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Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence

A Research Paper

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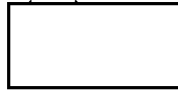
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A Research Paper

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**Afghanistan:
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Summary

The creation of a sense of national unity among the diverse peoples of Afghanistan has long been a challenging problem to its rulers. Afghanistan is a tribal society, composed of some 20 ethnic groups of widely varying backgrounds and cultures. About the only cohesive elements among these groups are their observance of Islamic law, martial tradition, and a distrust of government.

Pashtuns make up about one-half of Afghanistan's population. They are not only the largest ethnic group but also have traditionally wielded the greatest political power. This historic Pashtun preeminence is in turn a divisive issue between them and most of the other major Afghan ethnic groups. Other deep-seated animosities exist among the tribal groups, including the intratribal split between Sunni and Shia Islamic sects. These factors have worked together to thwart creation of a unified front or strategy against central authority.

The present tribal insurgency began in 1978 with the installation of the pro-Soviet Taraki regime. Afghanistan's devoutly Muslim and fiercely independent tribal population believed that the new government was Communist, atheist, and pro-Soviet. Reform measures brashly introduced by the government bolstered this belief and were viewed as attempts to displace the traditional social structure based on Islam and allegiance to family, clan, and tribe. The recent visible presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan has fulfilled the worst fears of the population and has added additional fuel to the fires of insurgency.



Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 climaxed nearly two years of gradually increased Soviet support and presence in the country. The installation of a Marxist, pro-Soviet regime following the April 1978 revolution and the introduction of unpopular social policies ignited a tribal-based insurgency that has continued and intensified. A better understanding of the underlying causes of this insurgency is provided through an examination of the ethnic background and culture of the Afghan peoples and their attitudes toward each other and toward central government control generally.

Setting

Afghanistan, slightly larger than the state of Texas, is the meeting place of diverse physical and cultural worlds. Physically, Afghanistan is an extension of the high land mass known as the Iranian Plateau; nearly two-thirds of the country consists of mountains.

In central and eastern Afghanistan the mountains—dominated by the Hindu Kush—present a formidable physical barrier and provide a favorable milieu for tribal separatism. To the north, west, and southwest, however, Afghanistan merges with the high plains and plateaus of central and south Asia. Across this region of transit has come a succession of peoples—Aryans, Medes, Persians, Greeks, Turks, and Mongols—bent on trade and conquest; others have climbed the passes and crossed the plateaus bearing the message of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Islam. It is from this mixture of peoples and cultures that the modern state of Afghanistan has been emerging since the 18th century.

Each of the approximately 20 ethnic groups in Afghanistan has certain distinctive physical characteristics, differing social institutions, and varying sets of values.¹ The origins and kinships among the many groups are a matter of scholarly controversy because of the lack of indigenous written records, fragmentary historic sources, and scanty archaeological, anthropometric, and serological evidence.

¹ For detailed discussion of selected ethnic groups, see pp. 5 and 6.

By size, the major groups include the Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara; other important groups include the Chahar Aimak, Turkmen, Nuristani, Baluchi, and Brahui.² Of the total estimated population of 15 million, about 50 percent are Pashtun and nearly 30 percent are Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara. Total population estimates, however, are confused by the *kuchis*, or Afghan nomads, who number from 2 to 4 million and are members of several ethnic groups. Many of the tribal people have ethnic ties with peoples inhabiting adjacent areas of the USSR, Iran, and Pakistan.

Despite considerable diversity, there are common ties of language and religion that provide some element of cohesiveness among the groups. The common language is Dari, the Afghan form of Persian (Farsi), which is used by all groups but is not the first language of any group. Nearly all of the ethnic groups are Muslim and about 80 percent are of the Sunni sect, while the remainder are adherents of the Shia sect. Although the two sects are contentious, the division has not resulted in the bloody confrontations that have occurred in other Muslim lands.

Ethnic Attitudes and Rivalries

Tribes and tribalism remain important in Afghanistan, particularly among the Pashtun, whose Durrani tribal families have ruled the country since its unification by one of them in the 18th century. The Pashtun are strong in number; some of their tribes, such as the Durrani, Ghilzai, and Yuzufazai, individually have at least a million members. The degree of tribal loyalty, however, varies considerably among the Pashtun, and tribal feuds and rivalries at times have been divisive forces in the country. The Durrani, though divided into numerous subtribes or clans and widely scattered, usually have rallied to a common cause when the need arose.

² There is no standard or agreed spelling of the names of the ethnic groups in Afghanistan. In the absence of an official census list, the names used here are those that appear most consistently in authoritative sources. For example, alternate names for Pashtun include Pushtun (name used in Pakistan) and Pathan (the Indian corruption of Pashtun); Uzbek or Uzbak for Uzbek; Turkoman for Turkmen; and Chahar Aimak, simply Aimak.

