

Afghanistan: A Land of Diversity

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Abstract

The heterogeneous Afghan society is the land of diversity, diversity of every pattern: ethnic, religious, linguistic as well as their traditions vary. Afghanistan suffered war throughout ages, home to various ethnic groups; it has become a good example of diversity. Surrounded by different central Asian countries that support their respective ethnic groups in the country has a bigger hand to keep the country divided. The various ethnic groups, trying to preserve their identity and considering the other ethnic groups as "others" is also an influential factor in the division of the country. This division is ingrained and is visible, that the concept of nationalism is not enough to unite the country.

Keywords

Diversity, linguistic, religious, ethnic groups, Jirga, Pushtunwali

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Demographic Profile

Afghanistan is a land of stark and rugged beauty, of snow-covered mountains, barren deserts and rolling steppe. Situated at the eastern end of the Iranian plateau, it covers some 250,000 square miles, an area about the size of Texas, larger than France, but smaller than Turkey. Some two-third of it lies above 5000 feet and several of its mountains are among the highest in the world.¹

Afghanistan is located at the crossroads of central, south and west Asia and shares its border with the Central Asia on the north, Chinese province of Xinjiang on the East and Iran on the West and South west, Pakistan and Pakistan occupied Kashmir on the south and south-east.² **Afghanistan's** population of 30 million people is divided into seven major **ethnic** groups—the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Hazaras, the Uzbeks, the Aimaqs, the Turkmens, and the Baluchs-and many smaller ones. Although the Pashtuns claim to be the national majority, most analysts believe they constitute only a plurality of between 40 and 45 percent. However, each **ethnic** group does constitute the majority in one or more of **Afghanistan's** regions: Pashtuns in the south and east, Tajiks in the northeast and west, Hazaras in the center, and Uzbeks in the northwest.³

Geographical contiguity, racial and religious affinity and trans-border interaction for a long time provided the ground for cross-border fraternization between the people of central Asia and adjoining Afghanistan. For the central Asian states, Northern Afghanistan has been the area of strategic importance. There are about 4 million Tajiks, 1.7 million Uzbeks, 0.6 million Turkmens in northern Afghanistan who share their culture with their counterparts in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan respectively.⁴

If we take glance at the ethnic map of Afghanistan, the geopolitical and strategic distribution of the various tribal groups already give us an idea of internal divisions, possible inter-tribal rivalries, possible alliances between tribal groups, and between these and external actors. The Afghan territory is naturally open to influences from other countries which have ethnic-cultural affinities with the various Afghan groups.

The Afghan society is heterogeneous with numerous ethnic groups, speaking various dialects or mutually unintelligible languages.⁵ The original ethnic composition of Afghanistan was clearly dominated by Pashtuns. As the 'great game' between the Britain and Russia progressed during the 19th century, the British encouraged successive Afghan rulers to push the borders of Afghanistan northward to the River Oxus. The British objective was to make Afghanistan a buffer state, and the Pashtun

rulers in Kabul, had imperialist ambition of their own. Vast areas populated by Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks and other non-Pashtun ethnic groups were gradually subjugated by Kabul after bitter struggles. However in the multi-ethnic Afghanistan that resulted, the Pashtuns have been increasingly unable to assert the position of dominance to which they considered themselves entitled as true Afghans.⁶

The ethnic origin of the Afghans has not been satisfactorily established. In the past, most Afghan authors, in line with popular tradition and tribal genealogies, ascribed a Jewish origin to their people. According to this tradition, the Afghans were the descendants of the Beni-Israel, who were deported by Bukhtanassar (Nebuchadnezzar) to Hazara or Hazarajat, believed to be the Arzareth of the Bible.⁷ While as modern scholars trace the Afghans to the Irano-Afghan branch of the Indo-European or Aryan peoples, with some admixture of Turkic, Mongol, and other groups. The first mention of a people suggestive of Afghans dates from the sixth century, when the Indian astrologer VarahaMihira referred in his *BrhatSamhita* to “Avagana” presumably Afghans, living within the territory of what is now eastern Afghanistan.⁸ Dubow (2009) states that during the old times, the “North half of Afghanistan has been firmly a part of Persia”. In the period preceding the Durrani Pashtun ascendancy in 1747, the ethnonyms of ‘Afghan’ and ‘Afghanistan’ denoted a particular ethnies.⁹ The term “GroupeEthnique” for Afghanistan was first time used by the French researcher and anthropologist, named Dollot¹⁰, who “categorized Afghan people in several ethnic units”. There had been no term of “Ethnic Groups” till 19th century and more realistically, the “foreign academicians and the governments began to divide Afghan society systematically into ethnic categories by the differences in language, sect, culture etc.” not before the mid20th century¹¹.

