Two decades ago, two men met in Kabul, in the living room of a minor writer, impecunious translator and political dreamer named Nur Mohammad Taraki. What resulted was celebrated in January 1985, by lengthy statements and anniversary articles in Afghan and Soviet media, as the beginning of a political party which now claims to have 120 000 members and to run Afghanistan. The membership claim is probably a gross exaggeration, and the claim that the party runs Afghanistan is true only in the narrow sense that it is the local link in the transmission of control from elsewhere. The basic significance of that meeting is that it was a step toward the establishment of Russian authority in Kabul and the present Soviet effort to crush Afghan resistance to alien domination. It was a naïve, possibly idealistic, beginning of what has become a savage guerrilla war that is destroying the Afghanistan which those men professed to want to improve.

The meeting on 1 January 1965, is officially regarded as the founding congress of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, (PDPA) ‘the party of the working class and all workers of Afghanistan.’ In neither its title nor its official publicity does the party call itself Communist, although its public rhetoric is the modern Soviet version of Marxism. In its secret internal documents, however, the party clearly identified itself as part of the world Communist movement led by the Soviet Union and described Taraki at the time of the founding congress as being a ‘long-standing Communist’.  

USSR ROLE IN FOSTERING A COMMUNIST MOVEMENT

The Soviet Union has been cautious about publicly accepting the PDPA as a Communist party, although there are many reasons to believe that the Soviets played a major – perhaps crucial – role behind the scenes in fostering the development of a Communist movement in Afghanistan. When Soviet leaders describe ‘countries
of the socialist community', Afghanistan is not listed; it is put in the secondary category of 'countries that have chosen the path of socialist development'. This is a more cautious placement that leaves Moscow some room for maneuver on its degree of commitment. It also helps preserve the fiction that Afghanistan under Soviet domination remains an independent country and a valid member of the non-aligned movement. Nonetheless, the PDPA is proud of its association in the Communist movement, claiming 'relations with more than 52 revolutionary parties, movements, and progressive organizations'.

The Afghan Communist party is one of the newest on the world scene. Its history is remarkable in that the PDPA came to power only 13 years after its official formation. But within 15 years of that formation, it had collapsed into its present condition of fronting for foreign control. It goes on claiming to be 'a patriotic party' working 'to improve the life of our people and make their progress toward a glorious future and the creation of a just new society irreversible'. In fact, the party is riven by rivalries, weakened by incompetence, rejected by the majority of Afghanistan's people, and demoralized by a realization that it survives only as the tool of a foreign occupying power.

Communism in Afghanistan, as originally in such other countries as Mongolia and in a sense also China, is an example of the adaptation of Karl Marx's thinking about proletarian power to the conditions of countries too backward to have significant numbers of industrial workers. Not until the 1930s did Afghanistan develop commercial agriculture on a significant enough scale to engage in international trade, and centralized banking began to supplement traditional village moneylending only as an adjunct to that early trade in cotton and a few other products. In the Marxist sense, there was hardly any proletariat, because there was little industry, until the beginning of modernization in the 1950s, and even then it remained small. Communism therefore had to develop out of another class. It lacked even the justification found in some Western countries of bourgeois reformers' arrogating to themselves the task of educating and leading the proletariat, because there was almost nothing to educate or lead.

In the first few years after the Bolshevik Revolution, when enthusiasm was high in Moscow for Communism's sweeping through the world, Afghanistan was not considered fertile ground. It was too feudal, medieval. While beginning there in 1920 their first foreign aid