Information Control in Afghanistan, 1901–1946

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the history of information control in the first half of the twentieth century in Afghanistan. This was a period of great turmoil. The world fought two devastating wars and Afghanistan went through major political and social transformations that included several violent regime changes. Despite being a neutral state, the Afghan capital attracted European rivals who campaigned for the hearts and minds of Afghans. In addition to foreign intrigues, the Afghan rulers, too, used certain information practices as part of their surveillance regimes to suppress political dissent and public unrest. A contribution to media history in Afghanistan, this article looks into how the state tried to control the flow of information in this period through surveillance, censorship, and the spread of misinformation. This was an era when print and other media technologies gained significant popularity in Afghanistan but people continued to use mostly word-of-mouth to communicate information. Despite its best efforts, which often involved brute force, the article argues, the state was not always successful in preventing people from talking with each other.

KEYWORDS: Afghan media, print history, misinformation, World War II, surveillance

INTRODUCTION

In 1915, Zafar Hasan Aybek, a young Indian, along with a group of fellow Muslim activists, visited Afghanistan to encourage the amir of Kabul to join the war in Europe in support of Germany and Turkey against the British. When they arrived in Jalalabad, the winter capital of Afghanistan, they asked people in the city about the latest news from the Great War. No one had any information. They asked for a copy of Siraj al-Akhbar, Afghanistan’s only newspaper but it was not sold anywhere in the city. Disappointed, Aybek asked for a pen, some ink, and paper in order to write a letter. He was told that in the entire city no shop sold such things. After some search, he finally found someone who told him where to get paper: the butcher’s
Pen and ink, however, he could not find. This was the state of literacy in the nation’s winter capital. Things were not much better elsewhere in the country. Lack of literacy, however, was not the only reason why people knew very little about the outside world. The other reason was the Afghan amir’s surveillance machine and his mastery of controlling the flow of information in his kingdom that, in effect, determined what people could and could not know.

This article offers an assessment of how information, and the way it circulated, gained an increasingly important role in the events of the first half of the twentieth century in Afghanistan. When the public’s main mode of seeking information is through face-to-face interaction—instead of mass media—controlling the flow of information is more complicated. This is usually the case in countries with a high level of illiteracy. If the state decides to control information in such an environment, it has to find ways to stop people from exchanging information. This is not an easy task, as we learn from the experience of the Afghan state. The state had to monitor physical spaces such as bazaars to prevent people from talking to each other. Sometimes it was fairly successful in controlling information but there were times when stories—false or factual—would spread like wildfire in Kabul whether the Arg wanted it or not. The conflict between the state’s print and the public’s rumors remained the key feature of the Afghan information order throughout the first half of the century.

The present article is a continuation of a research project that started with another article that the author published two years ago. In that article, in addition to examining the Afghan government’s information control in the nineteenth century, I discussed some of the key concepts related to this research such as the bazaar, rumors, power, public sphere, and public opinion. In order to save space, I decided to not repeat those theoretical discussions in this article. The purpose of that article was to examine a key transformation that happened in the way Afghan rulers exercised power: in the pre-print era they often used force (and religious rhetoric) to make the population obey them, but in the post-print era they mostly relied on public opinion manipulation using mass media. In this article, I document how they pursued public obedience in the first half of the twentieth century. In this period, they had better access to new media technologies but the main barrier to influencing the public remained the same: the high rate of illiteracy that prevented people from reading what the state published. As a result, oral genres of information such as bazaar rumors, I argue, remained the public’s main mode of seeking and communicating news. The oral circulation of information made the job of information control difficult for the state.

The period under investigation was the time when new media technologies found popularity in the country. This coincided with the fact that a series of dramatic political events, at home and abroad, kept happening which intensified the public’s thirst for information. (In 1929 alone, for example, Kabul saw four different kings come and go.) Information was now more important than ever in

1 Aybek, Khatirat-i Zafar Hasan Aybek, 100.
shaping political events. In Kabul, *khabar-hay-i sar-i chawk* (news from the square, or bazaar news) was the main source of uncensored information. The chawk (the main town square) of Kabul was the heart of the city encircled by shops and caravanserais where long-distance traders stayed. It was not a surprise that the bazaar served as a place where not only people and goods but stories and information circulated in public. In times of turmoil, states would deal with information control in their own way depending on their managerial capacity, societal values, and the strength of their institutions. In Afghanistan, the state used force to censor media and deployed police state tactics in controlling interaction and communication among members of the public. In addition, while suppressing the flow of information, it also used its resources to spread misinformation to influence the public’s opinions and behaviors. In fact, the use of misinformation, much like in the time of Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman, was viewed as a form of statecraft in this period.

PRINT AND DEMOCRACY

In the mid-nineteenth century, an obscure technological innovation helped the growth of democracy in the world. The innovation in question was high-speed papermaking. In much of the first half of the century, paper was still produced by hand, one sheet at a time, like in the previous 2000 years. In the second half of the nineteenth century, it became finally possible to mass-produce paper using cylinder machines, a development that significantly reduced publishing costs. Cheap print, in turn, popularized the use of paper in everyday life and gave rise to various genres of communication, most notably penny press newspapers. With the public’s access to affordable print, oral modes of communicating news gradually lost their credibility in comparison to the printed word. This was a major change in the information order in the West. In many parts of the world, however, where authoritarianism and illiteracy persisted, free flow of information was not a possibility and people continued to rely on word-of-mouth, a fluid medium, to communicate news.

Print technology contributed greatly to the growth of modern deliberative democracy because of its formative role in shaping the open public sphere—a precondition for any democracy. Print technology alone, of course, cannot be credited for this political transformation but its role in the development of democratic culture cannot be ignored. We can see this in Europe. In England, for example, the emergence of democratic culture in the early modern era, according to David Zaret, was largely due to the rise of popular print such as pamphlets, posters, and petitions that built the foundation of the modern public sphere, not the philosophical tracts of the French Enlightenment, as it is conventionally believed. He argues that democratic principles were shaped by vernacular talks and

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4 Springhall, “‘Disseminating Impure Literature,’” 568.

texts—not the kind of texts that belonged to the realm of high culture. His position echoes Nancy Fraser’s idea about the “counterpublic.” In her critique of the Habermasian public sphere, Fraser argued that the subordinated social groups in Europe built counterpublics, which challenged the bourgeois public spheres that were far from being inclusive or egalitarian. In some way, the cheap paper, thanks to the technological revolution in paper-making, helped the growth of these counterpublics where ordinary people produced and consumed information the way they wanted.

In the early twentieth century, countries across the non-Western world were employing new media to build their own publics. Afghanistan’s neighbor, India, had a well-developed publishing industry that catered to an expanding reading public. In Iran, too, things were improving. However, the country’s only print shop was a government office that printed the official newspaper, Siraj al-Akhbar, and other print materials, with the mission of earning popular support for the amir. Although there was a small reading public in Afghanistan who would read this newspaper and the state’s other print materials, the Afghan information order was predominantly oral at the time and remained so throughout the first half of the century. The dominance of oral communication in seeking news meant that the simple act of talking among members of the public mattered to the state. Because these talks could spread rumors—an invisible weapon in the hand of the public that the state greatly feared.