Ahmad shah Abdali carved the state of Afghanistan in 1747 in the form of a tribal confederacy. However, the real founder of the modern state of Afghanistan is generally accepted to be Amir Abd-ur-Rahman Khan (1880-1901). The most important changes in Afghanistan under pashtun rule (since 1747) occurred during the reign of Amir Abd-ur-Rahman Khan. They include:

- Ø The settlement of Pashtun in Northern Afghanistan, regarded as Pashtun ‘colonialism’ by the local, non-pashtun people;
- Ø The suppression of Hazara tribalism in central Afghanistan, together with the granting of pasture rights to Pashtun nomads in this area;
- Ø The conversion of Kafiristan (the land of infidels) into Nuristan (the land of light by Islamization), in eastern Afghanistan.¹²

Abd-ur-Rahman Khan’s centralization policy- later on often called ‘internal

imperialism', 'interior colonization', or 'Pashtunization of Afghanistan' - thus not only led to profound changes in the make-up the population of various regions (for example, northern and central Afghanistan), but likewise provoked a grading of ethnic groups within the newly emerging political system. This development had major consequences for the future, as it sowed the seeds of ethnically motivated conflicts and power struggles which became focal point of politics in the 1990s and contributed to the current plight of Afghan Society.¹³ However it was finally due to the war against the communist regime and the soviet forces that a major socio-political transformational process took place, one which, for the first time in afghan history, involved all strata of society and led to a profound mobilization of that society from below. This not only included the emergence of a kind of 'national consciousness' among all Afghan citizens, but simultaneously initiated a general emancipation of formerly disadvantaged ethnic and religious groups (such as the Tajiks and the Hazara), and led to an accentuation of identities, based either on ethnicity or religious affiliation. Legitimized by their participation in the resistance fight, these formerly suppressed groups demanded their political rights within the Islamic State of Afghanistan set up in April 1992.¹⁴

Traditional Afghan Society

Afghanistan is a state, created by force and held together by the military predominance of one tribal group over all those others which make up the population of this mountainous and desolate territory: a real mosaic. In reality, however, it was created as a federation of tribes, not so different from the typical empires of this region which, on the one hand depends on the highly personalized and charismatic power and, on the other hand on precarious and fleeting agreements between tribes and tribal groups. The consensus of these led to the consensus for the authority to the leader and the powers he wielded in their name. This is the tradition: a consensus which goes to the leader and not the institution, and which often lasts only as long as that individual lives.¹⁵

In dealing with the Afghan tribes, the Afghan monarchs were subject to the same limitation of authority as the tribal chieftain. Their actions had to conform to Shar'ia law, to the *Pushtunwali*, and especially to the decisions of the *jirgas*, or tribal councils, the *jirga* was based on the concept of communal authority; theoretically, every tribesman was both soldier and lawmaker and could aspire to leadership. As an institution, the *jirga* reflected the distinctive features of an Afghan tribalism in which the attachment of the individual was to the tribal community rather than to the chief; rarely could a chief induce a tribe to take any major action that was not consistent with the interests or honor of the tribe. In cases involving internal disputes or temporary tribal alliances, the *jirga* were all-powerful.¹⁶

