

Afghanistan Overview

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Environment

Afghanistan is a landlocked, arid, mountainous and sparsely populated country, with an area of 647,500 square kilometres, bordered by Iran to the west, Pakistan to the south and east, the People's Republic of China to the far north-east and the Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north-east.

Afghanistan is still largely a tribal society, divided into many tribes, clans and smaller groups. Considerable variation in the types of terrain and obstacles imposed by high ranking mountains and deserts, account for the country's marked ethnic and cultural differences.

The country's population reflects its location with the presence of several 'national' minorities. The main ethnic groups are dispersed throughout the country as follows: Pashtuns, the majority group, are concentrated mainly in the south and south-east but also live all over state; Tajiks inhabit mainly the north and north-east and Kabul region; Hazaras in the centre (Hazarajat) and in Kabul; Uzbeks in the north, Aimaq in the west; Turkmens in the north; Baluchis in the west and north-west and the Nuristani the east.

The sovereign territory of Afghanistan is divided into 34 provinces (Welayat) with more than 300 districts (Woleswali). The boundaries of two newly created provinces are yet to be delimited.

Peoples

Main languages: Pashtu, Dari (a Farsi/Persian dialect) (both national languages), also numerous minority languages such as Aimaq, Arabic, Ashkun, Baluchi, Gujari, Hazaragi, Kazaki and Moghili. Uzbeki, Turkmani, Pashai, Nuristani, and Pamiri (alsana) amongst others.

Main religions: Islam (majority Sunni Muslims of Hanafi school of jurisprudence, significant minority Shi'a[1]. Twelver also known as Imamis, and some Ismaili Muslims), Sikhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Sufism. There appears to be a sharp division between the Sunni and Shia communities.

Minority groups include Pashtun 42%, Tajik 27%, Hazara 9%, Uzbek 9%, Aimaq 4%, Turkmen 3% and Baloch 2% (CIA World Factbook 2011).

The total population in Afghanistan is 29.8 million (CIA World Factbook 2011).

More than 3.5 million Afghans live outside the country, mainly in Pakistan and Iran. Since the fall of Taliban an estimated 2.5 million have returned. Note: Exact population figures are not available, as a census has not taken place in Afghanistan since 1979. A nationwide UNICEF/CSO MICS estimate puts the total population at 23.85 million, with 23% living in urban areas and 77% in rural regions and population growth of 2.3% per year.

Afghanistan's political life has always been dominated by Pashtuns, who probably make up more than a third of the population. Pashtuns are overwhelmingly Sunni with the exception of the Pashtun Turi tribe who are Shi'a. Significant populations of the Tajiks are also Sunnis, apart from some Imami Shi'a Tajiks living in Western Afghanistan, and the Badakshan Tajiks who are Ismaili Shiites. Their language is Pashtu and they share an ethnic kinship with the approximately 13.3 million Pashtuns who are concentrated in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, where they are known as Pathans.

The majority of Hazaras are Shi'a (Imami Shi'a) though the Hazaras of Shibar are Ismaili Shi'a with a small minority who are Sunni.

Considerable intermarriage, particularly between the Pashtuns and other groups has blurred ethnic distinctions among communities. There has also been mixing between Tajiks and later Mongolian and Turkmen migrants, and some between Hazaras and Uzbeks.

History

Afghanistan's modern history has been one of conflict and civil war. The country's first constitution was drafted in 1923. However, the constitutional monarchy that was introduced in 1964 came to an end with the overthrow of King Zahir Shah by the then Prime Minister (later President) Mohammad Daoud in a coup in 1973. President Daoud was himself overthrown by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a small Marxist-Leninist party which took power in a coup supported by the Soviet Union in April 1978. However PDPA's ideology was rejected provoking resistance. This led to a civil war, which intensified after the entry of Soviet troops in December 1979.

The Soviet invasion resulted in the establishment of a puppet communist regime in Kabul and ushered in years of further conflict which persisted until the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from the country in 1989, following the Geneva Agreement of 1988. As reported in documents submitted to the Commission on Human Rights and the General Assembly, the Soviet occupation was characterized by arbitrary rule. During this occupation the United States began to covertly and overtly support opposition to the regime which consisted of Islamist groups, through military and financial aid to fight against the Soviet and Afghan governmental forces. Regional powers including Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia each supported their own factional groups, as ethnic awareness and consequent tensions mounted.

According to UN reports, during the Soviet occupation the country suffered serious damage, particularly in the intellectual sphere thereby damaging the foundation for the future. Torture was the most frequently used tool of the regime. Massive summary executions regularly took place and when, in September 1979, the President of the time, Nur Mohammed Taraki, was ousted by his deputy, Hafizullah Amin, a list of 12,000 persons who had been executed in prison was posted on the walls of the Ministry of the Interior.

