans, who believed at that time that Afghan interests were being ignored in pre-Partition maneuverings on the subcontinent. Some Afghan Pushtuns would even like to incorporate this territory into Afghanistan. Pathan tribes from the NWFP played a leading role in placing the present dynasty on the Afghan throne in 1929. Nevertheless, the King of Afghanistan does not favor accession of Pakistan's Pathans to his country. In recent years, the King has attempted to give enough lip-service to the cause of Pushtunistan to avoid alienating the more militant of his fellow-Pushtuns in Afghanistan, but he clearly wants to avoid a recurrence of the strained relations with Pakistan over the Pushtunistan question that led to the temporary closing in 1961 of Afghanistan's frontier with Pakistan, making impossible transit across Pakistan to India and access to the port of Karachi. Afghanistan's official position calls for "self-determination" for the Pathans. Actually, the Afghan position seems to be that Afghanistan recognizes the legitimacy of the NWFP remaining part of Pakistan, but reserves an equally legitimate interest in the welfare of fellow-Pushtuns in the neighboring state.

This position is largely due to the King's belief that other aspects of Afghanistan's policy demand a higher priority. While the King is a Pushtun, over half of Afghanistan's population is not. The King's modernization program depends largely on a non-Pushtun elite. In addition, the Government of Afghanistan has only slightly more authority in its Pushtun border areas than the Government of Pakistan has in the Tribal Areas of the NWFP. When restive, Afghan Pushtuns regularly resort to arms, and on many occasions force had to be used to maintain the Government's authority. The King has stated repeatedly that he recognizes that the use of force to maintain order is potentially destructive to government planning and stability in Afghanistan. Incorporating an enlarged "Pushtunistan" into Afghanistan would intensify the problem of maintaining order in that area. Also, the task of the non-Pushtun elite would be made even more difficult if the ethnic balance of the country were upset.

By the same token the King is unlikely to favor an independent "Pushtunistan" on his border. Such a development would spur separatism among Afghanistan's border Pushtuns. Also, an independent Pushtunistan

# PUSHTUN TRIBAL AREAS



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would be weak, politically and economically, and what remained of Pakistan would be unstable if it did not disintegrate. This would create a difficult situation along Afghanistan's eastern frontier, possibly increase Afghanistan's already large internal problems, and endanger the transit routes to India and Indian Ocean ports on which Afghanistan depends for its export trade.

Finally, Afghanistan could hardly remain indifferent toward an independent Pushtun state and would probably feel compelled to give it economic and political assistance. Afghanistan could ill afford any sizeable financial outlay, and political support for a Pushtun state could involve the country more deeply in the conflicts of the subcontinent and great-power maneuverings than the King would desire.

However, it is likely the King will continue to encourage greater Pathan autonomy and power within Pakistan. The existence of a strong Pathan element in Pakistani politics could help to insure Afghanistan's transit rights to India and to the sea. The King's support for a strong Pathan position in the NWFP would raise his stock among Afghanistan's Pushtuns. Additionally, any brake on Z.A. Bhutto's power commends itself to the King, since he reportedly personally distrusts the Pakistani President.

Thus, unless the situation in Pakistan declines to the state of disintegration, when the Afghans might feel compelled to take action to secure control of at least the Pushtun and Baluchi areas between them and the sea, the Government of Afghanistan will probably feel compelled to walk a narrow tightrope. A stable, unified Pakistan is important to it both as a buffer against India and as a transit zone for Afghan exports and imports. But the stronger Pakistan is, the less importance it will attach to the views and needs of Afghanistan. This, combined with internal Pushtun pressures, dictates that Afghanistan do at least as much as is prudent to support non-secessionist ethnic Pathan movements inside Pakistan. While the Afghans would wish to find someone other than Wali Khan to support (since he is not amenable to Afghan control), the strength of the NAP's position among the Pathans will most likely force them to lend some support to Wali and the NAP as the most likely vehicle to meet Afghanistan's balanced needs.

Within Pakistan, there are some Pathan tribesmen even today who are attracted by the notion of an independent Pushtunistan. However, no responsible Pathan political leader sees any merit in exchanging the advantages of the Pakistani connection for a precarious and impoverished independence, or for association with a dominant Afghan regime.

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