

37

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INTELLIGENCE NOTE

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AFGHANISTAN: DR. ZAHIR'S MINISTRY - CAN IT SUCCEED?

On July 26 Dr. Abdul Zahir and his cabinet obtained the required vote of confidence from the Afghan Parliament to confirm their appointment by King Zahir. In so doing, the new Prime Minister and his colleagues have inherited serious political and economic problems which necessarily raise questions about the new government's longevity. The most immediate problem is the threat of a major crisis in the country's agricultural subsistence economy, severely impaired by two years of drought. The political problem is, however, more fundamental. Although Dr. Zahir appears to be far better prepared for his office than his predecessor, Nur Ahmed Etemadi, the institutional handicaps under which he must function limit his prospects for improving governmental performance.

Etemadi Government Died Slowly, Achieved Little. The Etemadi government had been the target of growing criticism since its reappointment in 1969. Parliament was dissatisfied with Etemadi's lackluster performance, which was marked by economic stagnation, bureaucratic lethargy and inefficiency, widespread corruption, and the growth of leftist forces. The "crisis" which led to Etemadi's resignation, however, resulted from an essentially minor issue: the Prime Minister's disregard of a parliamentary

RNAN-20

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- 2 -

nicety in replying to members' questions. This lapse served to crystallize the discontent, and a "no-confidence" vote was threatened. The proposed motion was dropped following efforts by King Zahir, but Etemadi nevertheless resigned on May 16, having concluded that his relations with Parliament were too strained to permit him to function. His departure marked the first time that Parliament had forced a change of government, and gains further significance since it appears to have been contrary to the King's wishes. On June 8 Dr. Zahir, the prominent and experienced Ambassador to Rome, former President of the lower house of Parliament (Wolesi Jirgah), and close friend of the King, was named to the Prime Ministry.

Domestic Problems the Major Challenge. The new government must turn prompt attention to the problem created by food and animal forage shortages. Although there is little evidence of rural or urban unrest at present, it could emerge this fall. Livestock losses, particularly karakul sheep, which are a major source of foreign exchange earnings, are a special source of concern. The government must also find ways to spur the lagging economy without adding to inflation. A prerequisite to economic growth will be new sources of revenue. Dr. Zahir's ministry may also be faced by a fresh outburst of student unrest, spurred by leftists but based in large part on the antiquated and inappropriate education system.

Afghanistan's new government is not expected to face serious problems on the international front. Its non-aligned foreign policy is expected to

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- 3 -

remain unchanged, and long-standing frictions in relations with Pakistan and Iran have already been alleviated. In an effort to improve relations with Pakistan, the Etemadi government avoided comment on the current crisis in East Bengal, although both official circles and the public sympathize with the Bengalis of Pakistan's East Wing; this approach is expected to continue. The Afghan dispute with Iran over division of the Helmand River waters is now fading as some progress toward resolution is being made, and Dr. Zahir's government will seek only to insure continued forward motion. Afghanistan's most important problem in the international sphere is closely related to its domestic economic concerns: the country's debt burden is steadily increasing while Afghanistan remains heavily dependent on foreign assistance for economic development.

What Future for Dr. Zahir? Dr. Zahir's vote of confidence is only the first step in what is expected to be an arduous journey. He faces a parliament composed largely of conservative and landed deputies who will resist efforts to modernize the economy and to obtain new revenues from taxes on land and livestock. Moreover, since political parties do not yet function, he faces a house in which discipline is singularly lacking. Dr. Zahir's willingness to exert leadership is open to question: he is respected, but aging and unambitious. His close ties with the King will help. Afghanistan's ruler has been the dominant force in the political structure and the decisive influence in securing the Parliament's approval of controversial proposals in the past. The King's role, however, has begun to be questioned as a result of Parliament's adamant attitude toward

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- 4 -

Etemadi. Since Dr. Zahir's influence will in large measure flow from the King, his responsibilities will continue to exceed his authority, and his margin for failure will be too small for comfort.

If Afghanistan is to continue to move into the modern world, Dr. Zahir's government will have to demonstrate its ability to function effectively. The establishment of the parliamentary system was a "grace and favor" step by King Zahir, and he may weary of his "experiment in democracy" if it provides only ineffectual government which, in the end, must turn to the King for the authority to carry out its programs. There are reports that a number of influential Afghans have concluded that failure by Dr. Zahir will justify a return to authoritarian rule. Given Etemadi's difficulties with the Parliament, the King's powers may already have been eroded, and an effort to abolish the "experiment" might prove difficult. In any case, failure by Dr. Zahir would probably open an unpredictable chapter in Afghanistan's history.

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