

Afghanistan: History and system of government

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN IS located in southwestern Asia. It is bordered by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north, Iran to the west, the People's Republic of China to the northeast, and Pakistan to the east and south. With an area of 647,500 km², it is roughly the size of Manitoba. The population of an estimated 28 million is divided into a number of ethnic groups, the largest of which are Pashtun (42%), Tajik (27%), Hazara (9%), and Uzbek (9%). Eighty percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and most of the remainder is Shi'a Muslim. The official languages are Dari (Persian) and Pashto, but there are numerous other languages. The capital is Kabul. (See map in Appendix.)

Afghanistan has never had a central government capable of controlling the entire country. It is divided on religious, regional, linguistic and ethnic lines, and these divisions have deepened since the collapse of the communist government in 1992. In 1996, the Taliban gained control of most of the country and imposed a strict Islamic regime. In 2001, they were overthrown by a coalition of parties supported by the United States, but remain a serious force in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Recent history

Lying at the crossroads of Central Asia, Afghanistan has suffered successive invasions since ancient times by the Greeks (under Alexander the Great), Arabs, Persians, Huns, Turks and Mongols. In 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani unified the Pashtun tribes to create Afghanistan. During the 19th century, the British and Russian empires vied for control of the region. In 1919, Afghanistan won independence from British control over its foreign affairs.

King Amanullah (1919-1929) moved to end the country's isolation, but met resistance to his secularizing reforms. He was overthrown, and following a period of upheaval Mohammad Zahir Shah ascended to the throne in 1933. In 1964, King Zahir Shah began an experiment in democracy that included a partly

elected legislature. During this time, extremist parties emerged, including the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had close ties to the Soviet Union.

In 1973, King Zahir Shah was overthrown in a military coup led by former prime minister Sardar Mohammad Daoud. Daoud's attempts at economic and social reforms were unsuccessful, and in 1978 he was deposed by the PDPA and murdered. Once in power, the PDPA tried Marxist-inspired reforms, but these too ran into opposition. An insurgency sprang up, and this prompted the Soviet Union to intervene in 1979, installing Babrak Karmal as prime minister.

Although the Karmal regime was backed by 120,000 Soviet troops, it was unable to establish effective control outside Kabul. Groups of Afghan freedom fighters known as mujahedeen – who gained backing from the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan – gradually coordinated their attacks against the government. In 1986, Karmal was replaced by Muhammad Najibullah. The Soviet Union, having lost some 14,500 troops, withdrew in 1989. Najibullah's regime collapsed in 1992, and the mujahedeen took over the government.

The victory of the mujahedeen only led to a new round of fighting as they split along ethnic, clan and religious lines. In the civil war that followed, the mostly Pashtun Taliban emerged as a potent force. Made up largely of Afghan refugees educated at Islamic schools (*madrassas*) in Pakistan, they captured the southern city of Kandahar in 1994 and seized Kabul in 1996. The Taliban disbanded the militias and brought improved security to the country.

The initial welcome for the Taliban soon dissipated when it used repressive measures to impose a strict Islamic code. It committed atrocities against women and girls, as well as against minority populations, particularly the Shi'a Hazaras. The Taliban also allowed Osama bin Laden, a Saudi dissident who had fought with the mujahedeen, to set up bases for his al-Qaeda group. In 1998, after al-Qaeda's bomb-

ing of the US embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, the United States launched a cruise missile attack on one of its bases in Afghanistan. After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the United States and the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance (NA) launched a military campaign against the Taliban. The Taliban quickly disintegrated, and in November the NA assumed control.

Soon after the fall of the Taliban, the United Nations hosted a conference in Bonn of leaders representing various Afghan factions. The Bonn Conference established a process for political reconstruction and provided for a transitional government. To achieve stability in Kabul, the United Nations Security Council approved the deployment of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In June 2002 a traditional assembly of tribal leaders, or Loya Jirga (Grand Council), chose Pashtun tribal leader Hamid Karzai as president of the transitional government. In August 2003, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assumed control of ISAF.

In January 2004, a Loya Jirga was convened and approved a new constitution for Afghanistan, which provided for a presidential system and a bicameral legislature. The Constitution also reserved about one-quarter of the seats in the Wolesi Jirga (House of Representatives) for women. When presidential elections were held on 9 October 2004, Karzai won by a wide margin, becoming the first democratically elected president of Afghanistan. Elections were held for the Wolesi Jirga in September 2005. Although most candidates ran as independents, it is estimated that Karzai's allies won between 65 and 118 seats, while the opposition National Understanding Front, led by Yunis Qanuni, obtained between 60 and 80. Many of those elected were powerful factional figures. Meanwhile, fighting with a resurgent Taliban continued, and NATO forces moved into the northern and western provinces. In 2005, Canadian forces began operating in Kandahar province.

The security situation deteriorated during 2006, and NATO expanded its military operations into the southern and eastern provinces, taking over from US-led coalition forces there.

A new opposition political grouping was formed in February 2006. Known as the United National Front of Afghanistan (UNFA), it brought together

former communists and mujahedeen and called for a switch to a parliamentary system in which the president's powers would be reduced. Many of the UNFA's leaders were associated with the NA and were opposed to what they saw as Pashtun domination of the government.