Martin Sökefeld’s study of rumors in India’s Northwest Frontier region offers examples of how provocative stories circulating orally in public caused serious headaches for the Afghan government as well as the Indian government. He shows how the story about the conversion of the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, and his people, to Islam during WWI was used to persuade people in India and Afghanistan that the war of Germany and Turkey against the British was jihad and that all Muslims had to join that struggle. The amir did not want the British, who paid him a handsome annual subsidy and supported his government, to be worried about a possible Afghan jihad. The amir had no concerns about newspapers or pamphlets circulating anti-British ideas in public because there were no private printers in his kingdom. He was, however, concerned about people’s talks. That was why he decided to issue a decree warning people about spreading rumors. The decree was sent to provinces across Afghanistan. It partly said: “if anyone expressed the

6 Ibid. For more on information circulation in this era see, Coast, News and Rumour in Jacobean England, 1–8.
7 Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 56–80.
10 The history of print in Afghanistan is fairly well-studied. Fufalzay, Mukhtasar-i Tarikh-i Matabi va Jara’id-i Afghanistan; Ahang, Mathu’at-i Afghanistan; Rahin, Tarikh-i Mathu’at-i Afghanistan. On oral communication, however, the number of studies is considerably fewer. We can name Asad Allah Shu’ur’s important monograph, Mufahimah-i Shafahi, that examines this topic.
11 Sökefeld, “Rumours and Politics on the Northern Frontier,” 324.
intention of ghaza or praised the Germans, his tongue would be cut out.”

12 Despite the warning, there were Afghans who praised Germans and wanted to wage jihad. They were not in remote provinces, but right there in the amir’s court. We know that some of the amir’s top officials, including his brother, Nasr Allah Khan, were generally in favor of declaring a jihad against the British.13 Therefore, the rumors about the Afghan government’s intention to declare a jihad against the British were not entirely false—a common feature in rumors.

The relentless suppression of oral information circulation in this era through policing of communication not only prevented people from exchanging information but also killed the spirit of cooperation and social association in Afghanistan. In closed societies, the public sphere is normally a physical space, as opposed to a metaphorical space, such as the newspaper pages and radio airwaves that serve as sites of information exchange in democratic societies. When the state polices physical spaces and physical interactions it creates an environment of isolation for members of the public. Isolation is a political condition that, according to Hannah Arendt, is different from loneliness which is a more social phenomenon. “Totalitarian government, like all tyrannies, certainly could not exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities.”14 When people feel the experience of not belonging to the world and see an invisible barrier separating them from others it would make them feel lonely, vulnerable, paranoid, and unable to cooperate with others. This, Arendt says, is how tyrants practice control and kill the spirit of democracy in their populations. The roots of authoritarianism and its consequences are beyond the scope of this article. I just wanted to stress the idea of how important the culture of information commutation is in the political life of a society. It determines people’s desire and ability to cooperate with one another on communal projects such as building a democratic state.

THE IRON AMIR’S SON

Afghanistan entered the twentieth century with a new amir: Habib Allah Khan (1901–1919). He is famous for establishing the country’s second newspaper, *Siraj al-Akhbar* (1911–1918), which remained Afghanistan’s only newspaper under his rule.15 The newspaper was initially written by hand and printed in a small lithographic press. In 1912, the amir imported a movable type printing press with letters made of lead that was a game-changer in improving the speed and quality of printing in the country.16 Despite an active newspaper, people’s access to

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12 Ibid., 327.
13 Morton, “The Amir, Neutrality and Rumour During the First World War,” 4. See also the following firsthand account that reveals how the amir and his inner circle reacted to events of WWI and how he struggled to remain neutral. Rybitschka, *Dar Kishvar-i Khudadad-i Afghanistan*, 86–91.
information, print or otherwise, was still limited because Siraj published only what the king approved. In particular, information from the outside world was hard to come by. Letters remained one of the few sources of news from abroad. When a person received a letter, it was an exciting event that prompted friends and neighbors to ask the letter receiver about the news from the outside.

The new amir, like his father, the “Iron Amir” ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan (1880–1901), continued to use Ishtihar (posters) for announcing government decisions and books for various purposes. Also like his father, he published a book on the principle of “obedience of the ruler” (Itaʿat-i uli al-Amr), or how obeying him was a religious duty. The book featured an endorsement from Chief Justice, Saʿd al-Din Khan, who wrote “more is less” when it came to publishing books about obeying the ruler. Afghan rulers, and rulers across the Muslim world, had long used politicized interpretation of the Quran to gain popular support and suppress their opponents.

Still, the amir’s idea of safeguarding his throne was to practice harsh surveillance of communications—in particular, oral communication. Everyone was watched, including amir’s European employees. In 1913, E. F. Johnson, an Englishman who worked in the government factory in Kabul, told British officers in India that he was under “extremely close surveillance by his personal guard” which made his life in Kabul “almost intolerable.” Despite all the surveillance, he reported, the amir’s authority “practically ceases beyond a radius of ten miles from the city.” In 1905, an American newspaper published a report on the degree of surveillance in Afghanistan where “everyone is suspected as a spy of either Russia or the British.” It went on to describe the miserable lives of the two foreigners in Kabul, of whom, one was an actual spy and the other a court physician. They both had to deal with extreme isolation and the “ever-present knowledge that keen Afghan eyes” were watching them—things that did not have “a beneficial effect upon one’s nerves.” The spy, a Muslim Indian at the service of the British government, was in a particularly difficult position: nobody dared to talk to him and he did not dare to travel anywhere except occasionally to the royal court when he was invited by the amir. For all he was allowed to do as a person whose job was gathering information, the newspaper reported, “he might as well reside at the North Pole.”

The physician, an English lady named Kate Daly spent six years in Kabul and later wrote a travelogue about her life in a city under total surveillance where “one cannot speak or write, and it is best not even to think” about certain issues.

17 Rybitschka, Dar Kishvar-i Khudadad-i Afghanistan, 127.
18 Katib quotes many of those Ishtiharat in full, including, for example, the one the amir issued on 25 January 1904 to ban having more than four wives. Katib, Siraj al-Tawarikh, 2011, 4 (part two):548–50.
19 ʿAbd al-Rab, Itaʿat-i Uli al-Amr, 32.
20 “Interview with Mr. Johnson (22 August 1913).” India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library, London (BL), IOR/L/PS/11/64 P 3901/1913, f. 3.
21 “Afghanistan and Its Up-to-Date Amir,” 4.
22 Daly, “Eight Years among the Afghans,” 530.
The public was not the only source of fear for the amir. He also kept a close eye on the government employees. In 1910, he published instructions for news writers in local government offices to report on the activities of the governors, judges, and police chiefs and their treatment of the public. The manual was titled “The Manual for Overt News Writers of the God-Granted, Strong-Based State of Afghanistan” and it was primarily for ‘alaniyah, or overt, news writers. (He also had covert news writers or spies.) The overt news writers were tasked with reporting regularly on the events in their areas and the performance of local officials. They also had to dispatch regular updates on weather changes and prices of basic consumer items. To make sure the news-writers remained honest, and would not conspire with local government officials to mislead the amir, the manual warned them that they would be watched by covert news writers, who reported directly to him in Kabul. In 1903, even before the publication of this manual, the government already had harsh rules for news-writers who would report false information. In that year, one was executed and another was blinded and had his arms cut off for lying in their reports. The manual also warned local officials not to harass the news writers or they will be harshly punished.