Most of the major ethnic groups believe that Afghanistan is run by the Pashtuns for the Pashtuns. What prevails, in their view, is a form of internal colonialism. Pashtuns typically govern most provinces, even those where another ethnic group is in the majority, and hold most administrative posts. The Pashtuns' superior position is reflected in the growth and modernization of Kabul, which provincial Uzbeks and Hazaras view as burgeoning at their expense. Although improvements in health facilities, roads, airfields, and agriculture have been made in other provinces, past government efforts have been concentrated in Pashtun-administered or Pashtun-settled provinces.

Antigovernment, anti-Pashtun alienation is particularly strong among the Uzbeks, described as a sophisticated and capable people who provide most of the country's professional men and entrepreneurs.

A Uzbek often has little confidence, or feels he has no real stake, in the economy and prefers to stash his wealth in the equivalent of a sock under the mattress. On the other hand, the Uzbeks have a reputation among the Pashtuns for indolence and procrastination, though there has been little if any active discrimination or hostility between them.

The Hazaras generally have preferred to keep their central mountain homeland where they are literally almost inaccessible to all forms of government authority—from tax collection to police. In recent years, however, a few thousand have left their mountains as Army recruits or to settle in cities where most of them are employed as manual laborers and servants. Traditional hostility toward them because of their adherence to the Shia sect of Islam, combined with their Mongoloid features and their indifference to Kabul, has contributed to their inferior social and economic status.

Of the four major ethnic groups, the Tajiks are the least likely to oppose acts of Pashtun colonialism. They are described as a peaceful people—traditionally poets, dreamers, and intellectuals—who are unassertive in their pride of being Tajik. The Tajiks have lived in harmony with the Pashtuns, and a number of them have held high government posts. Neither intermarriage nor social intercourse between the two peoples is common, however.

The *kuchis* include members from nearly every ethnic group in the country and possibly represent one-fourth of the total population. The *kuchi* regards his way of life as the most dignified and distrusts variation and change. For many years the *kuchis* have taken their caravans to Pakistan and India to trade wool and animal products for goods they could in turn trade to farming communities in Afghanistan; the poorer nomads go to Pakistan during the winter months to sell their labor. The periodic closing of the Afghan-Pakistani border have caused all of them hardship. Government attempts to settle the *kuchis* permanently have met with little success because they are highly suspicious of any attempt to restrict their movements or record their numbers, and feel little if any loyalty to the abstract concept of the state or the Kabul-centered government.

Resistance to the Regimes

Opposition and resistance to the pro-Soviet Takari and Amin regimes were increasing among the peoples of Afghanistan prior to the Soviet invasion. The heavyhanded suppression of the mullahs and other government actions that impinge on the Islamic way of life stirred hostility in the villages and rural areas where 85 percent of the population lives. Resentment also grew among the less conservative urbanites—even among some of those loyal to the government—because they felt the regimes challenged basic Islamic institutions that they at least respect.

The pro-Soviet stance of the regimes coupled with the presence of Soviet advisers aroused historical feelings of mistrust of Russians. To an Afghan, the policies followed were tantamount to treason and a threat to his fiercely held independence. These feelings have intensified with the visible presence of large numbers of Soviet troops in the country and the installation of a puppet regime headed by Babrak Karmal.

The programs of the Taraki-Amin regimes for social and land reform were another cause of opposition. Most of the resistance was in response to the government's use of force in its attempt to bring about reform in one year that other Afghan governments failed to do in 70 years. The stubbornness of the people was bravely combated by cadres who were as fanatical in their

efforts to bring change as the people were in their resistance to that change. But, more importantly, the programs were regarded as attempts to displace tribal structure and family ties and were viewed as violations of Islamic precepts of authority and *pardah*.³

In implementing land reform, government officials found recipients reluctant to accept land because of loyalty to tribal leaders or fear of reprisals if the regime was overthrown. Little or no compensation was paid for land confiscated by the government, contrary to Islamic law, and most of the best land apparently was not redistributed. Moreover, the Taraki government did not offer alternatives when it did away with the traditional system of credit, whereby farmers borrowed from moneylenders or landowners against future crops. Farmers who were given poor land that lacked adequate water or irrigation and who were without seed or cash simply abandoned their new holdings. The program also created hostility between the landowners and the nomads who lost grazing rights recognized by the former landowners with whom they had ethnic and sometimes family ties. Pressure from their mullahs and fellow tribesmen, together with the inability to profit from newly acquired land in the short time since the program was initiated, dissuaded new landowners from cooperating with the government.