One of the oldest and most prominent codes of ethics is the tribal law of *Pushtunwali*. Dating back to the pre-Islamic era, it means “the way of the Pashtuns,” or the code of life, and refers to the traditions of the Pashtu people. Among the tribes, these unwritten rules of behavior have been passed down orally from generation to generation and are held as Sacrosanct. Violating the code will bring dishonor and shame not just to an individual but also to the entire tribe or community. A key concept in *Pushtunwali* is *melmastia* (hospitality), referring to the generosity in welcoming a visitor. It is said that a pashtun will never sacrifice his honor, but to give away his belonging is nothing exceptional.¹⁷ Pashtun demands vengeance against injury or insult to ones kin, chivalry and hospitality towards the helpless and unarmed strangers, bravery in battles and openness and integrity in individual behavior. Pashtunwali, in short is a code that limits anarchy among a fractious but valorous Pashtuns. Pashtun tribalism has its own significance.¹⁸ Contrary to this practice is another tenet of *Pushtunwali* referred to as *badal* (vengeance, justice, or revenge). A popular proverb says, “A pashtun took his vengeance after a hundred years, and said that he was in a hurry”. Such disputes may involve entire tribes and can last generations until revenge is taken or a *jirgais* able to mediate a solution.¹⁹

Religious Diversity

Though 99.7 per cent of the Afghans profess Islam, the country is divided on sectarian grounds. Most Afghans are Sunnis of the Hanafi School; with a small population who adhere to shi’ah school of thought. There are no precise figures on the ratio of Sunni/Shi’ah Muslims. Official Afghan sources state that 84.7-89.7 per cent of the Afghan Muslims are Sunni and about 10-15 percent are Shiites (mostly the Hazaras and Tajiks). Small groups of Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, and Jews are scattered in the towns which constitute almost 0.3 percent of the population.²⁰

The status and role of Islam in the new constitution (approved by consensus and officially signed by Hamid Karzai on January 26, 2004) and its place in the overall political system had generated a lot of debate even before the *jirgawas* convened. Islamic hardliners, wary of reduced authority in the new political structure, demanded greater Islamic content in the constitution. To allay their fears, Article 3 of the draft constitution was amended. While it initially stated: “in Afghanistan, no law can be contrary to the sacred religion of Islam and the values of this constitution”; but after amendment it reads: “in Afghanistan, no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam”. Some analysts felt that the amended language left enough room for anomalous interpretation of Islamic tenets and traditions, which could have a significant bearing on human rights in general and the rights of women and minorities in particular.²¹ Although the majority of the Afghans are Muslims,

and Islam is therefore one of the essential unifying forces evoked to promote national unity, the country's religious structure is not at all homogeneous.²² On the contrary, Hanafite sect, which is the official rite of the country, contrasts sharply with Imami and Ismaili sect, whose adherents are often discriminated against.²³

The differences between the Sunni and Shi'ah Muslim communities were a major problem for those who wanted to build a modern Afghan state. Neither group represented a homogenous social force, nor had developed uniform and centralized institutions. Different stages of socio economic development were reflected in the two communities' religious institutions.²⁴ Most Shia were members of the Hazara ethnic group, which was traditionally segregated from the rest of society for a combination of political, ethnic, and religious factors, some of which resulted in conflicts. The Hazaras accused the government of providing preferential treatment to Pashtuns and of ignoring minorities, especially Hazaras.

Linguistic Diversity

Even if the bulk of people in Afghanistan could read and write, linguistic diversity would still be a divisive element. To the modern nation-state, a complex linguistic picture is a negative segregator, but to the separate groups it serves as a cohesive regional factor. Often, though not always, ethnic group and language tend to coincide. In Afghanistan, three major language families are represented: Indo-European, Uralic-Altaic (including Mongolian), and Dravidian.