Amir Habib Allah’s violent surveillance would occasionally pay off. It helped him, for example, in preventing the formation of a constitutionalist movement in Kabul. During his reign, constitutionalist movements emerged in the Ottoman Empire and Persia and they inspired a certain number of people in Afghanistan to seek political reform. In Kabul, Dr. Abdul Ghani, an Indian teacher at the government school, is perceived as the one who formed the Afghan constitutionalist gathering, *Hizb-i Sirriy-i Milli*, which was an underground group. At the time all gatherings, small or big, were under close surveillance. He managed to organize the underground gatherings during the night in the month of Ramadan (1326/1908), the only time when the nighttime curfew was lifted and people were free to visit each other’s homes without the police stopping them. The amir still found out about the group and put some of them in jail and the rest were executed. Katib alleges that Abdul Ghani, who spent a decade in jail because of this, was a secret British agent. Katib is right that the Indian teacher secretly served a foreign country but the country in question was not Britain but its enemy: Russia. New evidence from Russian archives shows that he was once a secret agent for the Russians.

Amir Habib Allah’s heavy-handed governance eventually earned him a great number of enemies. His religious pamphlets on the duty of every Muslim to obey their ruler were not effective enough to produce public obedience. He was the target

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24 The original manual is very rare but the full text is reprinted in, Shu’ur, *Mufahimah-i Shafahi*, 84–97.
of two assassination attempts: on 16 October 1918, during an annual celebration marking his coronation, amir was riding through Char Chattah, Kabul’s arcade bazaar, when two bullets were fired at him but the shooter missed. Despite investigations, the person behind the attack was never found. This attempt, nonetheless, signaled the growing opposition—from inside and outside the court—against him.29 About four months later, the amir once again was attacked and this time the shooter did not miss. This happened during a hunting trip outside Jalalabad, the winter capital. Nasr Allah, the amir’s brother and heir apparent, who was accompanying him, was promptly declared the new amir. In Kabul, one of Amir Habib Allah’s sons, Aman Allah Khan, too, announced his emirate. The nephew soon won the battle against his uncle by strategically using information technologies—like in any successful coup: He asked his aides to cut the telephone lines between Kabul and Jalalabad to prevent the new amir from announcing his ascension to the throne. He then published propaganda leaflets around Kabul to introduce himself as the new amir.30 After he successfully occupied the palace and put his uncle safely in jail, Aman Allah Khan kicked off his transformative rule. His first move: gaining Afghanistan’s independence in foreign relations from the British. In so doing, he opened the country’s doors to the outside world.

THE ROARING TWENTIES

Amir Aman Allah Khan (1919–1929), compared to his father, possessed a more modern view of power and how it operated. He placed a great emphasis on the popularity of his government among the public. For the first time in Afghan politics, phrases like public opinion (afkar-i ʿammah) started to appear in the bureaucratic literature, showing how those in power were trying to develop a new language to understand, and generate, popular political support. This phrase was used, for example, in a 1924 letter that the Intelligence Office at the Ministry of War sent to the Ministry of Interior. The letter asked the Ministry to pause building a bridge in Nawabad, Kunar, where a Pashtun tribe opposed the construction of the bridge and threatened to attack the local government if the building went ahead.31 This sensitivity to public opinion was why the amir invested heavily in mass media. He put enormous efforts into popularizing paper as the dominant medium of information transmission. An official newspaper in Kabul, Haqiqat, once published an editorial in the form of a poem titled “The sacred status of the pen,” on the superiority of writing over speech. Haqiqat was published by the Afghan War Office “to check the unfounded rumors circulated in the bazaars.”32 The poem, at one point, said: “The word, when spoken, is not a document for anyone / But when the word is written, it will be a document in any way.”33

29 Khan, Barg-hay-i Az Tarikh-i Muʿasir-i Vatan-i Ma, 45–48.
30 Fufalzay, Saltanat-i Aman Allah Shah, 1:83.
33 Haqiqat, 29 Jaddi 1303/19 January 1925, 1. (Emphasis in the original.)
The amir established schools (for boys and girls), published books of laws and regulations, issued ID cards, printed paper banknotes, reformed the judiciary, and most importantly introduced free press in the country. At no previous time in Afghan history, had people been confronted with so much paper in their daily lives. He established an adult literacy class at a Kabul mosque and sometimes would personally volunteer there as a teacher. He wanted the public to get their information from printed sources and mass literacy was essential in that plan. In addition to state periodicals, private individuals, too, started publishing newspapers and magazines under his rule. For the first time, newspapers were published outside Kabul. Publishers, for the first few years, did not even have to get a government permit, but after the introduction of a Press Law in 1924, newspaper owners were required to apply for a permit.

Freedom of expression was a new experience that Afghans had to get used to. “We, the Afghan nation, have the right to express ourselves,” declared an Anis article in 1928, a progress that was credited to “the Messiah of the Afghan nation,” Aman Allah Khan. Censorship, however, still existed and publishers knew not to cross the red lines. In 1928, the amir shut down a newspaper, Nasim-i Sahar, edited by Ahmad Ratib, for an article in which the author had criticized superficial Westernization in Afghanistan. Still, newspapers were allowed to publish mild, non-political, criticism of the government. It was even encouraged as the editorial in Haqiqat said: “Those who do not take to pen the evil deeds of men / Are beings foul – worse than nothingness / But for chastisement – hint, forgo directness / Since on the path to politeness, it is the first step.” The official newspaper, Aman-i Afghan, even asked the government to reform the press law, granting more freedom to the press so they could “introduce bad and good individuals and report on their bad and good deeds.” In other words, freedom of the press was considered an effective tool for undermining the bazaar’s role as the primary medium in shaping public opinion. With a free press, the government hoped, people would read papers, instead of going to the bazaar, to obtain truthful, and sometimes inconvenient, political information.

