

Panjshiris

Profile

The Panjshiri are not always classified as a separate group because they are considered as falling within the Tajik ethnic grouping. However, they display certain distinct characteristics from the ethnic cousins that often identifies them as a specific minority in their own right. It can be speculated that their name comes from the Panjshiri valley, where they were living. They practice Sunni Islam and speak a language known as Panjshiri, which is a dialect of Dari (Persian). They inhabit the mainly mountainous areas north of Kabul.

Again, like the Nuristanis, they live at relatively high altitudes in high mountains with limited access to land. They have traditionally derived their livelihood from animal husbandry. With increasing migration to Kabul for work the Panjshiris have gradually begun to provide a source of unskilled labour that is only second to the Hazaras. A significant number have also traditionally worked in semi-skilled professions, as drivers and mechanics.

Socially and politically, Panjshiris fall into the same category as other suppressed ethnic groups such as the Hazaras and Nuristanis, with very few people in high-ranking positions in the army and the government in Kabul.

Historical context

Panjshiris played an important role as in providing resistance against the Soviet occupation. Like the Hazaras and Nuristanis they had initially remained independent, without affiliation to any political party during the war with the Soviet Union. However the Panjshiris gradually achieved prominence in the resistance under the command of Ahmad Shah Masoud, when their army came to control vast areas of northern Afghanistan.

During the ethnic tension in 1998, non-Pashtun Afghans were denied free movement within the country, solely based on ethnicity. Many Panjshiri, mainly men and boys as young as 12, along with Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek were captured by the Taliban guards, sent to Kandahar and imprisoned. Due to their distinctive ethnic features, they could not hide from the Taliban, and as a consequence suffered greatly.

After the fall of the Taliban regime the Panjshiris, along with other Tajiks, formed the core of the Northern Alliance, and gained power on some of the important ministries, as well as some control of the military. Some Panjshiris have however been articulating the view that the community should give up some of the control, if it is to achieve a more diverse and ethnically equally representative government.

Current issues

During the last elections in Afghanistan, Panjshiris were hoping for their prominent candidate, Mr. Qanuni, to be elected for President. They were counting on votes coming from both the Tajik and the Panjshiri communities but also from the broader Northern Alliance, for fighting against the Taliban regime. Panjshiri participation in politics has increased dramatically in recent times in the hope of being able to run a presidential representative. The current politics of Afghanistan shows that the Panjshiris have taken a great share of administrative and political power after the overthrow of the Taliban.