Because only about 10 percent of the people are literate, an illiteracy eradication program was initiated for everyone between the ages of 14 and 40. Reaction to this program was particularly hostile, mainly because it forced women out of *pardah* into public life. Even those tribesmen not opposed to their womenfolk learning to read and write were incensed at the idea of having them taught by male teachers. The secularization of education in general, the arrest and imprisonment of mullahs, and the introduction of a politically orientated curriculum further aroused the people.

Resistance to these programs not only resulted in the destruction of government offices and other official buildings but also in the assassination of government

³ The institution of *pardah* is particularly strict in Afghanistan. Women must be covered from head to foot in public, and they are generally confined to the home. Even their contact with male relatives is limited. Only when they work in the fields, or if they are nomads or servants, are women freed from some of the constraints of *pardah*.

officials, party cadres, teachers, and police sent into the provinces to implement the programs. Many Russians—estimates are as high as 300 and include women and children—were also killed. Violent elimination of the uninvited has always been the expedient way of solving local problems in Afghanistan.

The Pashtuns—the ethnic group of Taraki, Amin, and Karmal—pose the greatest threat to any Soviet-controlled government in Afghanistan. Their traditional desire for revenge has grown over the past year with the purges instituted by the Taraki government; hardly an extended family has not had at least one member imprisoned or eliminated. As the principal landowners in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns also have opposed land reform programs. They are responsible for most of the insurgency since April 1978, though old internal rivalries have prevented much cooperation among the various tribes. Prior to the Soviet invasion, the spread of Pashtun guerrilla forces and increased desertions from the Afghan Army had caused a serious drain on the regime's resources.

The Soviet invasion and installation of Babrak Karmal as President of Afghanistan is unlikely to alter the prospects for prolonged insurgency. Resistance continues and its basic causes remain. Although the Karmal regime has sought to broaden its base of support and has indicated a slowing of radical social programs, a vast gulf separates the objectives of a Soviet puppet regime and the tribal traditions and Islamic foundations upon which Afghan society is based.

The People

Major Ethnic Groups. The Pashtuns have been the dominant people in Afghanistan since its beginning as a nation in the 18th century. They are concentrated in the east and south, but in the late 1800s many were forcibly resettled north of the Hindu Kush. Loyalty to the clan or tribe varies from group to group but is usually strong, and all have extreme pride in their Pashtun identity. The majority of them are farmers, usually freeholders, and a number are landlords employing non-Pashtuns as tenants or laborers. Except for a few tribes which are Shiite, the Pashtuns are adherents of the Sunni sect of Islam. They are

Ethnic Groups in Afghanistan



predominantly light-skinned brunettes, longheaded with prominent facial features, and of slender build. Brown eyes predominate but hazel or blue eyes are not unusual among them. They speak Pashto, an Iranian variant of Indo-European and related to Persian, Baluchi, and Kurdish.

The Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group and are scattered throughout the country, with major concentrations in the east and west. They are not considered to be a distinct group, but consist of several peoples who share no more than a name, a language (Tajiki, a Persian dialect), and sedentary living habits. Those in the west are sometimes called Fairswan and probably are distantly related to the people of eastern Iran. Those north of the Hindu Kush are believed to be descended from ancient Iranians who have mixed with Turkic peoples. The mountain Tajiks, who have Mongolian admixture, appear to have been among the earliest or, according to Soviet ethnologists, the indigenous inhabitants of the far northeast.

Tajiks are not tribal, but they do have a strong sense of community loyalty. Most are tenant farmers and laborers; some engage in trade or handicrafts. They are not belligerent except for a few groups of mountain Tajiks who some consider as aggressive as the Pashtun. Similar to the Pashtun, the Tajiks are adherents of both the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam, but the majority are Sunni. Scanty anthropometric studies describe the Tajiks as roundheaded with oval faces and usually of slender build. They are light-skinned brunettes; occasionally there are individuals with reddish or yellowish colored hair. Even among the mountain Tajiks, lightness of skin and hair color can be found blended with Mongoloid traits.

The Uzbek live north of the Hindu Kush on the plain of the Amu Darya. Uzbek is a name applied to Turkic tribesmen who came to Afghanistan in the mid-15th century. The Uzbek are a mix of Turko-Mongol peoples who intermingled with descendants of an ancient Iranian plateau people. Modern Uzbek have either Mongoloid or Caucasoid features, or a blend of the two. They tend to be roundheaded, have yellow-white skin color and broad cheekbones, and occasionally the epicanthic fold. The Uzbek have relinquished their tribal affiliations and nomadism and are mainly

farmers; however, many are successful merchants and artisans. Unlike the Pashtun and Tajik, the Uzbek are adherents of the Sunni sect of Islam and have no Shiite minority. Their language, Uzbeki, is believed to be a derivation of a classical Turkic language.