This was an era of the democratization of paper as a serious effort was made to free paper from the confines of bureaucratic corridors and make it accessible to everyone through mass education and freedom of expression. The amir also banned intercepting postal communication, declaring the “security of correspondence is a people’s right.” It was practiced under the two previous rulers, but now censors

34 Fufalzay, Mukhtasar-i Tarikh-i Matabi va Jara’id-i Afghanistan, 1:380–81.
35 Gregorian, The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan, 245; Nizamnamah-i Matbu’at, 1–3.
36 Muhammad Saqib, Publisher of Bidar to ‘Abd al-Karim Khan, Governor of Turkistan, 3 Saratan 1304/24 June 1925, National Archives of Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan (NAA), Maktub, Mahfazah 810, No. 114.
37 Quoted in Habib, Davrah-i Amani, 47.
39 Haqiqat, 29 Jaddi 1303/19 January 1925, 1.
40 Quoted in Habib, Davrah-i Amani, 48.
were not allowed to open a letter without a court order. In 1928, to improve the reach of newspapers, Aman Allah issued a special stamp for the press that heavily subsidized their shipping cost (Figure 1). This stamp, which cost only 0.02 afghanis, remained in circulation for 35 years without any price increase while the price of other postal stamps all went up. Postal subsidy for the press was a tradition first established by the Founding Fathers of the United States who believed democracy would not survive without an informed public and that every citizen

Fig 1 A special newspaper stamp on a 1932 issue of Kabul magazine. Amir Aman Allah’s government issued the 0.02 afg stamps to subsidize the shipping cost of the press, making information more accessible. The price of the stamp remained the same for 35 years. (Courtesy of Afghanistan Digital Library, ADL0986.)

42 Ibid.
43 Patterson, Afghanistan, Its Twentieth Century Postal Issues, 95.
should have access to information at low cost. Amir Aman Allah Khan’s plan to share the power of the printed word with the public was partly aimed at making bazaar rumors irrelevant. In 1928, he doubled down on his efforts by purchasing a paper mill from Germany that cost him 34,820 British Pound, a considerable sum at the time. According to its business plan, the factory would produce high-quality paper, newsprint, and packaging material.

Kabul newspapers in this era received daily newswires from Reuters and other European agencies that kept Afghans up-to-date with world affairs. The main state newspaper encouraged people to read newspapers, instead of consuming bazaar rumors, if they wished to seek accurate information. It once published a (probably fictional) dialogue between two young men, in which, one lectures the other about the benefits of reading newspapers. In another piece, titled “Modern Work, Modern Man,” the newspaper compared illiterate men to “thin donkeys” that could not carry a heavy load. Not a great analogy, but the newspaper editors made their point. The Ministry of Education, too, played a major role in promoting literacy on one hand and publishing a great number of books on the other to help the state’s push toward creating a reading public in Afghanistan.

Despite all his efforts to suppress rumors, they remained a persistent force in the bazaar partly because they not only carried political information but economic information as well. The financial sector, which was run by Hindu money traders, was particularly sensitive to and reliant on rumors. The traders gleaned important political information from the rumors in order to run their day-to-day businesses. If a money trader in Herat, for example, loaned money to the governor, his partners in Kabul would try to be the first to hear the news of his dismissal from their court sources. Before the governor could get the news, the trader would send his own runner to Herat to get the money back before the man was ousted from his post. There was no legal mechanism in place to protect the lenders. As long as a governor was in power, he was able to pay back the loan but if he was fired, there was no guarantee money traders could recover their funds. As a result, “the traders had to keep their ears open to all sorts of ‘bazaargap’ and you would make a greater profit than others if you were gifted with business acumen and ingenuity.”

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44 This practice continues to this day. The US Postal Service currently charges publishers only 75% of what it costs to deliver their periodicals. “Annual Compliance Determination Report,” 43.
45 Qararad-i Karkhanah-i Kaghaz-sazi (Kabul: Shirkat-i Rafiq, 1307/1928), 1–5. The paper mill was never built because of the war that erupted in the following year, forcing the king into exile.
47 Aman-i Afghan, 28 ʿAqrab 1302/20 November 1923, 1, 3.
48 On the Ministry’s book publishing program see, Ayinah-i ʿIrfan, Jawza 1303/May-June 1924, 40–49.
49 Under Sharia law, Muslims were not allowed to trade money so the non-Muslim bankers played an important role in the Afghan economy.
50 Ali, In a Land Far from Home, 120. Hanifi, too, shows how information was critical for the work of 19th-century traders. Hanifi, Connecting Histories in Afghanistan, 25, 155.
runners working for the Indian merchants were known as harkaras, Persian for “men of all works.” They could safely and quickly carry letters and parcels from town to town even in times of crisis. During the first Anglo-Afghan war (1839–1842), when the British army was defeated outside Kabul and had lost direct communication with Delhi, it was the harkaras who first delivered the bad news to India.51

Aman Allah Khan, unlike his predecessors, believed that the only way to contain the power of rumors among Afghans was mass education. Still, he knew people used bazaar news to learn about government affairs. Therefore, in addition to traditional newspapers, in late September 1921, he published a wall newspaper titled Iblagh (Announcement) that would be placed in crowded areas both in the capital and in provincial towns. It was published every other day and carried the subtitle: “Free Wall Newspaper.” The paper was prepared by scribes inside the Royal Secretariat in the king’s palace and was printed in the government’s lithographic press. In Kabul, Iblagh would be hung on the Chawk and several other crowded spots in the city. Knowing that not everyone was able to read it, the government issued a timetable for times and places where people could gather to hear someone from the newspaper read it out loud. It was on Saturdays, Mondays, and Wednesdays at the Chawk (1:00 PM), Shur Bazaar (11:00 AM), and Chaman-i Huzuri (7:00 PM).52 As Kabul’s first free urban newspaper, the content was government announcements, new laws, and important news events. In issue 104, it explained its raison d’etre: “It is obvious that any perfect person must know the affairs of his government and nation. Iblagh, without charging any fees, has taken that noble task by gracing the walls every other day and opening the door to treasures that are government laws and regulations and reports on essential events.”53

The government wanted to infiltrate the bazaar news and Iblagh was created for that. The amir showed little tolerance for other bazaar papers that would compete with his own. In 1923, for example, anonymous pamphlets appeared in the Kabul bazaar accusing the amir of incompetence and empty promises. The amir arrested 100 people in connection to the incident.54 We do not know how effective Iblagh was but the government decided to shut it down after three years of publication. Iblagh was not amir’s only instrument of influencing the Chawk. In 1925, he launched a radio station in Kabul and, considering that few in the city had access to receivers, he set up loudspeakers on the Chawk. His ambassador in Paris, Muhammad Nadir Khan, had sent the loudspeakers.55 This was Afghanistan’s first radio station. In addition to the radio, he used his passion for giving lectures to

51 Bayly, Empire and Information, 139–40.
52 Shu’ur, Mufahimah-i Shafahi, 46.
53 Ahang owned a copy of the newspaper and also interviewed one of its editors. Ahang, Matbu’at-i Afghanistan, 41–45. See also, Juya, “Matbu’at va Nashriyat-i Ma (4),” 72–73. Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU), too, has a copy of Iblagh, but it is not yet cataloged.
54 The National Archives, London, UK (TNA, hereafter), FO 402/57, 2.
55 Kushkaki, Nadir-i Afghan, 1:309.
crowds to good use. He was a talkative man and some of his long-winded speeches were published in print.\textsuperscript{56} He became even more active in giving speeches after his visit to Europe. On his return, according to a Kabul resident, he brought with him “expensive furniture, a number of motor cars, and the bad habit of giving speeches.”\textsuperscript{57} He once gave thirty hours of speeches in the span of three consecutive days.\textsuperscript{58}

