**Conference on “Ethnic Nationalism and Politicized Religion in the Pakistan-Afghanistan Borderland”**

On Monday, 22nd May, 2023, CPPG in collaboration with the Afghanistan Program for Peace and Development (University of Notre Dame), and the Keston Center for Religion, Politics, and Society (Baylor University) organized an International Hybrid Conference on "Ethnic Nationalism and Politicized Religion in the Pakistan-Afghanistan Borderland". Dr. Jonathan S. Addleton (Rector of FCCU), Dr. Saeed Shafqat (Professor & Founding Director of CPPG), and Dr. Charles Ramsey (Keston Center for Religion, Politics, and Society) welcomed the guest speakers, which included many notable scholars, professors, and personalities from different parts of the world. The guest list included; Aref Dostyar, Ryan Brasher, Abdullah Burki, Dr. Husnul Amin, Dr. Qasim Wafayezada, Jamal Malik, Muhammad Faiz Zaland, Dr. Niamat Ibrahimi, Dr. Musa Shafiq, Dr. Abdullah Khoso and Dr. Muhammad Rovidad Khan who shared their thoughtful insights and commendable works about the pertinent topic. The sessions were moderated by Dr. Saeed Shafqat, Raheem-ul-Haque (Assistant Professor CPPG), Dr. Altaf Khan (Professor & Dean of Humanities FCCU), and Dr. Charles Ramsey.

Ryan Brasher and Abdullah Burki while discussing “Afghan Refugees in KPK” compared the levels of Pakistaniyat and diasporic nationalism in the Afghan Refugees. This was seen in the light of primordialism/ constructivism, collective and communicative memory making, and the role of religion and individual religiosity in their lives. It was pertinent to note that their identity seemed constructive i.e. flexible and multi-dimensional rather than primordial; fixed and unchangeable. Religious education and individual religiosity i.e. connection with Salaat and Quran seems to have a positive relationship with Pakistaniyat and a negative/mixed relationship with Afghaniyat. Urdu language acquisition showcased effects on identification with both Pakistaniyat and Afghaniyat. While engagement in cultural and communicative memory-making showed a positive relationship with Afghaniyat. Time spent in Pakistan since childhood also relates positively to Pakistaniyat and negatively to Afghaniyat.

Taking the discussion forward, Aref Dostyar sharing his insights about "Ethnicity and the Conditions of Dialogue" discussed the ethnic element in the Afghanistan conflict, which according to him is neither reductionist nor in denial. It is overlapping. After 2021, this division became much more visible and the conditions of dialogue between different ethnic groups is not conducive. All the ethnicities should be brought under one roof and the local groups in Afghan territory must be empowered to combat the persisting conflicts within the region.

In the succeeding session, Qasim Wafayezada talked about "The Interplay of Ethno-nationalism and Islamism and the Taliban’s Hybrid Extremism". He contrasted the two phenomena, Islamism and Nationalism, where the former focuses on the re-institutionalization of Ummah and the Glorious past while the latter sees self-determination and the formation of new and independent Islamic states as its core principle. But he argued, particularly in the case of Afghanistan, now Islamism has become more localized producing a hybrid extremism in collaboration with nationalist forces.

Further adding to the discussion, Dr. Jamal Malik talking on “Salafising Hanafiyya? Madrasa teachers in Afghanistan, state actors, Salafis” discussed that to counter globalization, the Afghan Hanafiya have adopted the universal Islamic framework which has made madrasas turn into platforms for the politicization of religion resulting into the acceleration of the jihadist activities. Any attempt to reform this narrative and syllabus is simply rejected. One prime example is the Salafist effort to reform traditional Afghan madrasa through a curriculum change which was rejected for being "too Salafist".

Muhammad Faiz Zaland further shared his thoughts on "The conflicting synthesis of the Taliban's religious and cultural identity" by stating that the Taliban is a neo-fundamentalist group that emerged in response to the Soviet invasion and the atrocities committed during the civil war. Taliban exhibit a strong adherence to traditional values however the tribal landscape poses challenges to the Taliban's insurgency at the domestic level. Therefore, their government strategy leans more towards religion. Additionally, several countries like Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, etc. have caused ideological and political divisions within Afghanistan.

To combat this, Taliban and external pressures, there is a need for empowering Afghani political parties, tribal elders, civil society organizations, media outlets, and progressive religious scholars to encourage dialogue and advancement in the longer run.

Following the question of the Taliban's national or religious inclination, Dr. Niamat Ibrahimi shed light on "Understanding the Violent Intersection of Ethnic Nationalism and Islamic Fundamentalism". He argued that the Taliban is a prime example of a religiously nationalist group that has a fundamentalist interpretation of religion and ethno-nationalist tendencies. They are ambitious and aim to shed the colonial past and simultaneously combat Western interests and policies. However, Ibrahimi was of the view that the Taliban were not a popular force. They are not celebrated as professed through different narratives.

Dr. Husnul Amin discussed "Ruptures, Negotiations, and Assimilations in Pashtuns' Ethno-nationalism in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis" arguing that it is pertinent to understand how Jihadi Activism, Pakistani state manifestation, and ascender of new Pashtun factors align with each other. He discussed that following the ruptures of conflict and negotiations of Pashtuns with the Pakistani state have brought transformation in the Pashtun community. The new generation of nationalist youth, equipped with technology, education, and awareness, challenges the hegemony of the famous Pashtun families, in one way redefining nationalism and their connection with the state. The role of culture, arts, literature, language, music, and poetry has further helped in the re-articulation of the Pashtun self.

Whereas, Musa Shafiq talked about “The Economic Impact of Insurgency: An Economic Well-being Assessment” stating that the Taliban's militant insurgencies have negatively impacted Afghanistan's economy and have caused severe economic collapse. The insurgency has outweighed the positive impact of foreign aid, military intervention, and other development initiatives. Applying the Bayesian structural time series causal impact model from 2001 to 2020, it is seen that despite aid flow and military intervention, the Taliban insurgency had a significant causal impact on Afghanistan's economic well-being. Following 2012, well-being quickly diverged from counterfactual predictions as without insurgency the average growth rate would have been 6.2. Moreover, short-term positive impacts were seen from aid dependency while the long-term sustainability of aid helping in economic well-being is questionable. Hence, a holistic approach encompassing economic development and democracy building is crucial for long-term economic stability and well-being in fragile states.

Dr. Abdullah Khoso and Dr. Muhammad Rovidad Khan shared their thoughts on "Pakistani Ethnic Political Parties' Political and religious narratives and Practices: Successes and Failures in the recent past". They discussed how the political parties, either ethical or national, maneuver religious narratives. It has been seen that those who use anti-religious narratives are unable to make strong social movements or garner public support that could transfer into election success in the provincial or national assembly.

Each presentation was followed by a stimulating Q&A session. Concluding the symposium Dr. Shafqat pointed out that Pakistan- Afghanistan Borderland remains a sensitive strategic region and its social, political, and economic complexities remain understudied, the symposium was an important step in that direction. He applauded the contributions of Dr. Ramsey in bringing a diverse group of scholars into a hybrid mode. Dr. Ramsey thanked all the participants, particularly scholars who were speaking from different time zones. He also thanked the CPPG and its staff for hosting the symposium.

Finally, Dr. Addleton, Rector of FCCU, applauded the symposium presenters for their scholarly contributions and said will look forward to the publication of papers. He extended a special word of appreciation for this tri-universities collaboration and remarked this is a partnership that must be strengthened and sustained. Dr. Addleton congratulated the students for raising thought-provoking questions and acknowledged the contributions of faculty, staff, students, and all the participants for making the symposium a success.