Post-Soviet invasion

After the withdrawal of Soviet forces in February 1989, a civil war commenced between the Soviet-supported government of President Najibullah and the various Afghan factions supported by the US and known as the *Mujahadin* (holy war fighters), who had fought against the Soviet troops until their withdrawal. But with the departure of the common enemy, differences submerged during the war re-emerged and *Mujahadin* groups began to fight among themselves.

The civil conflict rapidly acquired an ethnic dimension as people from various localities fled their homes, changing the population dynamics of the state. As a result, the population of various localities fluctuated in the numbers of one or other ethnic group. Under intense pressure the Najibullah's regime finally collapsed when Abdul Rashid Dostum (an army general under the Soviets) and his Uzbek militia switched allegiance from the Kabul regime to the *Mujahidin*, who entered Kabul in April 1992.

The end of the communist regime yielded the discovery of three common graves, at Pol-i-charkhi in the suburbs of Kabul next to the central prison, and in the provinces of Bamyan and Herat. The government was convinced that further investigations would reveal other such mass graves. The occupation and ensuing war led to more than 1 million deaths and forced 6 million people out of a total population of 16 million to seek exile in neighbouring countries. A further 2 million persons were internally displaced, several tens of thousands were disabled by anti-personnel mines, and the number of orphans and other persons left without families ran into the tens of thousands.

The United Nations (UN) offered to mediate in this conflict between various factions of the *Mujahadin*, proposing a peace plan, although this effort collapsed in April 1992. One result of the UN's efforts was the transfer of power to the *Mujahadin* faction representing the Tajiks from the north, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, who became President of Afghanistan in July 1992. President Rabbani's government was supported by Ahmad Shah Masoud, a former guerrilla commander and prominent Tajik representative. Strong opposition was mounted by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Hezb-e Islami faction of the *Mujahadin*, which represented the Pashtun population.

Burhanuddin Rabbani launched an offensive on Hizb-e Wahdat ('Party of Unity' Hazara opposition party) killing many Hazaras. 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.

***Mujahidin* in power**

The incoming *Mujahidin* government inherited merely the symbols, not the instrumentalities of a state. The army was also fragmented, leading to different groups claiming power across the country. The conflict between the resistance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud who occupied centre of Kabul, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar the leader of Pakistan-backed Hezb-e Islami escalated and continued until 1996.

During this time the education and health infrastructure of the state were annihilated. UNICEF reported more than 1.5 million children died from malnutrition and lack of health care. Afghans of all ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds were the primary victims of this war, though more than 3 million refugees subsequently returned to the country through the government's involvement in two tripartite commissions, with Pakistan and UNHCR and with Iran and UNHCR respectively.

Taliban rule

From 1994, Pakistan supported the "anti-modernist" militia known as Taliban. The Taliban constituted overwhelmingly of Pashtuns, and recruited students from Deobandi *madrassas* in Pakistan. The Deobandi's started out as a revivalist movement but is now seen as orthodox and ultra conservative. Their madrassas, or Islamic schools, run in many countries across the world. The *Mujahidin* commanders form the largely-Pashtun *Khalq* faction and non-Afghan radicals also joined the Taliban. The word 'Taliban' signifies 'students' with the professed initial ideology of the movement geared towards making its followers closer followers of the Qur'an (see below under Governance).

In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, Afghanistan found itself in a new political situation. The Taliban, accused of sheltering the culprits of the attacks, collapsed in the face of the US-led invasion of the country. The US-backed Northern Alliance forces entered and captured Kabul.

Bonn Agreement

The initial steps for re-building the country were taken through the signing of a peace agreement - the *Bonn Agreement* signed between various factions in Bonn, Germany in December 2001. The internationally brokered agreement sought to create a governance structure for Afghanistan after the demise of the Taliban. The agreement sought to put in place transitional institutions pending the establishment of permanent government institutions.

This created the Afghanistan Interim Authority (AIA) and an emergency *Loya Jirga*, who were given the mandate to decide upon an Afghanistan Transitional Authority (ATA). A constitutional *Loya Jirga* (a type of traditional assembly that consisted of representatives of the various ethnic groups within the state) was held within 18 months of the establishment of the ATA, in order to adopt a new constitution.

A new Afghan National Army was created through presidential decree. This army recruited across the ethnic divides as a symbol of the transitional authority's commitment to ethnically balanced institutions under civilian control. During this period an effective police force was also established.