Despite his many efforts to win the public’s hearts and minds, Aman Allah’s government, like the governments before it, had to constantly deal with an insurgency. He published a pamphlet on the religious duty of “obedience of the ruler”—like his father and his father—a hopeless attempt in teaching people about the “rights of the king.”\textsuperscript{59} Much of these revolts were believed to be caused by bazaar news circulating among the public. In an editorial, titled “The Public and the Public Deceiver,” \textit{Haqiqat} went after the public, ʿavvam, calling them “God’s most miserable creatures” who, while “cannot do anything of worth, are the source of all revolts, insurgencies, and atrocities.” The simplicity of “this ignorant crowd who cannot see farther than what is in front of them,” the article continued, was the reason they could be easily manipulated by the ill-wishers of the state.\textsuperscript{60}

In 1929, a major uprising broke out from the north of Kabul, led by a bandit, Habib Allah Kalakani, better known as Bachah-i Saqaw (“the water carrier’s son”), with the intention of ousting what he considered the infidel king. In Kabul, one of the first places the rebels attacked, upon arriving in the city, was the office of \textit{Aman-i Afghan}, the state’s main newspaper in Dih Afghanan neighborhood. They killed several of the employees and destroyed all the printing equipment in the office.\textsuperscript{61} It was a calculated attack on the government’s communication infrastructures. Aman Allah, in one of his final attempts to save his throne, issued a proclamation refuting the “words of mouth and rumors” spreading around the country that accused him of being disrespectful to the Prophet and pushing an anti-Islamic reform program. The announcement, which was accompanied by a letter from the clergy approving his legitimacy as a Muslim ruler, was too late to be effective.\textsuperscript{62} The rebels finally forced him out of power and put an end to his ambitious project to transform Afghanistan. He had to escape from Kabul to Kandahar, leaving the throne to his brother, ʿInayat Allah, who also left the city right after. In Kandahar, he published a poster to mobilize Pashtuns against Bachah-i Saqaw on the ethnic ground: he argued that Habib Allah was unfit to be a king because he was not an “Afghan,”

\textsuperscript{56} Subman and Zarifi, \textit{Nutq-Hay-i Aʿla Hazrat Aman Allah Khan Ghazi}; Rafiʿ, \textit{Taftish-i Qandahar Ya Hakimiyyat-i Qanun Dar Afghanistan}.
\textsuperscript{57} Ali, \textit{In a Land Far from Home}, 205.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Zuhur al-Aman}, 27.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Haqiqat}, 27 Dalv 1303/16 February 1925, 1–2.
a name that applied only to Pashtuns at the time. This was a desperate attempt that led to nowhere.63 He lost his throne because of many reasons but at least one of them was the bazaar rumor mills.64

The new king, Habib Allah Kalakani, declared Sharia the law of the land and dismantled almost all laws and regulations from the Amani era. During his uprising, the bazaar and government offices were looted and the economy was paralyzed.65 He also shut down all schools and banned all newspapers. During the attack on the Arg, the royal palace, rebels looted all the offices and destroyed the buildings, including the palace’s small printing house. Photographs from the aftermath of the attack show papers being scattered everywhere and print machines broken down (Figures 2 and 3). The Arg looks like the scene of a rebellion against the print.66

The bandit king, using what remained of the print industry in Kabul, soon launched his own state newspaper, Habib al-Islam (Friend of Islam), which remained the only paper in Kabul. Although it was printed in a print house that previously belonged to Aman-i Afghan, its quality was low.67 In the first issue, Habib al-Islam apologized to its readers: “Due to lack of zincograph equipment, we were not able to print the title of the newspaper in large and clear types. God willing the equipment will soon be obtained.”68 The newspaper, however, continued to be printed in the same small type from top to bottom—at least for the first 31 issues.

The bandit king, who earned the throne thanks to the bazaar news, soon found himself a victim of the bazaar news. His newspaper started to engage in the familiar battle to counter the news from the town square. The people of Kabul were living under harsh economic conditions and bazaars were empty of basic commodities. In response to the increasing anti-government sentiments, Habib al-Islam called the people of Kabul “lazy and spoiled” who were too accustomed to their previous comfortable lives. It said a “revolution is not easy” and things such as “famine and spikes in prices” were normal in revolutionary times. The paper then blamed the public’s discontent with the new king on those who spread “rumors, words of mouth, and sensational news.”69 Habib Allah Kalakani, in addition to his print propaganda, made great use of oral and visual media as well. He used Kabul’s Chawk square as a medium for dissemination of news and projection of state power by publicly hanging his opponents there for communicative purposes.

On 30 April 1929, probably one of the most gruesome public executions occurred in Kabul that involved a judge, a butcher, and an ice cream-loving rebel commander. According to an eyewitness account, one of the amir’s commanders, Malik Muhsin, the governor of Kabul, had a prominent clergyman, Qazi cAbd
al-Rahman, executed on the Chawk in a ceremonial way on the charges of sedition. He personally paraded the man in the bazaar while a town crier was announcing his crime, which was the opposition to the amir. On the way to the Chawk, the commander stopped by a shop for some faludah (a dessert similar to ice cream) and while eating the faludah he sent his men out to the bazaar to find a cow butcher. He

Fig 2–3 During Bachah-i Saqaw’s 1929 rebellion in Kabul, rebels looted the royal palace and destroyed the printing machines inside. They also scattered the papers and stationery they found in government offices. (Courtesy of the National Archives of Afghanistan.)
was enjoying his dessert while the prisoner was waiting with him in the ice cream shop. When the butcher arrived, Muhsin ordered him to perform a *vaskat-buri* (cutting waistcoat) on Qazi ʿAbd al-Rahman. The term “cutting waistcoat” referred to the practice of hanging the prisoner from a hook and cutting his limbs one by one, while he was alive, until only his torso was left. The butcher took the judge to the Chawk, the main square, and hanged him from a hook that was placed at the entrance of the arcade bazaar. The butcher then performed the waistcoat on the clergyman, while a large crowd was watching, among them children. After he was done, soldiers carried his head on a spike around the bazaar while dragging his torso on the ground. The parade ended on Pul-i Khishti Bridge where the spike, with the clergyman’s head on it, was installed for everyone to see. According to a witness, this was how all famous dissidents were executed. The practice was so common that there was a hook at the entrance to the first section of the arcade bazaar built specifically for public executions.

The theatrical punishment of the condemned man, to use a contemporary term, is an “affective” technique of communication designed to incite fear and produce obedience. A few years earlier, the Soviet rulers of Central Asia used it as a key instrument of governance to subdue the newly-conquered populace. Not only in Asia but across the world public punishment was a common method of delivering justice in the pre-modern era. It was not, however, merely a judicial ritual but a political one as well: “it belongs, even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested.” The administrative institutions of the state were few in the pre-modern era and could not be physically present in all corners of the territory. The state, as a result, used these theatrical spectacles to project its power over people and places it could not reach. In other words, theatrical violence served as a communication technology. The state’s method of public punishment, in Foucault’s words, “made the guilty man the herald of his own condemnation.” Only in the modern era, with the rise of the bureaucratic state at the beginning of the nineteenth century, things started to change in Europe. The state now exercised its power over the condemned man’s body and the general population at large using disciplinary techniques—administered by bureaucratic institutions.

