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362. Memorandum From Robert A. Flaten of the Office of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh Affairs to the Director of the Office of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh Affairs (Laingen)^{1 2}

Washington, May 31, 1972

SUBJECT:

Afghan Politics—The Creeping Crisis

Almost everyone agrees that there is some kind of political crisis in Afghanistan. To define that crisis is difficult and to predict where it may lead and when is impossible. Since much of the factual reporting on the situation has come in since I left Kabul, I will limit myself to the broad outlines of the situation as it was described to me by the Embassy and some of the Afghans I saw.

The symptom of the crisis is the lack of a quorum in Parliament. It was scheduled to assemble on March 13, although not expected to have a quorum until mid April. But by mid May when I left Kabul the Lower House had had only two quorums and it was quite clear that the lack of quorum had been caused by the government. (Samiuddin Zhouand, Deputy Minister of Justice, told me with a wink that “the official position of the government is that the lack of quorum has been caused by the Parliamentarians”.) The government has been especially careful to avoid a quorum for the Tuesday question sessions.

The issues which seem to have made the government unwilling to face a hostile Parliament, are serious and have followed a time sequence which has kept the RGA in a near crisis mood for almost six months without let up. First came the student strike in November, next the Indo-Pak War in December which revived old Pushtunistan feelings, then labor troubles in April, perhaps largely caused by the continuing high price of wheat, and finally in April and early May urgent and critical reports from the provinces that the drought relief measures of last fall had not been as successful as hoped.

The government failed to solve the university strike during the winter recess of the Parliament (December 12 through March 13) and there is some indication that the King’s decision to overrule his government and capitulate to the students was based on Parliamentary pressures or at least a wish to appease Parliamentarians. On [\[Page 2\]](#) Pushtunistan the King had carefully avoided a confrontation with the Pushtun dominated Parliament (60%) in December, but when the new session began in March Pushtunistan was still an emotional issue, as Wali Khan and President Bhutto made and broke agreements in their delicate dance toward the recent formation of the NAP/JUI government in the NWFP. But the food crisis seems to have been the real clincher for which neither the King nor his government were prepared. As the snows began to melt reliable reports began to reach Kabul that people had gone hungry over the winter, some had starved, and they were blaming the government, or at least their members of Parliament were blaming the government, for their distress.

It is hard to weigh the relative importance of these factors, but in combination they have clearly been enough to paralyze the government and probably to frighten the King. With long discussions on Pushtunistan and Baluchistan, Karzai of the Foreign Ministry was apparently trying to convince me that the Pushtun issue was the most important problem facing the RGA. (See separate memo on Pushtunistan.)

Aside from the lack of a quorum in Parliament the only measurable effect of the crisis is a reduction in construction and new investment, and this, of course, is not really measurable in Afghanistan where there are no statistics. But the mortgage bank has stopped making new loans because of the political situation and some prospective industrialists appear to have shelved their projects or delayed them because of the uncertainties.

But neither the issues nor the symptoms tell the full story. The issues will soon be over. The university strike has been settled, Wali Khan has his government in the NWFP with good prospects of continuing, and by mid June or early July the food crisis will have been overcome by the new harvest. If the symptom of the sickness is a lack of quorum then presumably the establishment of a quorum on a regular basis would symbolize the end of the crisis. The crisis could end this way, but while this may save the Zahir government, it probably will not stop the talk of crisis. When Afghans spoke of their crisis they spoke of a lack of leadership, the need for political parties, corruption and the disruptiveness of Parliament in addition to the immediate causes listed above.

The Prime Minister went on record the other day in favor of the political parties bill in an interview with [\[Page 3\]](#) Caravan, but there is no indication that the King is more willing to permit political parties now than he was three years ago when the bill was sent to him, except that Parcham (Communist, Soviet oriented) recently declared itself to be a party and has not yet been prosecuted. Some feel that it is the fear of Parcham and other communist groups which prevents the King from signing the political parties bill. Ambassador Popal pointed out, however, that this is silly because under the Constitution "Un-Islamic" parties would be illegal any way. The Embassy assessment seems to be that the political party question is not the real issue. It is unlikely that the King would permit political parties to exercise real power even if he did permit their organization.

The consensus in the Embassy seems to be that even if the issue of the crisis recedes into the background, the crisis itself will continue. This may mean a motion of no confidence in the Zahir government. If the King believes that such a motion has a chance of succeeding, he will then permit Prime Minister Zahir to resign for health reasons and probably appoint either Deputy Prime Minister Hamed or Foreign Minister Shafiq as Prime Minister. In the former case the crisis would still be there after a long confidence debate, and very little would be changed. Shafiq seems a little less predictable, smarter, more flamboyant but with good credentials as a son of a Mullah and an Islamic scholar, but a Shinwari. The chances for real leadership within the government would continue to be very limited because the King himself is most unlikely to permit a real change from his cautious style of government, and is unlikely in any case according to a number of observers to permit real power to fall into the hands of a "commoner".

It is entirely conceivable therefore that this crisis could continue for another year, until the elections of 1973, and perhaps on into 1974 or longer before the pressures for decisions bring it to a head. If and when it comes to a head the likely outcome is a return to direct royal family rule under a strong man, probably either Prince Daud or Sardar Abdul Wali.

In spite of this political uncertainty, the US role in Afghanistan remains positive and welcome by almost all [\[Page 4\]](#) Afghans. Afghan gratitude for US assistance continues to be almost embarrassing. The Afghans are probably going to agree to the 10 percent payment for MAP training, the RGA is apparently willing to face off an adverse Russian reaction to an IBRD planning team which we greatly favor, and there appears to be little evidence of any increase in

Soviet presence and influence within the country in spite of the governmental paralysis. From a strictly diplomatic point of view our position in Kabul is probably as strong as it ever has been and would be cause for considerable optimism if we could be assured of a responsible government with which to continue to deal.

1. Source: National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 15 AFG. Confidential. Copies were sent to Kabul, to Islamabad for Sober, and to London for G.B. Lambrakis. Attached but not published was the memorandum on Pushtunistan cited in Flaten’s assessment. On May 30 the Embassy in Kabul reported that the Zahir government was “subjected to strong domestic pressures that could bring it down any day.” (Telegram 3016; *ibid.*)↵
2. Based on his recent experience as a member of the Embassy staff in Kabul, Flaten assessed the “creeping” political crisis in Afghanistan.↵