

Pashtuns

Profile

Pashtun, also called Pushtan, Paktun or Pathan, are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. They live mainly in the south and the east of the country. They have a distinct language called Pashto (an official language since 1936) but also speak Pakhto, which are both Iranian dialects that fall within the Indo-European group of languages. They are generally able to speak Farsi when necessary, often relying on the language in the context of trade dealings in the region. It is speculated that the Pashtun are descendents of Eastern Iranians, who immigrated to the area from Iran. However, there is also an interesting legend, which claims that they actually originate from one of Israel's tribes. Pashtun are Sunni Muslims and can also be found in the North West Province in Pakistan (about 14 million). They are seen as the historic founders of the Afghan Kingdom, with an apparent predominance in administration power until recently.

The social structure of the Pashtuns is based on the Pashtunwali (or Pukhtunwali) code, which is a mixture of a tribal code of honour and local interpretations of the Islamic Law. This requires the speaking of Pashtu and the adherence to established customs. Hospitality, protection of their guests, defence of property, family honor and protection of the female relatives are some of the most important principles for the Pashtuns. They rely on the tribal council *jirga* for the enforcement of disputes and local decision-making, as well as the seclusion of women from all affairs outside the home. A major aspect of the Pashtunwali code emphasizes personal authority and freedom. Women are required to wear full-length garments known as the burka. Culturally the Pashtuns are credited with enjoying music, dancing, poetry and story telling.

A majority of Pashtuns rely upon agriculture (irrigated wheat) and animal husbandry for their source of income, with some involved in trading in these and other commodities. Population relocation and poverty caused by the chronic lack of stability in Afghanistan has led to a rise in drug trafficking, mainly opium via Pakistan to Europe and North America. The difficult living conditions together with the lack of clean water and health care contributes to a short life expectancy of only about 46 years. Those living in the Kabul seem to enjoy slightly better living standards.

Tribal divisions

Despite their past political dominance, Pashtuns have never formed a homogeneous group, and many have fallen victim to oppression at the hands of the elites from their own community. The power and leadership of individuals are perhaps what divides Pashtuns, not only into different tribes but also into numerous sub-tribes, each isolated within their own borders. Interference in each other's affairs has caused conflict among sub-tribes throughout their history. Yet despite their infighting they have generally rallied to form a unified front when challenged by external interference or interference by a central non-Pashtun government.

Pakistan's policy was mainly supportive of the Pashtuns, especially in more recent times, but did not

support the claim for self-determination of the 13 million Pashtuns living in the North West Province of the country, out of fear of losing part of their territory.

Historical context

The Pashtuns are historically the ruling group in Afghanistan and they have dynamically fought to keep their predominance throughout Afghan history. In the years before 1978 Pashtuns made up about 40 per cent of the Afghan population. After the Soviet invasion in 1979, some 85 per cent of the more than 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan were Pashtuns. They have always played a central role in Afghan politics, and their dominant position has been a major catalyst in triggering conflict. For example, conflict arose between partners in the coalition which fought the Soviet troops and opposed the regime of Najibullah - the regime of President Rabbani represented the Tajik minority, whereas opposition troops led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and those of the Taliban, were mainly Pashtun.

The Taliban rule was based on a strict and controversial interpretation of *Shari'a* law application and it was responsible, during its dominance, for grave human rights violations based on gender, and also for ethnic discrimination. This period brought severe poverty to Afghanistan, accompanied by food insecurity and large-scale emigration for most Afghans, though some Pashtun communities who were in favour were treated favorably and buffered against the worst of the conditions. However, though the Pashtuns were in power, the majority of the community nonetheless continued to suffer discrimination. This was particularly true for Pashtun families who had been moved forcibly to the north more than 100 years earlier by an Afghan King. They were left to the mercy of the Tajiks and Uzbeks that are the predominant ethnic groups in the area. There have been reports of ethnic massacres at Mazar-e-Sharif in 1997 and 1998 and continuing reports of violence targeted against the Pashtuns (whether or not formerly Taliban supporters) as vengeance for the Taliban regime's excesses.

Current issues

With the collapse of the Taliban regime and the signing of the Bonn Agreement (2001), Pashtun dominance over the other ethnic groups in Afghanistan was brought to an end. Accordingly, there seems to be an essential change over the traditional power balance. The Pashtun, the largest and historically most powerful and influential ethnic group are currently significantly under-represented in the central government, which is dominated by the Uzbeks and Tajiks of the Northern Alliance. This less privileged position in administration and power has created obvious dissatisfaction to Pashtun. Of the estimated 1 million of IDPs at the beginning of 2002, most of the ones that have not returned to their original area of inhabitation are Pashtun, who were uprooted by ethnic violence in the north and the west of the country.

Nevertheless, the Pashtun remain the largest ethnic group and therefore in an increasingly democratic system are likely to regain their influence. Accordingly, many Pashtun who feel that their influence has been eroded since the fall of the Taliban, have been strongly supporting for President Mr. Karzai, himself a Pashtun albeit not aligned to any political party.