In September 2007, after an attack by a Taliban suicide bomber killed 30 people in Kabul, Karzai offered to include the Taliban in the government if this would bring peace. The Taliban responded by saying it would not negotiate with the Afghan government while foreign troops remained in the country.

System of government

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is divided into 34 provinces. The president is head of state and head of government. Legislative power is vested in the bicameral National Assembly.

The 102-member Meshrano Jirga (House of Elders) is made up of one representative from each of the 34 provincial councils; one representative from each of the 34 local district councils; and 34 members appointed by the president. Two seats each are reserved for representatives of the Kuchi nomads and for disabled representatives. At least 17 seats are reserved for women. The members chosen by the provincial councils and the district councils serve four-year terms, while the members appointed by the president serve five-year terms.

The 249-seat Wolesi Jirga is directly elected. There are 34 multi-member constituencies with between 2 and 33 members each. Ten seats are reserved for Kuchis, including at least three women, and 65 additional seats are reserved for women, giving a total of at least 68 women. The term of the Wolesi Jirga is five years.

The electoral system uses single non-transferable votes. Candidates who receive the most votes in each province win seats. If the number of women elected is below a certain threshold, however, the difference is made up with the female candidates who received the most votes.

The president and two vice presidents are directly elected for a five-year term; if no candidate receives 50% or more of the vote in the first round of voting, a second round is held between the two candidates with the most votes. The president may be elected for two terms only.

On occasion, the government may also convene a Loya Jirga to amend and interpret the constitution, declare war, and adopt decisions on the most critical national issues.

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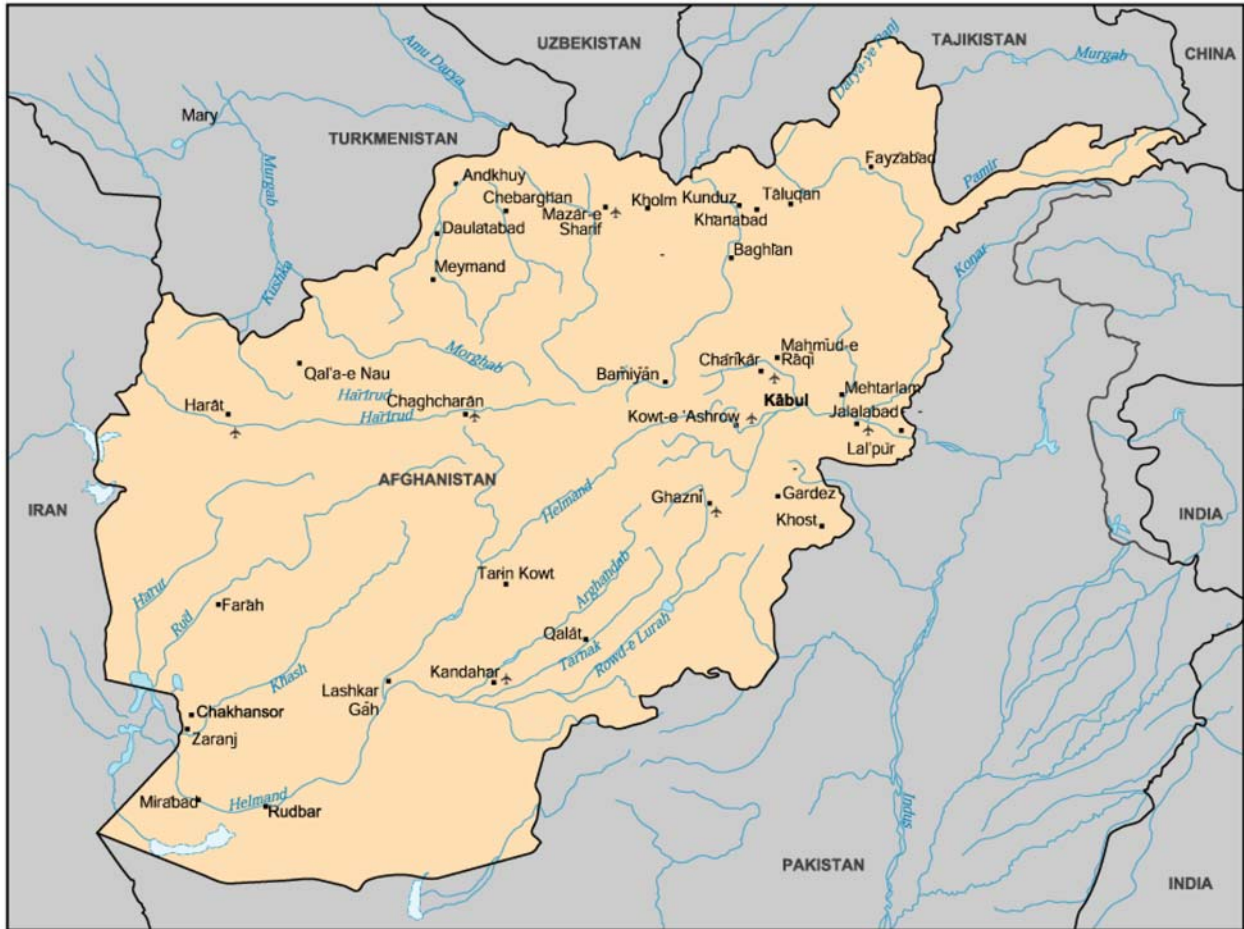
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Appendix
Map of Afghanistan



Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.