The Hazara homeland, which is called Hazarajat, consists of the upper Helmand valley area west of Kabul. Smaller groups are located farther north in Bamian and in the far northeast in Badakhshan. The Hazara are believed to be of Turko-Mongol origin. They possibly are descendants of Mongol soldiers who intermarried with a mountain Tajik population in the 13th and 14th centuries, although it is more likely that their ancestors predate the Mongol conquests.

Whatever their origin, the Hazara culturally resemble the mountain Tajiks but speak a Persian dialect called Hazaraghi. Physically, they have coarse black hair, yellow to yellow-brown skin color, are roundheaded with broad faces and prominent cheekbones, and have a high incidence of the epicanthic fold.

Unlike the Tajiks, they are divided into tribes and, although some are nomadic, the majority are pastoral farmers. The Hazara are the only major Afghan ethnic group that adheres to the Shia sect of Islam. Reputedly, they are physically strong, enduring, and industrious. They make good soldiers and are regularly recruited into the Afghan Army.

Other Ethnic Groups. To the north and west of the Hazara live the Chahar Aimak ethnic group, which is divided into four main subdivisions or tribes. The main group includes small cultural groups of mountain peoples, about whom little is known. The Chahar Aimak are generally believed to be of Turko-Mongol origin, but there is a theory that peoples of Indo-European origin have been included in this group. Mongoloid traits, however, are dominant among the Chahar Aimak population. Many of the Chahar Aimak are seminomadic and live in yurts or yurtlike tents; the remainder are farmers. They speak a dialect of Farsi that contains many Turkic loan words, and they follow the Sunni sect of Islam.

The Turkmen, who live mainly in the northwest, are another Turkic group like the Uzbek. Most authorities believe the Turkmen descended from the Oghuz Turks who came to Afghanistan in the 11th century, although they may have other strains in their ethnic background. They speak a dialect of the Turkic family of languages and are adherents of the Sunni Islamic sect. The Turkmen, unlike the Uzbek, are still pastoral tribal nomads, and they maintain few contacts with other Afghans. During the 1920s their numbers increased when Turkmen entered Afghanistan from the north as refugees from Soviet collectivism. They have a distinct economic role as breeders of Karakul sheep whose pelts—Karakul and astrakhan or Persian lamb—are a main Afghan export. The Turkmen women are the dyers and weavers of the deep red "Bokharan" rug, another leading export.

The nomadic Baluchi speak an Iranian language and are adherents of the Sunni sect of Islam. They are found in the sparsely populated southern borderlands of Afghanistan and are related to the Baluchi who settled in villages south of Herat during the migration of the Baluchi eastward from Iran in earlier times.

The Brahui, also located in southern Afghanistan, include both farmers and nomads who speak a Dravidian language. They are believed to be descended from an aboriginal people driven south by the Aryans and possibly to share a common ancestor with other dark-skinned, Dravidian-speaking peoples of south Asia.

The Nuristanis live in the eastern mountains of Afghanistan. Their origin and kinship are ethnic mysteries, for they have a range of skin, eye, and hair coloration that includes a blond strain. At one time they were considered to be descendants of ancient Greeks, but it is now thought they may be related to an earlier people from central Asia. They are renowned mountaineers. Subdued by an Afghan ruler in the 19th century, many were converted to Islam (Sunni sect), and the name of their country was changed from Kafiristan (land of infidels) to Nuristan (land of light).

The Nuristanis consist of two main groups subdivided into a number of tribes. They speak dialects of an Indic variant of Indo-European that is closely related to

Dardic. Their traditional religious practices—now largely unobserved—consist of a combination of animism and polytheism, featuring ancestor worship, animal sacrifices, wooden idols, and grave effigies. The Nuristanis carry on a mixed agricultural and pastoral economy, farming the lower slopes but perching their villages high above the valley floor. They prefer the isolation of their mountains and deeply resent government interference.

The Kizilbash, descendants of a Turkish garrison left in Kabul by a Persian conqueror in the mid-18th century, are an urban group which adheres to the Shia sect of Islam. They generally are well educated, and some hold important government positions or are traders. Other strictly urban groups include Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews, who primarily are merchants, traders, and moneylenders in the towns and cities throughout Afghanistan. The Kirghiz are a pastoral Mongoloid people who speak a Turkic dialect, are members of the Sunni sect of Islam, and inhabit the Wakhan Corridor area in the far northeastern extension of Afghanistan. Other minority groups are the Moghuls, who live in the western and northern parts of the country and claim descent from Ghengis Khan, and the nomadic "Arabs" or "Sayyid," who live on the northern plains.

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