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70 *Ayinah-i Afghanistan*, Jaddi 1368/January 1990, 91–92. The source is Ruh Allah Khan Ruhi, later Manager of Festivals at Kabul Municipality, who witnessed the whole incident when he was a young boy. Katib also confirms this horrific execution. Katib Hazara, *Tazakkur ul-Inqilab*, 167–68. See also Ghubar, *Afghanistan Dar Masir-i Tarikh*, 1989, 1:828. On the same day that Qazi ʿAbd al-Rahman was cut into pieces on the Chawk, Katib reports that nineteen Hazara Amanists and three heads were brought to the Kabul bazaar from Shaikh ʿAli. They paraded the prisoners in the bazaar while carrying the heads, which were burned, on spikes. Katib Hazara, *Tazakkur ul-Inqilab*, 168. Katib reports frequent public punishments in the bazaar. On one day alone, he says, Bachah-i Saqaw hung one man on the Chawk, killed two by fire squad, and blackened the faces of 15 others and paraded them in the bazaar. Katib Hazara, 165.

71 Kassymbekova, *Despite Cultures*, 19–52.

72 Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 47.

73 Ibid., 43.
institutions—instead of theatrical violence. In Kabul, and many other parts of the world, however, power was still exercised through physical violence in the first half of the century.

The bandit amir, in his communication efforts, took good advantage of the newly-popularized modern technologies as well, which were supposedly viewed as more authoritative and trustworthy. His town criers and print propagandists would use phrases such as khabar-i tilifun (“telephone news”) or khabar-i tiligraf (“telegraph news”) as sources of the news they spread in order to supposedly give the information more credibility. In addition to all these, following the former rulers in using religious rhetoric to earn public support, Habib al-Islam also published a serial column, with numerous quotes from the Quran and the Prophet, titled “Obedience of the Ruler” that ran for seven issues, trying to earn popularity for the amir using religious rhetoric. Habib Allah’s rule was short-lived and after nine months, Muhammad Nadir captured Kabul and established his own kingdom (1929–1933). Nadir, a seasoned general, soon restored order and formed a government. Insecure about the return of Aman Allah Khan, he built a merciless police state where anyone with connections with the exiled king was jailed or killed. He brought order to the city and, with it, a surveillance machine.

THE POLICE STATE

In October 1930, a caravan of four cars from India reached Kabul. Among the passengers was William Shirer, a Chicago Tribune journalist who was visiting the country for the first time. The main passenger in the caravan was the teenage crown prince of Afghanistan, Muhammad Zahir, who was returning from France. The cars entered the Lahuri Gate and passed through the bazaar in the center of the city on their way toward the Arg. When driving through the arcade bazaar, the American journalist’s stomach turned, according to himself, when he saw “a dozen bodies dangled stiffly from ropes that stretched down from the roof of the dome.” He was expecting a lot of things to see in the Afghan capital but corpses with a “gruesome grin on the waxen faces, the hands still tied” hanging on the main town square was not one of them. It was a horror show in broad daylight. The American newspaperman had arrived in Muhammad Nadir’s Afghanistan.

Afghanistan under King Muhammad Nadir was a dictatorship with no private media and the few public ones were closely watched—sometimes by the king himself: In 1932, for example, the Kabul Literary Society, which was under the Royal Secretariat Office, decided to publish a yearbook, or almanac. Sayyid Qasim Rishtiya was appointed as the editor. One day when he was preparing the copies for the first issue, Nadir walked into the print office. He saw that Rishtiya was working on a picture of Benito Mussolini with the captain, “Mussolini, the Dictator of Italy.”

74 Ibid., 14. In the Islamicate world, affect had an important role in warfare as well. The use of spectacular violence to gain obedience was a tactic that was generally called al-nasr bi-al-ra’b (victory by terror), a dictum derived from a saying of the prophet Muhammad.
75 Katib Hazara, Tazakkur ul-Inqilab, 164, 219.
76 Habib al-Islam, 22 Hamal 1308/11 April 1929, 73.
77 Shirer, The Nightmare Years, 1930–1940, chap. 1, epub.
“What does the ‘dictator’ mean?” The king asked him. “It means the ruler,” replied the editor, playing ignorant. “No,” the king remarked, “dictator means a tyrant and autocrat and it’s an insult.” Nadir then pulled out his pen, crossed out the word dictator, and added: “Mussolini, the Prime Minister of Italy.” He was not always censoring the press himself, but newspaper editors knew the red lines and were very careful not to cross them. The bodies that the American journalist saw on the town square most certainly belonged to the king’s political enemies and they were publicly displayed for deterrence. Nadir showed no mercy to political dissidents. He tied Mahmud Sami, for example—a former colleague of his at the Ministry of War who now could pose a threat to his rule—to the muzzle of a cannon and blew him up into pieces while a large crowd was watching. With the level of brutality to which he subjected his perceived enemies, few wanted to attract the king’s attention. Everything was suspicious and everyone was silent.

The spy agency, the Directorate of Intelligence Records, surveilled the public and arrested anyone it deemed dangerous. Even postal communication was not safe from the government eyes. This was despite the fact that Nadir’s constitution had prohibited postal interception. In 1930, Prime Minister Muhammad Hashim Khan (1929–1946), for example, ordered his Security Chief in the North to

78 Akhavan, *Tarikh-i Shafahiy-i Afghanistan, 1900–1992*, 56; Rishtiya, *Khatirat-i Siyasi, 1311–1371*, 22. The correction scared the editor enough that his caption, handwritten and clearly added late in the process, reads: “The great fascist leader, the Honorable Mussolini, in Rome who has taken the affairs of Italy in his powerful hands since 1922 and has been serving his country with utmost competence and brilliance. The current progress of Italy is because of the wisdom and genius of this great man.” *Salnamah-i Majallah-i Kabul*, 266–67.

79 In much of 1930, the king was engaged in a brutal campaign against the Tajiks of the Shamali region, who rebelled against his local officials. Nadir ordered his men to suppress dissidents in the north at all costs. King Muhammad Nadir Khan to Prime Minister Muhammad Hashium Khan, 1 Hut 1308/20 Feb 1930, NAA, Farman, No. 396, Doc. No. 41/36; King Muhammad Nadir Khan to Muhammad Ya’qub Khan, Security Chief (Ra’is-i Tanzimiyah), Mazar and Maymanah, 13 Asad 1309/4 August 1930, NAA, Farman, No. 1584, Doc. No. 410/30.

