Misunderstanding Ethnicity in the Afghan Conflict

After the conflicts in Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Chechnya, the war in Afghanistan is being explained in terms of the supremacy of ethnicity. The solution, the NGOs claim, is a federal structure which provides for the representation of all ethnic groups. However, a Russian study claims that an attempt to bring together the political elites of all ethnic groups can be brought together in one government, the 23-year war in Afghanistan will only end. But such a solution only affects the political elite. As long as the Afghan masses do not go along with it, the conflict in Afghanistan will be stabilized and even intensified.

Policy-makers and the media tend to narrow the conflict in Afghanistan to the ethnic dimension. What constitutes an ethnic group? According to which criteria can we identify an ethnic group? All ethnic groups are represented well in the Afghan population. The Afghan political elite is divided between ethnic groups. However, the Afghan political elite has only one goal: to make sure that their own group gets the largest share of power. The Afghan nation-state is once again faced with the challenge of deciding how to deal with a conflict that is interpreted as an ethnic conflict. The achievements of the Afghan nation-state must underline that government appointments along ethnic lines will threaten the continued existence of the Afghan nation-state. Whoever claims rights in the name of an ethnic group is only interested in achieving political power. The Afghan nation-state is once again faced with the challenge of dealing with a conflict that is interpreted as an ethnic conflict. The achievements of the Afghan nation-state must underline that government appointments along ethnic lines will threaten the continued existence of the Afghan nation-state. Whoever claims rights in the name of an ethnic group is only interested in achieving political power.

Ethnicity in the war

The question of why ethnic groups rose to political relevance in Afghanistan comes to mind. To answer this question one has to look back into history. The Afghan state was created by the ruling colonial powers, England and Russia, at the end of the 19th century. The ruling family of the Pashtuns, enthroned by England, favoured Pashtun élites in their concept of the nation-state. That is why ‘Afghan’ is the Persian synonym for Pashtun, Pashtu was always the Afghan national language, and the Afghan history was written from a Pashtun point of view. The politics of the ruling family employed the ethnic patterns that came into existence in order to regulate access to public goods and offices. Pashtuns were privileged in all areas and dominated the military. Tajiks were left with the economic sector and the education institutions, whereas the Hazara were marginalized. The differential treatment of people went along with the formation of ethnic stereotypes: Pashtuns were considered ‘belligerent’, Tajiks were said to be ‘thirsty’, Uzbekis were known as ‘brutal’ and the Hazara as ‘illiterate’ and ‘poor’. Despite the politics of the nation-state having created an ethnic hierarchy, there were surprisingly few ethnic conflicts. The main reason for this was the enormous contrast between the rural and urban have not been a factor in the Afghan War, the belligerent parties increasingly enhanced the ethnic momentum to strengthen their position. The ethnic groups hoped to bring certain ethnic groups closer by raising them to the status of nationalities. Even more important was the creation of militias that relied on ethnic affiliation, well known is the Uzbek militia of Rashid Dostum. Also Pakistan and Iran used the political context and the ethnic factors for conflicts. On the grounds of their ethnic loyalties, Iran established the Hizb-i wahdat, which was strong among the Shiite Hazaras. During the 1980s the Jamiat-i Islami, the oldest resistance movement, developed into a representation for the Tajiks. Pakistan supported the Taliban, which followed a radical line but which the Afghan government could control. But the ethnicization of the conflict was restricted with regard to one important aspect: the ethnic card was never played openly, but remained covert. Thus one can find very little proof of ethnic centres among any of the political, movement organizations. The published speeches of leaders such as Ahmad Shah Massud, Burhanuddin Rabbani or Mullah Omar, are imbued with Islamic rhetoric, but there is little evidence of any ethnic dimension of the war. Politicians never tire of declaring their respective parties as being multi-ethnic. The underlying reason is that Afghans refrain from picking ethnicity out as a factor of military and political cohesion. They often make the mistake of seeing ethnicity as an instrument for political and economic cohesion – independent of their ethnic affiliation.

What is an ethnic group?

The dilemma with raising ethnicity to the basis of conflict-resolution begins with the question of what constitutes an ethnic group. Despite the widely held view that ethnic groups have existed since time immemorial, most of those in Afghanistan were created in the course of the 20th century. Driven by the scientific endeavour to classify people according to cultural customs, ethnologists invented an entire series of ethnic groups: Nuristani, Pashtu, Aimak, Tajik or Farsiwan. The segments of the populace for whom they were invented are often not even familiar with such labels, much less aware of any common identity. In addition there is a lack of viable criteria to determine who is Uzbek, Hazara or Pashtun. For example, those who maintain that Pashtuns speak Pashtu and are Sunni Muslims are the Pashtuns in the Qandahar region and Pashtuns from Kabul often do not speak a word of Pashtu. A good example for the aforementioned is the former king, Zahir Shah. The difficulties with differentiating are being aggravated by the fact that many Afghans – if they mass-