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The King of Afghanistan

Benign monarch who was deposed after four decades of languid rule, but returned as 'Father of the Nation'

JULIAN SIMMONDS

Zahir Shah in Rome, shortly before his return to Afghanistan in 2002, with a picture of himself when younger

MUHAMMAD ZAHIR SHAH, who has died aged 92, was King of Afghanistan for 40 years; after being deposed in a bloodless palace coup in 1973 he spent most of the rest of his life in comfortable exile in Rome, occasionally emerging into public view during crises in his homeland, and returning only after the defeat of the Taliban.

He was obliged to develop a languid approach to kingship during the long period of political impotence that he endured as a cosseted boy-king, installed by his more powerful uncles when his father, Nadir Shah, was assassinated in a dynastic feud. When he eventually emerged as a ruler in his own right, 10 years after his accession, his policy was liberal, progressive and humane, but marred by political instability which his tendency to vacillation only exacerbated. His 10 years of effective rule unleashed forces in his volatile kingdom that turned against him and later against his entire dynasty, when a communist *coup d'état* plunged the country into a long period of war and chaos which has yet to come to an end.

Muhammad Zahir Shah was born in Kabul on October 15 1914, the only surviving son of Nadir Shah. He was educated in a special class for princes at the Habibia school in Kabul, then the city's only modern school, and later at *lycées* in France, where his father was sent as diplomatic envoy.

Nadir Shah seized power in Kabul in 1929, and the following year Zahir Shah returned to Afghanistan, where his father began grooming him as his successor, an unprecedented step in a country with no tradition of primogeniture. He was enrolled at the Infantry School, and in 1931 married his cousin, Hamera Jan, eldest daughter of the minister of court, Ahmad Shah.

His education complete, the young prince was appointed privy counsellor, deputy war minister and minister of education. Despite these duties, the young Zahir Shah found Kabul dull after France and spent much of his time playing tennis, riding and shooting. Until a new palace was built he lived in a crumbling ancient citadel in the centre of Kabul.

On November 8 1933 his father was shot as he officiated at a prize-giving ceremony for students in the courtyard of the royal palace. The prompt, politically astute actions of the king's brother, the defence minister Hashim Khan, in the hours after the killing secured the relative stability of the country for the next 40 years. The king's body was whisked away, and his death kept secret until Hashim Khan had obtained vows from his brothers to accept the king's son as his successor. Hashim Khan succeeded in persuading all to fall in behind Zahir Shah, who was proclaimed king at six o'clock that evening.

He was given the regnal title "al-Mutawakkil 'ala Allah, Pairaw-i Din-i Mati-i Islam", meaning "confident in God, follower of the firm religion of Islam". Hashim Khan became prime minister, ruling the country like a virtual dictator for the next 12 years, while Zahir Shah performed occasional ceremonial duties and shot duck twice a week. For the next 10 years, he rarely left Kabul, and then only when surrounded by a massive bodyguard.

By the time Hashim Khan resigned, due to illness, in 1945, the British representative in Kabul wrote that Zahir Shah was "quiet and unassuming, with pleasant manners", though "resigned to a life of idleness and pleasure. It may be that years of confinement to the routine of a constitutional monarch have unfitted him to take a prominent and useful part in his country's administration." He was said to be taking a greater interest in his duties, but "is not one of the world's workers".

It was not until he had been on the throne for 20 years that Zahir Shah began to chafe under the restrictions of his position, and in 1953 he and his older cousin (and brother-in-law) Daud Khan, a close friend from infantry school, conspired to remove their uncle, the ineffectual Shah Mahmoud, from the prime ministership. Daud Khan assumed the post, and held it for 10 years. Zahir Shah's life continued much as it had before.

In 1962, after nearly 30 years as King, Zahir Shah felt confident enough in his own abilities to attempt to establish his own power base. He began to tour the country, with the aim of cementing relations with tribal leaders. In March 1963 he demanded Daud's resignation, and, unexpectedly, Daud tendered it.

Zahir Shah's 10 years of active rule began auspiciously. In 1964 he promulgated a new constitution, which established parliamentary democracy and stripped the royal family of many of their traditional powers, as well as allowing a free press and free elections. Although he introduced a measure to allow parliamentary parties, he never signed it, fearing that parties would organise themselves along ethnic lines and threaten the country's precarious political equilibrium – a serious problem in a country in which 20 languages were spoken, and which had never been moulded into a cohesive nation.

Although Zahir Shah's liberal reforms seemed enlightened and progressive, they ultimately failed because he showed insufficient leadership in making them take root. One prime minister after another was appointed and then dismissed, as Zahir Shah was loath to relinquish power that he did not effectively exercise. While the countryside was left to follow its traditional means of subsistence, an increasing urban middle class agitated for change to the country's feudal power structure.