Despite the introduction of some element of democracy in Afghanistan the country continues to be plagued by tribal battles and violence and insecurity as a result of retaliatory Taliban attacks.

Refugee and internal displacement

Afghanistan's problems intensified with the rapid return of many Afghan refugees who had left the state during decades of war. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that almost 2 million refugees returned to Afghanistan from abroad in 2002 alone while 700,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) moved back to their places of origin. This figure subsequently dropped in the following years as the heightened security tensions and the destitute conditions led to further displacement.

In terms of the relations between the different ethnic groups within the state, it can be stated that the Pashtuns have largely dominated Afghan politics though other ethnic groups, notably the Tajiks, have, at various stages of history also maintained a strong political influence. Many attribute the worsening of ethnic relations and the emerging tensions between the groups to the Afghan-Soviet war which is said to have changed society significantly.

This civil war between the various Afghan factions caused untold misery in the state. While many people sought to rebuild their lives, thousands of refugees also arrived from the borders. There were

severe abuses of human rights. Between April 1992 and August 1994, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, 13,500 people were killed and 80,000 wounded in Kabul alone. It was estimated that more children under the age of five died of disease in Afghanistan than in any other country during that period.

Women and children most affected

As in most conflicts, women and children were among those worst affected by the civil war. Strict *purdah* meant that many women spent most of their lives in seclusion, and cultural norms further limited their access to health services, education and training. Today nine out of ten Afghan women are illiterate; on average they bear seven live children; and their life expectancy, at 42 years, is lower than that of Afghan men, an anomaly in global population statistics. More than a quarter of a million Afghan women were killed, 100,000 maimed and 300,000 widowed in the civil war, which lasted 23 years. Some 80 per cent of the refugees were women and children, as were most of the internally displaced people. With family structures broken, and men killed or absent, Afghan women have taken on heavy additional burdens, often including sole responsibility for children and disabled relatives.

When the Taliban gained control of Kabul in September 1996 and established what they regarded as an Islamic form of government, they implemented hard-core policies that adversely affected the rights of minorities and women.

With the end of the Cold War, and the Soviet withdrawal, international support and sympathy went into decline as dissent among various factions within Afghanistan turned into an open civil war. As a result the Taliban were able to consolidate their hold over Afghanistan with little concerted international opposition.

Governance

Progress was made toward establishing a central government through the Bonn Conference and the two Loya jirgas (grand councils). Women participated widely in the national presidential elections in October 2004, when Hamid Karzai was elected president. However, Afghan civil society remains severely underdeveloped with more than 50 per cent of rural Afghans in certain provinces having no knowledge of the new constitution. According to the 2003 [United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan \(UNAMA\) report](#), Community Development Councils (CDCs) were set up in 34 provinces as a part of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) aimed towards the promotion of good local governance. CDCs, unlike the old institutions of Jirga or Shura have increased the opportunities available for women's participation in village life.

Opportunities for women to participate in democratic governance are improving, although, due to their suppression in the last few decades, many rural women still lack awareness of governance issues. The situation for many women in Afghanistan has improved significantly over the last decade, with improvements in female access to education, women's representation in parliament, armed and police forces and civil society. However, there are many women who have still not been given the opportunity to garner a full understanding of their rights, and freedom of expression among women (for instance on issues concerning women's issues and rights of dressing according to one's choice) remains minimal in more rural areas given the extent of intimidation by armed factions and political or religious leaders.

New Constitution

The new Constitution of Afghanistan came into force on 4 January 2004. It recognizes Afghanistan as

an Islamic Republic and as an 'independent, unitary and indivisible state'. With regard to religious minorities, it is interesting that it is the constitutional chapter on 'The State' that protects religious freedom rather than the chapter on 'Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens'. Article 2 recognizes Islam as the religion of the state and that: 'followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law.' Pashtu and Dari are recognized as the official languages of the state, but mention is made of nine other languages, these are: Uzbek, Turkmen, Baluchi, Pashai, Nuristani, Pamiri (Alsana) and Arabic. All these languages are to be effectively adopted and developed by the government, with publications and broadcasting proposed to be in all the spoken languages of Afghanistan. The educational curriculum however is envisaged as being unitary and based on Islam and 'national culture'.

Discrimination against minorities

According to reports, there is continuing social discrimination against minorities in the new Afghanistan. This includes restrictions on religious freedoms and the harassment of missionaries in Afghanistan. Social discrimination against the Hazara Shi'as, who have been discriminated against over a long period has continued. Additionally since the previous penal code remains in force, blasphemy and apostasy are still theoretically punishable by death, creating a further barrier to non-Muslim minorities. Conflict between rival tribes and local commanders has led to casualties and insecurity which has impacted on the freedom of movement of members of ethnic groups. A particular instance of this was the heavy fighting over natural resources between rival tribes in the provinces of Nangarhar and Logar. Reports also highlight the effect this had on 10,000 Pashtuns hoping to return to their lands in the northern areas, from which they had been displaced since 1991.

