

Afghanistan - Hazaras

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June 19, 2015



Profile

There are approximately 2.7 million Hazaras in Afghanistan (CIA World Factbook 2011). They were once the largest Afghan ethnic group constituting nearly 67% of the total population of the state before the 19th century. More than half were massacred in 1893 when their autonomy was lost as a result of political action. Today they constitute approximately 9% of the Afghan population. The origin of Hazaras are much debated, the word Hazara means "thousand" in Persian but given the Hazaras features, current theory supports their descent from Mongol soldiers left behind by Genghis Kahn in the 13th century.

The majority of Hazaras live in Hazarajat (or Hazarestan), land of the Hazara, which is situated in the rugged central mountainous core of Afghanistan with an area of approximately 50,000 sq. km, with others living in the Badakhshan mountains. In the aftermath of Kabul's campaign against them in the late 19th century, many Hazaras settled in western Turkestan, in JauzJan and Badghis provinces. Ismaili Hazaras, a smaller religiously differentiated group of Hazaras live in the Hindu Kush mountains. The most recent two decades of war have driven many Hazaras away from their traditional heartland to live on the fringes of the state in close proximity to Iran and Pakistan. There is also a large cross-border community of Hazaras who make up an influential ethnic group in the Pakistani border city of Quetta.

Language and sect

The Hazaras speak a dialect of Dari (Persian Dialect) called Hazaragi and the vast majority of them follow the Shi'a sect (twelver Imami). A significant number are also followers of the Ismaili sect while a small number are Sunni Muslim. Within Afghani culture the Hazaras are famous for their music and poetry and the proverbs from which their poetry stems. The poetry and music are mainly folkloric having been passed down orally through the generations. In

1880 the Hazara community constituted of landed nobility, peasants and artisan. The social class was that of the ruling and the ruled classes, which itself was based on ownership of the means of production (animals, land and water).

The gradual descent of the standing of the Hazaras has seen them plunge to the very depths of the social hierarchy in modern Afghanistan. Their engagement mainly in providing the unskilled labour required by society has resulted in further stigmatization, with a good indicator of this being the low rate of inter-ethnic marriages with the Hazara. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the Hazaras have been relatively isolated from the influence of the other ethnic cultures of Afghanistan, and their identity has remained relatively static.

The Hazaras are reported to have nuclear families with the husband considered the head of the family except in the case of husband's death, when the woman becomes the head. In the latter case the older wife in polygamous marriages succeeds the deceased husband until the eldest son reaches maturity. At national level Hazaras tend to be more progressive concerning women's rights to education and public activities. Educated Hazara women, in particular ones who returned from exile in Iran are as active as men in civic and political arenas. Hazara families are eager to educate their daughters. U.N. officials in Bamian, 20 miles to the east, said that since the collapse of Taliban rule in late 2001, aid agencies have scrambled to build schools and have succeeded in attracting qualified female teachers to meet the demand.

Historical context

The Hazaras are believed to have settled in Afghanistan at least as far back as the thirteenth century. The Shi'a Hazaras are historically the most repressed ethnic minority group in the state, and have seen little improvement in their situation despite the changed being rung in modern Afghanistan. While President Karzai did appoint six Hazaras to his cabinet, there appears to be no less discrimination against the majority of the Hazara population of Afghanistan. Forced to migrate to Kabul in the second half of the 20th century due to persecution, their low socio-economic status has created a class as well as ethnic division between them and the rest of urban Afghan society.

Economic pressures and social and political repression have resulted in Hazaras combining with other Shi'a minority groups during the 1960s and 1970s and playing a prominent role in the prolonged civil war for the past two decades. During the resistance in the mid-1980s Hazaras maintained their own resistance group, some of which had ties with Iran.

As an ethnic group, the Hazaras have always lived on the edge of economic survival in Afghanistan. The persecution of the Hazara was not instigated by the Taliban although more documented, but has existed for centuries where the Hazaras were driven out of their lands, sold as slaves and had a lack of access to services available to majority of the population. One of the main factors in Hazaras' continued persecution has their religious belief, as well as their having separate economic and political roots.