Zahir Shah's good relations with tribal leaders prevented the outbreak of conflict within the country, and in foreign policy he carefully balanced relations with the Soviet Union and the West, by accepting development funding from both the Soviet Union and the United States. Yet while peace and prosperity prevailed on these fronts, Daud Khan was building support among the Kabul middle class, who wanted a Leftist regime to replace the monarchy.

In 1973, while in London to have an operation on an eye that he had injured playing volleyball, Zahir Shah was overthrown by Daud Khan, who abolished the monarchy and proclaimed a republic. Zahir Shah sent his cousin a courteous letter of resignation, and retired to his villa in Rome. Daud himself was overthrown in a violent communist revolution five years later, which resulted in direct Soviet military intervention at the end of December 1979.

In 1983, at the height of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, Zahir Shah was actively, though cautiously, involved in plans to head a government in exile, but he could achieve no consensus among the increasingly powerful Islamist factions. His name was raised again in this connection during the American-led war against Afghanistan's extreme Islamist Taliban government in the autumn of 2001, and the following year he returned to his country to open the Loya Jirga which endorsed his clansman Hamid Karzai as president.

That he should have been called upon at a time of crisis showed that whatever his merits as King, he was invaluable as an embodiment of Afghan political legitimacy, as the heir to a tradition going back to the founding of Afghanistan in the mid-18th century by his ancestor Ahmad Shah Durrani.

Given the title "Father of the Nation", Zahir Shah moved into a palace in the presidential compound, where he died yesterday.

Zahir Shah was the father of two daughters and six sons, of whom four survive him.

Don Arden

Explosive manager of rock bands who revelled in his reputation for violent intimidation as the Al Capone of Pop

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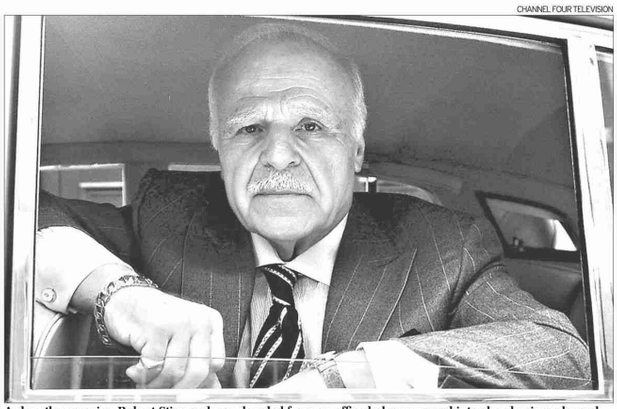

Arden: the occasion Robert Stigwood was dangled from an office balcony passed into showbusiness legend

DON ARDEN, who died on Saturday aged 81, rejoiced in his reputation as the most infamous manager in the history of rock music – a reputation which led to him being known variously as "Mr Big", "The English Godfather" and "The Al Capone of Pop".

In a long and colourful career, Arden was responsible for building the careers of such performers as Gene Vincent, the Small Faces, Electric Light Orchestra and Black Sabbath. But he became best known for his fiercely uncompromising business methods, which were alleged to include beatings, kneecappings, threats of defenestration and the frequent deployment of muscular assistants, sometimes with firearms. In later years he also achieved a sort of reflected fame as the father of the television personality Sharon Osbourne, whose similarly forthright demeanour led her own brother once to describe her as "Don in a skirt".

Arden's notoriety derived largely from an incident in 1966 when a rival manager, Robert Stigwood, attempted to lure away one of his groups, the Small Faces. Determined to teach Stigwood a lesson, Arden arrived at his fourth floor office in Cavendish Square with a team of heavies, personally lifted Stigwood from his chair, dragged him to the balcony and threatened to throw him into the street below if he attempted to steal one of his acts again. What Arden had not realised was that his accomplices had planned an extra scene to the drama. Tearing Stigwood from Arden's grasp, they manhandled the unfortunate victim over the balcony and made as if to drop him, before depositing him on the floor of the office. Arden declared himself satisfied with the outcome – Stigwood, he recalled, "never bothered me again" – although he also expressed surprise at how the incident quickly became a part of showbusiness legend, speculating that it would be memorialised on his gravestone: "Don Arden – Hung Robert Stigwood Out Of Window. Ha ****ing Ha."

