

The Return of the Kings

Oct 11, 2001



Articles & Testimony

It is looking increasingly likely that the clearest winner of the Afghan conflict could be Zahir Shah, the exiled king. At 86, he is seen by many as the most appropriate symbol of reconciliation. His politics may be diametrically opposed to those of the Taliban, but Zahir Shah is of the same Durrani Pathan clan as much of their leadership.

His 40-year reign ended in 1973, when his cousin bloodlessly overthrew the monarchy and declared Afghanistan a republic. The rest is tragic history.

Already, the Americans appear to have endorsed his eventual return. On Oct 5, the State Department policy planning chief, Richard Haass, arguably Colin Powell's closest adviser, visited Zahir Shah at his villa in Rome.

The re-accession of an exiled monarch after two decades of war seems all the more plausible because of the Cambodian precedent in 1993, when the United Nations facilitated the return of King Sihanouk to Cambodia after 20 years of bloody civil conflict.

However, it is worth asking what effect the Afghan king's accession could have elsewhere. Take Iran - another country long governed by an unpopular, undemocratic regime. Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah of Iran in 1979, and established an Islamic republic.

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At the time, the Shah was unpopular; most middle-aged Iranians I have met in Teheran freely admit that they initially supported Khomeini. He promised an Islamic democracy, and they were willing to take him at his word.

More than two decades and a bloody war later, there is little organised opposition in Iran. The student movement is disorganised; the reformers are impotent.

The Islamic republic survives in the absence of any viable alternative. But that is why the ayatollahs in Teheran are terrified that Zahir Shah will return to Kabul in the name of national reconciliation.

After all, waiting in exile is the much younger Reza Pahlavi, who recognises the mistakes of his autocratic father, the Shah, and presents a secular figure around whom Iranian youth might rally.

Indeed, just last week, disaffection was once again bubbling to the surface, with reports of large anti-government demonstrations in Teheran and Isfahan.

While democracy may still be far away in the Muslim Middle East, many of its people are growing tired of living under radical Leftist, ethnic chauvinist or fundamentalist regimes.

Monarchies may not be ideal but they seem to promise moderation and stability. If Zahir Shah does return, the reverberations will be felt far beyond Kabul's dusty streets and broken palaces. ❖

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