80 Siddiq, *From My Memories*, 1–3.


82 This notorious agency was a small office under Amir Aman Allah Khan and was called Mudiriyat-i Zabt-i Ahvalat va Istikhbarat. It was part of the office of the king’s personal assistant (*yavar-i huzur*.) In 1928, Aman Allah Khan planned to transform the service into an independent department, presumably expanding its operations. In 1929, it was his successor, the bandit king, who eventually implemented the plan by restructuring the office as an independent directorate (*riyasat*), tasked with spying on government staff and the public. Under Prime Minister Muhammad Hashim Khan (1929–1946), it became the most feared government agency in the country. See, Mudiriyat-i Zabt-i Ahvalat va Istikhbarat to Vizart-i Dakhiliyyah, 24 Mizan 1303/16 October 1924, NAA, Maktub, No. NA; TNA, AIR 5/734, 3; *Habib al-Islam*, 13 Saratan 1308/4 July 1929, 247–248; Ghubar, *Afghanistan Dar Masir-i Tarikh*, 2000, 2:174–77.


84 *Anis*, 8 Qaws 1310/30 November 1931, 4.
intercept the postal communication of suspected individuals—but not others. In his order, after noting the fact that the “whole world” protected the privacy of letters, Hashim Khan asked his man to keep the process a secret, otherwise, “it will give a bad impression abroad.” It was not only the written communication that was under close surveillance, oral communication, too, was monitored. In Kabul, there were police officers walking around in the bazaar and arresting anyone seen whispering to each other, on the assumption that “they must have been talking ill of the government.” In 1933, the government arrested a restaurant owner and two others from the Kabul bazaar for spreading stories about conflicts in the Southern provinces and also in the city of Mazar-i Sharif in the north. All three were paraded around in the bazaar and then sent to the south and Mazar-i Sharif, “so that they see for themselves the falseness of their rumors.”

Despite the harsh surveillance, people still found ways to voice their discontent. In 1930, Ahmad Ratib, the sharp-tongued journalist whose newspaper was shut down by Amir Aman Allah Khan for criticizing government policies, once again ran into trouble with the government. No longer having a newspaper, but still with a lot to say, he published anonymous hand-written night letters (shabnamah, pamphlets) against Nadir Shah. The king himself would read the letters with great interest. One of the pamphlets, in which he called the king “a jackal of the British,” became very popular and the police finally arrested him. After he was released from prison, he fled to Iran where he died in 1936. The main reason night letters were handwritten instead of typewritten, which is safer for maintaining anonymity, was the state’s strict policing of typewriters. The customs officials had to report to the government all traders who imported typewriters and the number of typewriters they imported. Stores had to record the identity of every buyer of typewriters and share them with the government. The state would not leave anything to chance with it came to information control.

At this time, the Afghan government embarked on a plan to restructure the economy that unintentionally left an important mark on the Afghan information order. The first step in the reform program was the establishment, in 1932, of Bank-i Milliy-i Afghan, the first bank in the country that eventually ended the dominance of Indian money traders in the financial sector. It was followed by state monopolization of much of the export and import sector, which cut the

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85 Prime Minister Muhammad Hashim Khan to Muhammad Ya‘qub Khan, Security Chief (Ra’is-i Tanzimiyyah), Mazar and Maymanah, 27 Sawr 1309/17 May 1930, NAA, Farman, No. 33 H (Makhsus).
86 Tabibi, Khatirat, 18.
87 TNA, FO 402/16, 139.
88 TNA, FO 402/13, 8.
89 TNA, FO 402/17, 254. Ahmad Ratib died in obscurity but his daughter, Anahita Ratibzad (1931–2014), grew up to become one of the most prominent members of the Afghan communist party, leaving a huge mark on the events of the second half of the century in Afghanistan.
90 Ghubar, Afghanistan Dar Masir-i Tariikh, 2000, 2:86.
91 On these mid-century economic reforms see, Crews, Afghan Modern; O’Halpin, “The Fate of Indigenous and Soviet Central Asian Jews in Afghanistan, 1933–1951.”
international traders off the Afghan market. A by-product of this nativism and state monopoly was a drop in circulation of the information that foreign caravans would usually bring to the Kabul bazaar. One group that was hit the most as a result of these economic restrictions was foreign intelligence agents. The British Embassy in Kabul that would usually use Indian trade companies to spread misinformation in the bazaar, found it “impracticable” to do the job on their own. In 1941, the British ambassador wrote to Delhi that “much use could be made of commercial channels for both oral and written circulation. Our main difficulty here is the complete lack of trustworthy representatives of British or Indian firms.” No help could come from India, as Foreign Office wrote back to him: “All, or almost all, dealings of British firms in that country are through Afghan monopoly companies.”

In 1933, Nadir was assassinated by a Hazara schoolboy, Abd al-Khaliq, during an award ceremony. His nineteen-year-old son Muhammad Zahir took the throne but it was Muhammad Hashim, Nadir’s brother, who run the government as the Prime Minister. He was as brutal as Nadir and put even greater importance on information control. Under his rule, in addition to official newspapers that published state propaganda, a novel way of public manipulation was devised: methodically spreading oral misinformation. This was an effort to manipulate the organic bazaar news. In 1941, for example, when a new army regiment was set up in Gardiz, the military decided to persuade locals that it was a bigger unit than it really was in order to deter possible attacks. The regiment commander, General Mir Ahmad Mavlayi, trained forty soldiers to wear civilian clothes and visit the local bazaar for spreading misinformation. They had to sit in shops and spread the rumor that the station had twelve thousand soldiers and was led by a man who knew the South very well. They also had to say that other army units were ready in Kabul and a telephone from the commander would be enough to get them to Gardiz in hours.

World War II in Europe caused a great political drama across the world, including in Kabul. During the war, Afghanistan remained neutral but the Allied and Axis legations in Kabul still competed to win over the Afghans. Even before the war, the rivalry among Western powers over influencing Afghans was intense. In 1930, for example, the British and the Russians, who were constantly plotting intrigues against each other in Afghanistan, maintained large embassies in Kabul

94 BL, IOR/R/12/124 File 388/41 (1).
that were “bigger than their embassies in Paris or Berlin.”\(^95\) This rivalry further intensified later during the war. In their propaganda, Western legations used both the print media and \textit{khabar-hay-i sar-i chawk}, or the “news from the square,” the phrase used for rumors in Kabul. The bazaar news they used were simple stories with some truth in them that would circulate easily in public. In 1944, for example, the arrival of an English language expert caused Axis embassies in Kabul to spread a story, with the help of their anti-British Afghan friends, that the British and Americans used English as a way to dominate the world.\(^96\) This type of information war was probably effective as the people of Kabul, particularly the educated class, all rooted for the Germans during the war. At the time the crimes of the Nazi regime were not yet well known in Afghanistan and people, according to an Afghan author, Muhammad Asif Ahang, who lived in Kabul at the time, considered Germany as an underdog that stood up against everyone else—countries like Britain and USSR that Afghan did not particularly like.\(^97\)

The government’s radio station, too, had a role in pro-Germany propaganda. Every night from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM, people would bring their own rugs to sit around the radio loudspeaker, installed on the main town square and several other spots in the city, to listen to the news of the war. Whenever the news was about the progress of German forces, according to Ahang, “everyone would burst into applause.”\(^98\) This popularity meant that Germans did not need to use secret ways to spread propaganda: German teachers of Nijat High School, for example, would award students who would do well in exams with postcards of Adolf Hitler.\(^99\) In addition to the government radio station, there was also a German radio in Kabul broadcasting in local languages. The German radio, however, was constantly jammed by the Russians, who had the technology in their embassy in Kabul, rendering it “unintelligible.”\(^100\)

People in Kabul were eager for any news of the war. They paid great attention to newspapers too. The official daily, \textit{Anis}, which had to publish on letter-size papers—because of the shortage of paper caused by trade disruptions due to the war—was so popular that every issue would sell out and those who could not buy a copy would borrow it from friends and neighbors.\(^101\) Afghanistan by now had also a wire service of its own, Bakhtar News Agency, established in 1939, which was a modest state-run news service that would initially collect news from around the country via telephone for it did not own telegraph equipment for the first few years.\(^102\) This was the state’s investment in the centralization of information circulation, giving it greater control over what the public should and should not

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\(^{95}\) Shirer, \textit{The Nightmare Years, 1930–1940}, chap. 1, epub. See also, Drephal, \textit{Afghanistan and the Coloniality of Diplomacy}, 96–97.