Arden was born Harry Levy on January 4 1926 at Cheetham Hill, Manchester. His father Lazarus did piece work in a raincoat factory and had ambitions for his son to join him. But from an early age Harry had set his sights on showbusiness. As a child he had sung as a cantor in the local synagogue, and by the age of 14 he was appearing on stage as a professional singer and comedian, offering impressions of Winston Churchill and Al Jolson. A canny agent suggested he should change his name to Don Arden, after the Hollywood actor Robert Arden.

Arden was just 5ft 7in, but as a young man had shown a dedication to personal fitness, developing a physique which led to his being nicknamed "Tarzan". He also demonstrated a volatile temper. At the age of 19 he was banned from performing on the circuit of Hippodrome theatres for two years after punching a stage manager who had called him "a ****ing Jew boy". Despite this setback Arden went on to top the bill at the London Palladium and appeared as a special guest on television's *Black and White Minstrel Show*.

In the mid 1950s, realising that his long-term prospects as an entertainer were limited, Arden shrewdly reinvented himself as an agent and promoter. He was among the first to realise the commercial possibilities of rock and roll, which most people dismissed as a fad. Eschewing such home-grown acts as Cliff Richard (whom Arden dismissed as "pathetic") and Billy Fury ("not fit to wipe Eddie Cochran's arse"), Arden organised package tours bringing American artists such as Sam Cooke, Brenda Lee and Little Richard to Britain for the first time. He was particularly close to the singer Gene Vincent, an alcoholic who walked with a limp and carried a loaded pistol wherever he went – "a habit," Arden confessed, "I would later adopt myself". Arden also attempted to bring Elvis Presley to Britain by holding out the bait of an appearance on behalf of one of the Duke of Edinburgh's charities, but the plan faltered when "The King" stipulated that he should receive a personal invitation from the Duke himself.

In the 1960s Arden turned his attentions to British artists, proving highly effective in managing such acts as the Nashville Teens, Amen Corner and the Small Faces, who had five consecutive hit singles under his direction, one of which, *All Or Nothing*, he produced himself. Arden would later confess that one reason his acts were so successful was that he regularly bribed DJs and paid young mothers to buy singles at shops which supplied sales figures for the charts.

But he dismissed suggestions that this was cheating as: "absolute rubbish. I had a saying: you can't polish a turd. In other words, if the record's no good to begin with it still won't be any good after you've wasted your time and money getting it played."

His fiercely patriarchal approach to management, investing large sums of money in supporting and promoting his artists, but expecting unwavering loyalty in return, inspired a peculiar mixture of admiration and terror in his acts. Kenney Jones, the drummer of the Small Faces, once described him as "a kind of Jewish teddy bear. You liked him immediately because he was enthusiastic. Whenever he said 'I'll do this, I'll do that' – he did and it came true." However, another group who sought to leave his roster, Skip Bifferty, was allegedly obliged to seek police protection after being visited by enforcers attempting to persuade them of the error of their ways.

Even within the rough and tumble world of Tin Pan Alley, few could match Arden's stamina for a feud, and his enthusiasm for retribution when he felt he had been cheated. Even before the incident with Robert Stigwood, he had threatened to throw Allen Klein out of the window of his 24th floor office in New York, and he once ground a lighted cigar into the forehead of another rival, Clifford Davis.

Arden enjoyed playing up to his image as a ruthless operator. He affected broad-lapelled gangster suits, and hung a picture of himself impersonating Edward G Robinson on his office wall. "A lot of what he did had its beginnings in humour," one associate remembered. "And socially he could be very, very funny. A great deal of what he said was bluff. But later on the role took over the man."

Arden enjoyed his greatest success in the 1970s, with Electric Light Orchestra, Black Sabbath and – as a solo artist – Sabbath's erstwhile singer Ozzy Osbourne. He founded his own record label, Jet, and in 1977, relocated to America, buying Howard Hughes's Hollywood mansion. By now, Arden had brought his son David and daughter Sharon into the business. In 1982 Sharon married Ozzy Osbourne, and Arden gave her Osbourne's management contract as a wedding present. The new arrangement led to ill-feeling when Sharon attempted to break Osbourne's recording contract with Jet and sign the singer to another label. Arden sued his daughter, and the case was settled out of court when she paid him $1million. The estrangement between father and daughter was exacerbated when Arden left his wife, Hope, for a younger woman. Sharon would not talk to Arden for another 20 years. Father and daughter were finally reunited in 2001, and the following year Arden enjoyed a walk-on role in his daughter's reality TV show *The Osbournes*.

One of the abiding astonishments of his career was that Arden evaded the attentions of the law for so long. In 1987, however, he was tried at the Old Bailey on charges of kidnapping, blackmail, torture and assault in the case of Harshad Patel, an accountant whom Arden alleged had stolen money from him. Arden was acquitted on all charges.