Historic discrimination

Historically, the minority Shi'a have faced long-term persecution from the majority Sunni population. From the 1880s onwards, and especially during the reign of Amir Abdul Rahman (1880-1901), they suffered severe political, social and economic repression, as Jihad was declared by Sunnis on all Shi'as of Afghanistan. As the Pashtun Rahman started to extend his influence from Kabul by force to other parts of the country, the Hazaras were the first ethnic group to revolt against his expansionism. Pashtun tribes were sent to the central highlands to crush the revolt. Thousands of Hazara men were killed, their women and children taken as slaves, and their land occupied. To strengthen the forces against the Hazara rebellion that followed, the Rahman played on Sunni religious sensibilities and even attracted Tajiks and Uzbeks (both Sunnis) to help the Pashtuns against the Shi'a Hazaras. Those who survived the initial period of the raids managed to escape to the north while a significant number fled to then British India. Apart from Pashtuns, Uzbeks are also thought to have conducted slave raids on the Hazaras in Bamian and elsewhere.

Abdul Rahman's suppression of Hazara ranged from issuing unwarranted taxes and to assaults on Hazara women, massacres, looting and pillaging of homes, enslavement of Hazara children, women and men and replacement of Shi'a mullas with their Sunni religious counterparts. Hazarajat was occupied by Rahman in 1893 and it is estimated that 60% of the Hazara Population was wiped out by him,

The persecution of Hazaras continued throughout the 19th century and during the Monarchy (1929 onwards) when during the process of "Pashunization" Hazaras were made to conceal their identities to obtain state identification. It is suggested that until the 1970s some Sunni religious teachers preached that killing of Hazaras was a key to paradise.

Hizb-e Wahdat

Economically Hazarajat was kept undeveloped with no roads, schools or clinics. The Hazaras have voiced their dissent to the policies of overt discrimination against them since the 1970s though a united political party of the Hazara opposition movement Hizb-e Wahdat (Party of Unity) was only established in 1988. In 1992 after the Mujahideen's succession to power, Burhanuddin Rabbani launched an offensive on Hizb-e Wahdat killing many. Amnesty International subsequently reported the killing of unarmed civilians and raping of Hazara women. In February 1993 hundreds of Hazara residents in the Afshar district of West Kabul were massacred by government forces under direction of Rabbani and his chief commander Massoud.

Between 1992-1995 Abdul Ali Mazari became the first political leader to speak out at international level for, and on behalf of Hazaras, putting their case to the UN and the international community. He unified the Hazara people by bringing together the many sections, forces and classes within Hazara and Shi'a society. Mazari signed an agreement with the Taliban leadership in 1993 but was brutally murdered by them in 1995. In the same year Hizb-e Wahdat joined the new anti-Taliban Shura-ye Ali-ye Difa under the leadership of Abdul Rahid Dostom. Under this guardianship schools (including a new girls school) were reopened in 1996, and the University of Bamian was established.

After the Taliban seized power in 1996 they declared Jihad on the Shi'a Hazaras. In the years that followed, Hazaras faced particularly severe repression and persecution, including a series of mass killings in northern Afghanistan, where thousands of Hazaras lost their lives or were forced to flee their homes. Consequently Hazaras formed part of the Northern Alliance forces that opposed the Taliban and took power after the Taliban fell in 2001.

Current issues

Since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 the situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan has improved considerably. Hazaras are one of the national ethnic minorities recognized in the new Afghan constitution and have been given full right to Afghan citizenship. Only two Hazaras gained seats in President Hamid Karzai's initial cabinet, and the only representative of their main political party, Hizb-e Wahdat gained the position of vice president. But in the most recent parliamentary election Hazaras (who make up around 9 per cent of the population) gained 25 per cent of seats. However, Hazaras still face persistent discrimination in many areas of the country.

Hazaras are concerned about the rising power of the warlords, who they feel pose a direct threat to their community. There have also been increasing ethnic tensions and incidents of violent clashes between Hazaras and nomadic Kuchis over access to land in recent years. Due to the severity of their persecution under the Taliban, Hazara leaders have insisted, along with leaders of other minority groups, that they be included in all negotiations with the Taliban.