Important Indo-European sub families include *Pashto* (spoken by Pashtun ethnic group); *Dari* (spoken by Tajik, Frarsiwan, Hazara, Qizilbash, and Aimaq, among others); *Nuristani* dialects (Nuristan, formerly Kafiristan); *Dardic* dialects (fringes of Nuristan); *East Iranian* or *Pamiridialects* (Badakhshan, Wakhan, and Pamir). Uralic-Altaic subfamilies include *Kipchaki* and *Kirghizi*, and other *Turkic* dialects among the Turkoman groups, as well as *Moghli*, a *Mongolian* dialect but vaguely remembered by the scattered Moghol people. The Brahui of Afghan, Iranian and Pakistani Sistan and Kalat (Pakistan) speak a *Dravidian* language of the same name.²⁵

Much attention has been directed at the inter-state position of the Pashtuns; this emphasis on Pashtunism at the basis of Afghan national identity became particularly obvious in the government's education system. By making Pashtu compulsory for all Afghan pupils, and by forcing all government officials to apply it in their communications, the government intended to disseminate the use of Pashtu.²⁶ These efforts to promote Pashtu not only focused on strengthening the role of that language in Afghan society, but aimed at replacing the hitherto dominant Farsi.²⁷

The official languages of Afghanistan are Pashto and Dari. Both belong to the Indo-European group of languages. According to US government estimates, approximately 35 per cent of the population speaks Pashto, about 50 per cent speaks Dari, and 11 per cent speak Turkic languages (Uzbek and Turkman). Numerous other languages are also spoken in the country and bilingualism is very common.²⁸ The collapse of the state and of the educational system caused linguistic frontiers to become more marked than before. In Kandahar, for example, the Pashtuns spoke less Persian, while it became rare for Pashto to be taught in the north. Those processes were reinforced by the media; on the radio the ethnic affiliation of the leaders was, at least implicitly, presented as a factor explaining their political positions.²⁹

Moreover, many Uzbeks considered their mother-tongue, despite its importance for their identity construction, inferior to Farsi-Dari. This probably has to do with the fact that the Uzbek language was not officially acknowledged until 1978 by the Afghan state. As *Uzbeki* was not taught in the state education system, the few Uzbeks who had attended modern public schools had to rely on Farsi-Dari and *Pashtu* in their written communications. This perceived low status of the Uzbek language led many Uzbek parents, especially those living in urban areas, to speak only Farsi-Dari with their children and to avoid giving those Uzbek names. Likewise Farsi-Dari was dominant in Uzbek-Tajik mixed families and prevailed in interethnic communication between the Uzbeks and the Tajiks.³⁰

However, Tajiks have more than an equitable portion of army personnel. An early 2003 estimate ascribes 40% of the new national army to Tajiks, 37% to Pashtuns, and the rest to other minorities. Pashtun recruits are thought to have some grievances regarding their training in *Dari* only, no *Pashto*. Others say that Turkmen recruits have also made complaints of mistreatment due to lack of proficiency in either *Dari* or *Pashto*.³¹

The original draft declared *Pashto* to be the national language of Afghanistan. Delegates belonging to minority ethnic groups, particularly the *Farsiwan* and the Uzbeks took exception to this. They strongly demanded that their languages be given status equal to that of *Pashto*. This led to a heated debate on the issue of national language and the official status of minority languages. Under a compromise, the final draft did not mention any language as the national language. However, the national anthem, which mentions the name of all 14 ethnic groups, was to be in *Pashto*. In addition to *Pashto* and *Dari*, under Article 16 of the 2004 Afghan Constitution six additional languages- *Uzbeki*, *Turkmen*, *Baluchi*, *Pashai*, *Nuristani* and *Pamiri*- were made the third official language in regions where a majority of the population spoke them.³²

The present Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was agreed upon by more than 500 delegates representing Afghan men and women from across the country at the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* (December 13, 2003 - January 4, 2004). The Constitution was formally ratified by President Hamid Karzai in Kabul on January 26, 2004. The constitution further says: Article Twenty-Two, any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law. Article Thirty-Three, the citizens of Afghanistan shall have the right to elect and be elected. The conditions of exercising this right shall be regulated by law. Article Forty-Eight, work is the right of every Afghan. Working hours, paid holidays, employment and employee rights and related matters shall be regulated by the law. Choice of occupation and craft shall be free within the bounds of law. Article Fifty-Nine, no individual shall be allowed to manipulate the rights and liberties enshrined in this Constitution and act against independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty as well as national unity.³³ And how much these articles match the ground reality is quite visible. All these articles pose a big question mark before the administration and the state.

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