The real challenge that lies ahead for the governance of Afghanistan still remains the fundamental question of how to develop the country's economy and create secure employment and guaranteed and regular national income. This task is exacerbated by the state of Afghan infrastructure after decades of war and disrepair. The factors that have to be reckoned with include: the lack of an enabling environment, the lack of support services including key infrastructure and market access, lack of access to capital and financial services and lack of advanced entrepreneurial skills, knowledge and technology. These factors are aggravated when looked at against gender based demarcations and minority indicators.

Women's rights

The country's new Constitution, ratified by the Loya Jirga in January 2004, requires each of the 34 provinces to send two female delegates to the lower house, In the 2010 parliamentary elections, 406 women ran for the 64 seats reserved for women. The Constitution states that "the citizens of Afghanistan - whether man or woman - have equal rights and duties before the law". The constitution also maintains: "No law shall be contrary to the beliefs and practices of Islam". Critics of the constitution say that clause will hamper the developments of women's rights in the country.

Despite the barriers, Afghan women have shown great and prolonged determination in their fight for equality. Massouda Jalal became the first Afghan woman to run for president in the October 2004 election. She worked as a doctor and ran an underground school for girls during the Taliban's reign. Despite receiving death threats while she campaigned, she vowed to continue on the trail.

In 2009 the controversial Shi'a Personal Status Law was passed, stripping Shi'a women of some of their basic rights enshrined in the new Constitution. The law, which regulates the personal affairs of the Shi'a Muslim minority, was amended slightly following international outcry from women's human rights groups and influential world leaders, yet many of the most repressive measures remain in the final legislation, including allowing a husband to withhold basic sustenance from his wife for not having sex with him, restricting women from working without permission from their husbands, and denying women

custody over their children. The minority Shi'a community has long demanded a separate Shi'a family law, fearing the imposition of a Sunni family code, and so the law appears to have been passed under the guise of protecting the religious minority community, but it in fact severely threatens the rights of Shi'a women.

The law on the Elimination of Violence against Women was also implemented in 2009. However, gender based violence continues to be surrounded by a culture of impunity, reflected in the lack of convictions or prosecutions since the law was implemented, and violence continued to be inflicted on women on a regular basis. A recent UN report found that two years on from its implementation, police in at least two provinces were not even aware that the law existed, highlighting the need to focus on improving women's rights in practice as much as in policy.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

The new Constitution of Afghanistan (2004) mention Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, Baluch, Pahsai, Nuristani, Aimaq, Arab, Kyrghiz, Qizilbash, Gujur, Brahui and others as the ethnic groups who have the right to Afghan citizenship. The languages of the named ethnic groups are also recognized in the new constitution.

Further according to the Article 7 of the Constitution, the state shall abide by the UN charter, international treaties, international conventions that Afghanistan has signed and the Universal declaration of Human Rights. Afghanistan has ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), accordingly it can be held accountable for any racial or ethnic or gender-based discrimination.

Although the Constitution grants rights to minority groups, Afghanistan nonetheless remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with a devastated economy after 23 years of conflict, mass unemployment, widespread lack of purchasing power and lack of infrastructure and institutions. In the years ahead, this will perhaps be the most significant factor in the country's re-birth, and how it is managed will have a significant impact on future inter-ethnic relations within the state. Ethnic groups such as the Hazara and the Tajiks fear the rising power of the warlords and pro-Taliban forces outside of Kabul. Some women insist on wearing the Burqua fearing reprisal from fundamentalist forces. Nuristanis remain on the edge of economic instability, facing poverty and violence in the region.

Recent developments

The general security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated progressively over the last few years. According to the Institute of War & Peace Reporting (IWPR), while international attention has mainly focused on the south of Afghanistan, the security situation across northern Afghanistan, once considered relatively safe, has deteriorated significantly since 2007. The re-emergence of warlords, who use violence and intimidation to maintain their hold on civilians through engagement in brutal assaults and abductions, has become an increasing problem and in particular now poses a major threat to women in the region. 2009 saw a surge in insurgent violence in the north, and the Taliban have been making progressive gains in the region since then, including capitalising on widespread poverty and unemployment in the area to gain new recruits.

