

MODERNIZATION IN AFGHANISTAN: 1905-1973

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Abstract: Afghanistan underwent several periods of reform and modernization in the twentieth century starting in 1905. These reform periods were spearheaded by the state with the active encouragement and influence of enlightened religious figures, intellectuals, political activists, and writers. Both radical and incremental approaches were implemented in the process to modernize Afghanistan and bring it out of isolation. Progressive intellectuals with a religious affiliation who were connected to the country's first modern school, Habibiya High School, took the first steps in the modernization process by publishing a newspaper to enlighten the Afghan nation about the outside world. This led to the Afghan Constitutionalist movement that laid the foundation for the promulgation of Afghanistan's first constitution in 1923. In the reign of King Amanullah (1919-1929), a massive effort was undertaken to radically modernize Afghanistan. This endeavor ultimately failed but left a durable legacy for subsequent regimes that applied a more gradual approach to modernizing Afghanistan. Educational, economic, military, social, and legal reforms during King Amanullah's reign became the blueprint for successive Afghan governments. Slow but steady reform from 1929 onwards became a successful model for sustained modernization within the context of a conservative, Muslim society. Afghanistan's first experiment with democracy took place from 1949-1952 when liberal-minded reformers entered parliament and held the government accountable for the first time in Afghan history. This was followed by a more substantial transition to democracy from 1963-1973 known as the Decade of Democracy. By 1963, Afghanistan had a ruling elite that was forward-thinking, modernist, and secular with many of its members having obtained higher education in Western countries. It was these elites who spearheaded the political liberalization process during the Decade of Democracy. These different periods of reform and modernization in the history of Afghanistan demonstrate that religious radicalism and social and cultural backwardness are not endemic to the Afghan society. The invocation of Afghanistan's modernist past is especially relevant given the current situation when the Taliban regime is implementing extreme policies unprecedented in the history of Afghanistan. As the Taliban impose never-before-seen restrictions on women and the Afghan nation, the memory of pre-war Afghanistan can inspire

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hope for a more prosperous and progressive future and serve to prevent the normalization of draconian policies.

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