In 2003 Arden published an autobiography, *Mr Big*. The subtitle, "Ozzy, Sharon and My Life as the Godfather of Rock" suggested that he was alive to his diminished role in the family celebrity pecking order, but the book displayed no sign of repentance, either in his vigorous appraisals of past business associates (Ronnie Lane was an "evil little man", Bill Haley "a prick" and the Animals "a bunch of Geordie dummies who didn't know their arses from a hole in the ground") nor in his unorthodox business methods. While confessing that he had never actually killed anyone, Arden declared himself proud of his capacity to have inspired fear and terror "in such a way that the people I scare are going to have to keep looking over their shoulders for the rest of their lives".

His wife predeceased him and he is survived by his son and daughter.

END COLUMN

Craig Brown
Way of the world

The Conservative Party: the next 50 years

2008: Following the Labour victory at the general election under Gordon Brown, the Conservatives hold a leadership election, and swing to the Right. In his acceptance speech, the new leader says that the country has been "crying out for a new face, with a new approach, and new ideas". The majority seem to agree that the new leader, Mr William Hague, is just the man for the job. Mr Hague's first call for unity provokes a major split.

2012: Mr Hague resigns from the leadership immediately after losing the general election. Few people have heard of his successor, Iain Duncan-Smith. He is considered an unknown quantity, but most Conservatives agree that he has the un-glitzy, robust, common-sense approach needed to ensure a Conservative victory.

2014: The Conservatives reject Mr Duncan-Smith, complaining that he lacks charisma, wasn't noisy enough, and was generally "out of touch". The party looks for a "safe pair of hands", an elder statesman with experience in high office. Mr Michael Howard is elected without competition.

2019: After making little headway in the general election, the Conservatives look for "a breath of fresh air". In his acceptance speech, the new leader, Mr David Cameron, says that the country has been "crying out for a new face, with a new approach, and new ideas". The electorate as a whole, he continues, is "fed up to the back teeth" with the Prime Minister, Mr Gordon Brown, who, he says, "will soon begin to show his true colours".

2022: Following their disappointment at the general election, the Conservatives make a break with the past and elect as their new leader a man who, in his own words, has "the drive, dynamism and razzmatazz" to lead the party to victory at the next election. Some argue that, at 89, Michael Heseltine may now be too old for the job, but others point out that he is a good five years younger than the average party member.

2024: The Conservative Forward Study Research Group unveils its major document, "Britain: Forward into the 20th Century", which is the fruit of a 25-year policy review. Key recommendations include: a ban on smoking in public places, CCTV cameras to be installed on roads and in shopping centres, and an end to hereditary membership of the House of Lords. "We can now claim to be the only party of bold new ideas", says frontbench spokesman Quentin Davies, who recently defected to the Conservatives from the Liberal Democrats.

2027: The Tory frontbench spokesman on Youth Affairs is forced to resign after reports that he lied about taking drugs when young. "Over the past few weeks, it has become clear that I never took drugs at university. My reputation lies in shreds. I am sorry for any embarrassment this has caused my fellow Conservatives," he says.

2031: A by-election is called after David Miliband resigns his seat "to make way for a younger man". The Conservatives come third, behind the party now billed as "Menzies Campbell's Liberal Democrats", who are now faced with the possibility of holding the balance of power at the next election. A Tory spokesman declares that "This result, though very disappointing, is also extremely encouraging. It shows that we are making steady progress in the country as a whole."

2047: It emerges that some Tory MPs have written to the party's Influential 1922 Committee (the adjective was formally incorporated into the title 15 years ago, in a bid to stop it losing any more influence). It seems they have issued the party with a "wake-up call", drawing attention to the fact that the Conservatives have now been out of power for 50 years. In response, the new Conservative leader, Brooklyn Beckham, son of the first female Chancellor of Oxford University, sets up a committee of Wise Old Men – Hague, Howard, Cameron, and Duncan-Smith – to advise on how to win a general election. Half of them advise a move to the Right, the other half to the Left.

2052: The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, is said to be considering handing over to a younger man. The Ambassador to Siberia, Tony Blair, makes it clear that he is two years younger than Mr Brown, and still has "much to offer". Downing Street rushes out a statement that Mr Brown's retirement has been postponed indefinitely.

2057: After their failure to make a breakthrough in the general election, the Conservative Party vows to "get back in touch with Britain as it is today" by electing a new "dream team". In his acceptance speech, the new leader, Mr John Redwood, says that the country has been "crying out for new faces, with a new approach, and new ideas". He then leads the applause for his new deputy leader, Ms Edwina Currie.

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