A recent IWPR report stated that after Osama Bin Laden's death in 2011 the Taliban resurgence has strengthened in the north and that Taliban resistance is now perhaps stronger than ever, raising concerns over the imminent withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan, planned for 2014.

UNAMA documented 3,021 civilian deaths in 2011, an increase of 8 per cent compared with 2010 and a 25 per cent increase from 2009. Seventy-seven per cent of the deaths were attributed to anti-government forces, although critics noted that the tally appeared to exclude a substantial number of civilians who were killed during NATO-led night raids.

The year 2011 marked the start of significant troop withdrawals of NATO forces from Afghanistan. In June, United States President Barack Obama ordered his country's military to withdraw 10,000 troops by the end of the year, with a more significant pull-out to occur by mid-2012. Other NATO countries made similar plans. But with the reduction of foreign troops, there are significant question marks over how Afghan forces will perform on their own.

There is limited information on the ethnic and religious affiliations of the victims of violence and human rights violations in Afghanistan. However, based on the country's past record, it can be concluded that minorities are significantly affected by the violence, particularly in situations of anarchy where warlords/militia leaders are in control. Hamid Karzai successfully gained another term during the 2009 presidential elections; however his reputation was weakened by widespread allegations of fraud throughout the election process, which according to Human Rights Watch involved securing votes through a series of deals with former warlords from all the main ethnic factions.

Limited reports indicate that ethnic tensions are on the rise in volatile parts of the country. In mid-2007, several people were killed and hundreds displaced in clashes over access to pastures and in 2008 severe droughts increased tensions further, with thousands of Hazaras taking to the streets in March and July threatening to take up arms against Kuchis if they entered either of the provinces. Subsequently, a UN-brokered ceasefire was signed between the two groups, demanding that Kuchis temporarily withdraw from the areas. In 2010, clashes between the two groups also erupted in west Kabul after Kuchi refugees returned from Pakistan to build on what they contended to be their ancestral land, but which Hazara residents contested had been given to them by the Afghan government.

In 2009, the IWPR reported that tensions between Pashtuns and Tajiks were destabilizing the province of Balkh. There have also been increasing ethnic tensions between nomadic Pashtun Kuchi nomads and Hazara settlers over recent years with various incidents of clashes between the groups in Afghanistan's central Bamiyan and Wardak provinces.

Most recently, a series of coordinated bombings killed around 80 members of the Shi'a Muslim minority in December 2011. The attacks took place in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, targeting members of the Shi'a community celebrating the holiest day in the Shi'a religious calendar, and raised fears that a wave of sectarian violence would follow. Leading Hazara organizations reported this as an attack on the Shi'a Hazara community, who are historically the most persecuted minority in Afghanistan.

A report released by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in 2011 on economic and social rights showed that although there have been vast improvements in recent years in increasing access to food, water, education and health, many still lack these basic rights and suffer from glaring rights violations as a result. Minorities were included in the survey, although the findings were not ethnically disaggregated. A previous report on economic and social rights also found that 17 per cent of people who said they felt left out of development projects attributed it to their ethnic or tribal origin.

Armed conflict has forced tens of thousands out of their homes. According to UNHCR figures the number of refugees reached over 3 million in January 2011 with 5.7 million returning to the country since 2002 and nearly 352,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The UN Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan reports that most of the victims of mines are returnees or internally displaced people who have little awareness about the risk.

Second Bonn Conference and Peace Process

The second Bonn Conference was held on 5 December 2011 and chaired by the government of Afghanistan. The aim of the conference was to commit the international community to supporting Afghanistan after troops withdraw in 2014. Several experts have however raised concerns over the deadline for withdrawal of foreign troops, fearing that it could result in an economic vacuum and the possible descent back into instability.

No new strategy for achieving reconciliation with the Taliban was put forward in Bonn and Taliban representatives did not attend the conference. While Afghanistani authorities and international actors now agree that engaging the Taliban in the peace process is essential, significant concerns over the potential compromises attached to Taliban involvement have long been expressed by women's and minority groups.

The Karzai-appointed High Peace Council, which is tasked with seeking peace talks with the Taliban, also includes former warlords, critics say. A deputy chair of the council told the Institute for War & Peace Reporting that women should not fear a reconciliation agreement with the Taliban. But he also said women should not expect 'unconditional freedom in areas where Islamic rules and Afghan values were dominant'.

In any event, the future of the peace talks is far from certain. In September 2011, a suicide bomber assassinated Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik who had headed the High Peace Council; and in May 2012 another council member and former Taliban minister, Mullah Arsala Rahmani, was also shot dead.

[\[1\]](#) The terms Shi'a and Shiite are used interchangeably.