Rebel Poet's Death Leaves 40 Years of Epic Afghan Work Unfinished

He was a Marxist revolutionary and minister in Afghanistan's short-lived communist government. But Sulaiman Layeq spent the last decades of his life writing an epic poem about an Islamist insurgent.

By Mujib Mashal

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KABUL, Afghanistan — As the Afghan poet and former leftist revolutionary Sulaiman Layeq was suffering from blast wounds that never healed, his verses dried up.

In the final months before his death, his children would bring Mr. Layeq the incomplete draft of his magnum opus that had occupied him for four decades.

In 800-pages of rhyming verse, the poet wrestles with the thoughts of the epic's main subject: a young member of the Islamist insurgency that would eventually topple the communist government in which Mr. Layeq served as a minister into the early 1990s.

In verse after verse, chapter after chapter, the poem examines the life and thoughts of the insurgent, friends who had heard accounts from Mr. Layeq said. But the epic is also a treatise on why Afghanistan's tribal and feudal injustices were never solved either by Marxist ideology or by Islamist militancy. Each ideology briefly held the country in its thrall, only to leave behind a legacy of chaos and blood.

But Mr. Layeq was unable to finish his masterpiece before dying.

"Nothing comes to mind," Mr. Layeq would tell his son, Zmarak, on his deathbed, pushing aside the manuscript and returning to the little he was still capable of doing after the blast: reading.

Mr. Layeq died at 90 in late July of wounds he had suffered in a Taliban bombing last September, after months of treatment in Kabul, India and Germany.

At his hilltop burial in the capital, Kabul, on Tuesday, as relatives, friends and a few dozen old "comrades" of a long-dead leftist revolution gathered for a final farewell, it almost felt fitting that Mr. Layeq had left his poem about the insurgent incomplete. The war Mr. Layeq and his colleagues helped start with a bloody coup in 1978 remains an unfinished chapter in the country's history. An insurgency still rages, and today Afghanistan's future is probably at its most uncertain.

Relatives and friends gathered for Mr. Layeq's burial in Kabul. Among them was Dawood Popa, a retired colonel, seated at center, who helped install a communist government in Afghanistan. Mujib Mashal/The New York Times

But in graveside conversations under a U.S. military blimp that hovered in the sky, there was quiet talk of validation for the old revolutionaries.

In the final days of Afghanistan's communist government, as the Soviet troops who were propping up the country's leadership withdrew, the communists tried to convince the United States to rein in the Islamist insurgents it had backed and bring them to the table for a peaceful settlement.

But peace never came.

The U.S. military is now leaving Afghanistan after a nearly 20-year quagmire of its own. At its peak, the United States had about 100,000 troops in Afghanistan — roughly as many as the Soviets sent.

And a similar dilemma faces the current government, just as propped up and bankrolled by the Americans, as the one that faced the communists: Will the Taliban — which now counts Russia as an ally — push for the collapse of another government?

Much of Afghanistan's spiral into chaos dates back four decades to when the leftist revolutionaries, after taking over the government by assassinating the first president of the country's republic, turned to murdering each other, unleashing brutal violence on anyone who dissented and provoking a civil war that still rages.

The factions that took power in 1978 were so ruthless that in just one year after their coup, two more presidents had been slain. The first communist president was reportedly suffocated by pillows on the orders of his rival who, just a month after taking power, was himself mowed down by elite Soviet forces as he lunched with family and friends.

Mr. Layeq's comrades were left wondering what might have been.

"If we weren't so fractured, so divided, this hill wouldn't be full of our martyrs," said Dawood Popal, a 72-year-old retired colonel who was an early member of the revolution. "Sometimes, when I think about it, I wonder if my heart is made of stone — how come it doesn't explode?"

The checkpoint in Kabul where the car bombing took place in September. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Mr. Popal said he had spent time in jail with Mr. Layeq right before the coup. What he liked about Mr. Layeq was his unwavering honesty, which meant he was often marginalized in the early years of the government he helped bring to power — and even jailed by it.

Crouched at the edge of the grave as Mr. Layeq was lowered into it, Mr. Popal wept. "Your books, your poems will remain with me," he said.

Mr. Layeq was an unlikely early champion of the leftist movement in Afghanistan. He came from a lineage of religious leaders and was trained in Islamic seminaries. He was a journalist and editor before helping the communist People's Democratic Party violently seize power.

He reached prominence during the final years of the communist government when, as the minister of tribal and border affairs, he played a key role in pushing for reconciliation with the C.I.A.-backed insurgents seeking to overthrow President Najibullah.

When the Soviets withdrew in 1989, Mr. Najibullah's government tried for three years to moderate its policies and reached out to the United States to balance the rivaling Cold War powers. But it was too late. His administration was overrun in 1992, and he was later hanged. Mr. Layeq fled Afghanistan, eventually settling in Germany.

A photograph provided by the family of Sulaiman Layeq showing him in his youth.

In recent decades, Mr. Layeq, who returned to Afghanistan in 2005, became deeply reflective about the past, and critical of it.

In interviews, he said the politics of the government he joined had been misguided — becoming so extreme in its ideas, and going so deep into how people lived their lives, that it simply wasn't acceptable. He even proposed submitting himself to justice if it would help heal the wounds of the victims of the four decades of war.

"They can start with me — I am a volunteer to go to a tribunal," Mr. Layeq said. "In the games of powers, in the games of parties, in the rivalries of international giants here, a nation has been sacrificed, a nation has been oppressed. We can't count the widows and orphans."

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Throughout his political career, Mr. Layeq wrote prolifically in both of Afghanistan's primary languages, Pashto and Persian, publishing about a dozen collections of poetry. His verses became anthems to the revolution, slogans shouted at rallies:

> If the road home is carpeted with thorns
>
> We'll bare our feet and dance the way.

His son, Zmarak, said Mr. Layeq left behind about 70 volumes of unpublished political diaries. He was such a disciplined archivist that he would stay up late into the night during his provincial assignments as a party leader to record the events of his day.

It was on one of those provincial assignments in the east of the country around 1980 that Mr. Layeq met a young insurgent who became the subject of his unfinished, 40-year epic, "A Man from the Mountains."

His soldiers brought before him a young man — "so well proportioned, it was as if his body had been carved from marble," — on charges that he was a "counterrevolutionary," what they called the guerrillas.

Mr. Layeq said he pardoned him. But much to his surprise, the young guerrilla refused — and even confessed to his crime. When Mr. Layeq asked why he had done so, the young man, according to a Los Angeles Times article from 1989, replied: "You gave me a kindness in offering your pardon. So I return the kindness. I give you the truth, for I have nothing else to offer."

The young man, whose "face spoke of strength and power beyond the imagination," lived and grew in Mr. Layeq's imagination for 40 years and many thousands of lines of verse, as the poet aged and looked for answers to Afghanistan's suffering.

Last September, Mr. Layeq left his small Soviet-built apartment and was on his way to his office at the Academy of Sciences when he was wounded in a Taliban car-bombing — a young insurgent of a different generation ramming his explosive-packed vehicle into one carrying American and NATO soldiers, the moment captured on camera.

During a reporter's visit to the hospital days later, Mr. Layeq was still dazed. In his mind, this had been an assassination attempt on a lifelong revolutionary. Perhaps forgetting, because of the blast, some of his own contrition, he kept repeating how proud he was that his convictions, his beliefs, still had assassins out to get him at his age.