

Uzbeks and Turkmen

Profile

Together accounting for 3.8 million people or about 12 per cent of the total Afghan population (CIA World Factbook 2007), both Uzbeks and Turkmen live in the Northern part of Afghanistan. In origins, Turkmen also called, Turcoman, Turkman or Turkomen come from the Turkic-speaking tribes that emerged from Oghuz Khan, back in the seventh and eight centuries. Turkmen are Sunni Muslim of Hanafi tradition and are closely related to the people of modern Turkey to the West, and identical to the majority Muslim population of their Central Asian kin state across the border to the North. Originally a purely tribal society, they have, in the more recent years adopted a semi-nomadic lifestyle. The Uzbeks come from the Altaic and are also a Turkic-speaking ethnic group. They are believed to have emerged in Central Asia in the third century B.C. and are possible descendants of Genghis Khan. They indicate Turkic Mongoloid ancestry and have a degree of an ethnic relationship with the Iranian people. The Uzbeks are, in vast majority, Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi tradition, which reflects a primarily cultural rather than religious identity. Their language is Uzbek and although it is their own Turkish dialect, it is closely related to the one spoken in the Uygur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, in China.

Uzbeks and Turkmen have a tribal identity that still largely defines the structures within their respective societies and this is reflected both in their social as well as political life. Both groups have had an influence on the Afghan culture mainly through sport and music.

Economic status

The Turkmen and Uzbeks occupy the greatest share of Afghanistan's arable land in the North, and are mostly farmers by occupation, growing grain and vegetables. In addition, they produce crafts, and animal by-products that bring considerable supplementary income to their communities. Cotton production has also added significantly to the wealth of these two groups. However, a very important part of their economy and fame is based on the making of carpets, which is mainly considered women's work. Because of their relative prosperity, Uzbeks and Turkmen have not been dependent on the central government and have not made a concerted effort to garner political influence in the past. However, the economy of northern Afghanistan was badly damaged by the Taliban conquest of 1998. The consequences of this was not only subjugation and repression, but importantly also resulted in the closure of the border with Uzbekistan by the Uzbek government resulting in significant loss of trade, and thereby reduction in the socio-economic independence of the groups.

Historical context

The Turkmen of Afghanistan originate from amongst Turkic tribes of Central Asia who arrived in Afghanistan as refugees in the 1920s and 1930s along with many thousands of Uzbeks, to escape repression by the Soviet Union because of their participation in the unsuccessful Basmachi Revolt. Generally, the population in the region is not a product of recent immigration but of the way borders

were drawn between the Republics during the early Soviet period.

In order to quell the power of the Pashtuns, the Soviets, during their occupation of Afghanistan adopted a divide and rule policy, especially in the Northern areas where the Uzbeks had significant presence. This was relatively effective in stemming the influence of the Pashtuns, who were the main resistance against them in Kabul. In keeping with their policy the Uzbeks and to a lesser extent the Turkmen were given a degree of autonomy, and trained to fight against the *Mujahidin* in case of attack. For the first time in the history of Afghanistan, except during periods of anarchy and rebellion, the Uzbeks along with the Tajiks and Hazaras exercised full administrative and political autonomy.

Political representation

After the Soviet withdrawal, during the civil war in Afghanistan, the Uzbek, along with the Hazara and Tajik actively sought adequate representation in political power at the centre, and the form of autonomy they had become accustomed to, in their respective areas. The Uzbeks did not have their own political organization until General Dostam defected from the Najibullah regime and, with his control over the Northern provinces, became self-appointed spokesman for the rights of the Uzbeks in Afghanistan.

In contrast to the Uzbeks the Turkmen sought to avoid confrontation by remaining neutral throughout the decades of conflict in Afghanistan. As a result they had no powerful leaders or warlords to represent them politically during and in the aftermath of the civil war and the modern rebuilding process. Accordingly, they remained apart from the social and political mainstream of Afghanistan. They have been historically excluded from the decision-making processes and ignored by the ruling class. They had no representation to talk about their rights and have never generally been properly represented in the overall administration structures.

Current issues

The Uzbeks were part of the Northern Alliance, which fought against the Taliban regime. Thus after the fall of the regime Uzbeks have gained an even more influential character into the military and political life of Afghanistan.

Turkmen were first represented in Afghanistan's government when Mr. Nur Muhammad Qargin (2004), a Turkmen in origin, became the Minister of Education. He took the initiative to introduce a project in order to provide school textbooks in the Turkmen language for the first time, since Turkmen in general, study in Dari as do many of the other small ethnic groups in Afghanistan.