\(^{96}\) Burdett, \textit{Afghanistan Strategic Intelligence}, 2002, 3:627.

\(^{97}\) Muhammad Asif Ahang, telephone interview on 8 March 2014.

\(^{98}\) Ibid. See also, Rahmani, \textit{Chahar Chattah-i Sar-i Chawk-i Kabul}, 101–2.

\(^{99}\) Amin, \textit{Khatirat 1318–1371}, 14. For more on German efforts to win over the Afghan public see, BL, IOR/L/PS/12/335.

\(^{100}\) Humayun, “Zindagi Namah-i Ghulam Sarvar Humayun (Ba Qalam-i Khudash).”

\(^{101}\) Ibid.

\(^{102}\) Zarrah, \textit{Azhans-i Ittila‘ati Bakhtar}, 18.
know. Media outlets could not afford to send out correspondents to the provinces on their own and Bakhtar served as their source of provincial news. It provided foreign news as well, thanks to agreements it had with some international news agencies for exchanging content. The public’s frenzy over the war news, and the state’s censorship of the news went on until the end of the war.

In the seventeen years that Muhammad Hashim was the Prime Minister (1929–1946), Pashtun nationalism that started with Mahmud Tarzi’s writings a couple of decades earlier transformed into straight-up fascism. The state was now pushing the official ideology with full force. This alone, of course, cannot explain the suppressive nature of the Afghan state in this era. The other reason behind the surveillance and suppression was deep-seated insecurity: Muhammad Nadir and his four brothers, Muhammad Hashim, Shah Mahmud, Shah Wali, and Muhammad ‘Aziz, collectively known as “Musahiban Family,” felt like outsiders in the Arg. They were born in India and brought up there and spoke Persian with a thick Indian accent. Their rule (1929–1978) ended the Barakzay dynasty that governed Afghanistan for more than a hundred years (1826–1929). They were worried about Aman Allah Khan returning from Europe and taking his throne back. Their worries, however, were valid because the exiled amir, with the help of soviets and the Afghan “Amanists,” was indeed planning a possible return to power, especially after the 1933 assassination of Muhammad Nadir. The new rulers of Kabul, on the other hand, with help from the British, every time would disrupt his planning efforts. This was a fierce intelligence battle fought across several countries. In 1934 alone, Prime Minister Muhammad Hashim, twice sent people to Italy to assassinate Aman Allah Khan. Each time, the soviets would learn about the plot and notify the Italian police who would then arrest the assassins before they could carry out the job. The government’s harsh surveillance in Kabul, therefore, is better understood as part of the last episode of the Great Game that the British and the Soviets were playing behind the scenes in Afghanistan. The nationalist authoritarianism of the state was only part of the reason why the state was so sensitive to any sign of dissent and placed such importance on controlling information circulation.

CONCLUSION

After the war, King Muhammad Zahir, a mild-manned young man who rarely made any decision on his own finally made a major political decision: he fired his

103 Ibid.
105 Khalili, Yad-dasht-hay-i Ustad Khalil Allah Khalili, 169.
106 BL, IOR/R/12/3; BL, IOR/R/12/93 File 564/1.
107 Tikhonov, Nabard-i Afghani Istalin, 397–99. British officials outside Afghanistan helped nadir with intelligence by watching Aman Allah very closely and kept an eye on his followers as well. TNA, FO 402/15; TNA, FO 402/16.
uncle. On 6 May 1946, Radio Kabul surprised the public with the news of Muhammad Hashim’s “resignation.” The fact was that he did not resign but the king, with the possible help of his other uncle, Shah Mahmud, forced him out of office. Shah Mahmud (1946–1953) was promptly announced as the new Prime Minister. He was much different from his brother: he freed some political prisoners, allowed private media to operate, and held elections (municipal and parliamentarian)—reforms that led to the emergence of a second constitutionalist movement. His rule marked the end of a dark era and felt like the “breaking of ice and the end of a long, cold winter,” according to historian Siddiq Farhang who lived through that time in Kabul—part of it as a political prisoner, like most other Afghan intellectuals. This period of relative freedom did not last long, because the ruling family, especially the conservative members like Muhammad Dawud, started to fear the critical articles published in private newspapers might cause popular unrest. The king had to replace Shah Mahmud with Muhammad Dawud (1953–1963), his cousin, whose style of governance was similar to Muhammad Hashim’s when it came to political freedoms.

The first half of the century was a dramatic time for Afghanistan: a small, isolationist kingdom nestled behind high mountains that kept finding itself entangled in global events such as world wars. As noted earlier, at one point, the British and Russian embassies in Kabul were larger than their embassies in Paris and Berlin. Filled with diplomats, spies, scholars, and journalists, the superpowers wanted to cause trouble on each other’s frontiers—but at Afghanistan’s expense. It was a tough time to be an Afghan ruler. They made great efforts to form public opinions in their favor using traditional tools, such as Quranic verses and fear of God, as well as modern ones, such as newspapers and radio—or cannons that they used to blow up their enemies as a lesson to the onlookers. This was a formative time for the cultural history of Afghanistan as well. Many of the current controversies surrounding Afghan nationhood, such as language and identity, have their roots in this period.

The purpose of this article was to show the relationship between information practices and political power in Afghanistan. Controlling information is viewed as a form of controlling people’s opinions and behaviors. In an environment with a high rate of illiteracy, information control meant controlling people—physically. In contrast, in a country with a high rate of literacy, where information transmission happens technologically, the state’s information control would also be technological. The reason there was so much violence involved in the Afghan state’s pursuit of controlling what the public should and should not know was that it could not control public opinion technologically. It had to jail, kill, and surveil the bodies of its subjects in order to police the circulation of information. Censorship of, and misinformation in, print media were not effective in helping the state influence the public’s opinions or behaviors. The information communication culture in this period in Afghanistan is marked by violence and silence, creating a political environment that was hostile to the construction of a public sphere or the

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108 Farhang, _Afghanistan Dar Panj Qarn-i Akhir_, 446.
109 Ibid.
emergence of democratic aspirations. There were, however, brief episodes of exceptions as well as examples of public resistance against the state’s heavy-handed policing tactics.

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