

Tajiks

Profile

There are approximately 8.6 million Tajiks in Afghanistan (CIA World Factbook 2007).

The Tajiks are the second most prominent ethnic group in Afghanistan after the Pashtuns. They make up the bulk of Afghanistan's elite, with considerable accumulated wealth within the community. As a result of this wealth and levels of education, they wield a significant political influence within Afghanistan. Being of Central Asian origin they maintain a kinship with the 4 million ethnic Tajiks that live in the neighbouring Central Asian state of Tajikistan.

While mainly urban in the pre-Soviet era, living in and around Kabul and in the mountainous Badashkshan region in the northeast, they are now spread out throughout the state though mainly concentrated in Northern, Northeastern and Western Afghanistan. The population of Tajiks in the Northeast fluctuated considerably during the Taliban era as the Taliban and opposition forces fought over the control of the territory.

Historical context

Most Tajiks are Sunni Muslims, with minority of Twelver Imami Shi'a (in the west around the city of Herat), and speak a form of Dari (Farsi dialect) close to the national language of Iran. They belong to an ethnic group that appears not to have retained the memory of their tribal past, which as a result seems lost in ancient times. Instead, unlike the Pashtuns they have no specific social structure, and Afghan Tajik loyalty patterns evolve around the village and family. Interestingly they appear to have adopted the social and cultural patterns of their neighbours in the regions where they live.

Targeted as Soviet supporters

The close links of the Tajiks to Afghanistan's Durani dynasty provided many Tajiks with opportunities to accumulate wealth and access modern education. However since they were closely linked to the regime overthrown with Soviet support in 1978, they came under heavy attack during that war. Tajik farms in and around Kabul were shelled and they were forced to evacuate or to mobilize to defend themselves. The mobilization led to the formation of several resistance groups, the most prominent of which was that of Ahmed Shah Massoud of Panjshir who was assassinated shortly before September 11th 2001.

Tajiks although influential in Afghan politics have only ruled Afghanistan for two brief periods, first in 1929 when Habibullah Kalakani ruled Afghanistan for nine months and the second time in 1992 when Burhanuddin Rabanni became president under the Peshawar accord, and who was subsequently ousted from Kabul by the Taliban in 1996. Tajiks are increasingly mobilizing themselves politically and are, to date associated with the Jamiat-e Islami party.

Since then the Tajiks dominated what came to be referred to as the Northern Alliance - the conglomeration of opposition grouping fighting the Taliban that the international community recognized government of Afghanistan. During the Taliban regime Tajiks amongst other ethnic groups were suppressed, many were killed after Taliban's take over of Mazar-i Sharif in 1998.

In 2001, following the September 11th attacks on the United States of America, the U.S. led a coalition of forces to overthrow the Taliban regime, which allegedly sheltered leaders of *Al-Qaeda*. The coalition cooperated with the Northern Alliance, whose members dominated the interim government, although it was headed by a non-aligned Pashtun, Hamid Karzai.

New found political dominance

The political situation of the Tajiks changed radically in 2001, when the United States led a coalition in overthrowing the Pashtun-dominated Taliban government. Although led by a Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, the interim government set in place by 2002 was dominated by ethnic Tajiks. Tajiks are unlikely to mount a large-scale rebellion against the state so long as they maintain their level of representation. Nonetheless Tajiks continue to be involved in inter-communal warfare, primarily against the majority Pashtuns. Until the central government is strong enough to contain war-lordism, such clashes are likely to continue.

Tajiks are represented at national level by a variety of political organizations and parties, though the dominant one continues to be the Jami'at-e Islami. Since no political parties were allowed to participate in the 2005 legislative elections, all candidates ran as individuals. As a result the Tajiks also are represented by Tajiks not aligned to any specific political grouping.

Current issues

The Tajik Jamiat-e Islami party gained three key cabinet posts in cabinet named by Hamid Karzai in 2002. Also the Afghan constitution (2004) recognises Tajiks as one of the Afghan ethnic minorities with the right to citizenship.

Current grievances among the community centre on the issue of political participation. There appears to be a desire among the political elites within the community for greater involvement not only over Tajik-majority regions but also for a greater stake in the central government. While Tajiks have not engaged in armed rebellion since the overthrow of the Taliban they have maintained in a relatively high level of communal conflict with Pashtuns. They also desire greater economic opportunities and are mindful of the discrimination they face in pro-Taliban areas due to their prominent role in ousting the previous regime.

While the threat of physical uprising may be lower, Tajiks have maintained a moderate level of protest on the basis of discrimination, which is likely to continue. A positive aspect of this protest is that it has, more recently taken the form of conventional political mobilisation, with a view to boosting Tajik performance in elections.