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Before We Judge: History, Power, and the Legacy of “Sultan Ali Keshtmand”

Life and death are inseparable and universal realities that govern the existence of all living beings—humans, animals, plants, and marine life alike. They occur without discrimination and without exception. Human beings, too, are born, and after a certain span of time, inevitably pass away. Regardless of the immediate cause, if nothing intervenes, old age itself ultimately becomes the natural cause of death. Political inclinations, ideological positions, and religious affiliations have no bearing on this fundamental law of nature. Therefore, it is neither morally appropriate nor humane to rejoice at the death of someone simply because they did not share our views or stood on a different side of the political or ideological spectrum.

With the passing of Sultan Ali Keshtmand, former Prime Minister of Afghanistan and a member of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a wide range of reactions has emerged across social media. Some responses have been sympathetic, others measured and impartial, while some have been openly hostile—often reflecting personal grievances or unresolved sentiments rooted in the PDPA period when it held power. Personally, I am not concerned with whether individuals agree or disagree in their assessments. However, I firmly believe—and respectfully urge others—that before passing judgment, it is essential to carefully review and thoughtfully consider the broader historical context: namely, the past 275 years of Khorasan’s history and the last century of Afghanistan.

In this land, many leaders and governments have not arisen from the genuine will of the people. Rather, they have often been shaped, imposed, or sustained by external powers in accordance with their strategic interests and the prevailing geopolitical circumstances of their time. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that during the 1960s and 1970s, political life in Afghanistan was notably vibrant. Various left- and right-wing groups actively participated in political discourse and struggle, particularly in Kabul and other major urban centres, contributing to a dynamic—albeit contested—political environment.

Throughout Afghanistan’s modern history, a wide array of political systems has taken form: foreign-influenced administrations, Islamic governments, monarchies, authoritarian regimes, leftist movements (including those aligned with the former Soviet Union, the Khalq and Parcham factions, as well as Maoist groups influenced by China), and right-wing Islamist parties. Each of these systems, in its own way, reflects both the internal conditions of the country and the external influences shaping it at the time.

A careful review of Afghanistan’s political trajectory over these 275 years demonstrates that the emergence of truly representative leadership—rooted in the genuine will of the people—has been exceedingly rare, if not entirely absent. Even when such opportunities appeared to arise, they were undermined by intense and often chaotic rivalries for power, as well as by the gradual weakening and eventual decline of the Naderi monarchy. Consequently, most rulers either inherited their authority or functioned as proxies for foreign powers. Many ascended to power with the direct or indirect support of external actors such as Russia, Britain, Pakistan, or the United States, often relying on military backing and media influence. In reality, very few—if any—have come to power through authentic popular support or sustained grassroots struggle. This cycle has persisted with remarkable continuity.

Moreover, certain factions, under the banner of “jihad,” imposed devastating and destructive wars upon the population. Following the collapse of the PDPA government under Dr. Najibullah, Kabul descended into a brutal civil war. Thousands of rockets were launched indiscriminately into various parts of the city, particularly from areas such as Char Asiab to the south. These attacks claimed the lives of thousands of civilians, and countless families were forced to bury their loved ones within the courtyards of their own homes. Such conflicts cannot be characterized as a genuine religious struggle, nor did they represent a legitimate path toward popular sovereignty. Rather, they were violent contests for power that resulted in the widespread destruction of the city and immense suffering for its people. There remains no moral or historical justification for such

acts of brutality. These events neither fully absolve nor exclusively condemn any single faction; instead, they point to a broader and shared responsibility among various leaders and groups for the devastation and bloodshed that have marked the past half-century.

Jihadi groups played a significant role in the looting of cities, the destruction of national infrastructure, their engagement with corrupt externally backed regimes, and the conditions that ultimately contributed to the rise of the Taliban. The name of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, for instance, remains closely associated with the rocket attacks on Kabul and is deeply etched in the city's collective memory as a dark and painful chapter of its history. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that other leaders of jihadi factions were involved in similar patterns of political bargaining, violence, and abuses against rival groups. Likewise, during various periods, it was not uncommon for some members and supporters of PDPA governments to seek refuge in Western countries, while, conversely, certain individuals affiliated with jihadi groups found refuge in socialist states—highlighting the complex and often contradictory alignments that have characterized Afghan political history.

Despite all these realities, if one evaluates the matter from the standpoint of governance and economic management—while considering the significant constraints and challenges of the time—it can be argued that Sultan Ali Keshtmand left behind a comparatively stronger record than many prime ministers and leaders of the past century. This assessment, however, must be approached with intellectual honesty and fairness, free from personal bias, ethnic considerations, or political and religious prejudice.

Finally, it is important to remember that, according to religious belief, every individual is ultimately accountable for their actions before divine judgment. Therefore, it is both wise and appropriate for us to exercise restraint and caution in our own judgments. The final reckoning of human deeds does not lie in our hands but rests with God alone. We are neither entitled nor qualified to judge in the place of the Creator.