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Afghanistan: The Status of the Shi'ite Hazara Minority

AMIN SAIKAL

Abstract

The predominantly Shi'ite Hazara minority in Afghanistan has historically been a deprived and poorly treated cluster. During the theocratic rule of the Taliban (1996–2001), they were subjected to an unprecedented degree of violence and persecution. However, since the US-led NATO intervention a decade ago their situation has improved substantially. They have succeeded in securing a sizable share in the political and economic life of Afghanistan in the context of the growth of political pluralism and civil society. This is an important outcome of the international involvement in post-Taliban Afghanistan, despite all the problems and uncertainties that the country continues to face. Even if Afghanistan's national circumstances change dramatically in the wake of troop withdrawal by the USA and its allies by the end of 2014, the Hazaras are now well positioned to be able to defend their rights and interests, and to avoid re-living their bitter historical experiences.

Introduction

Afghanistan is the most mosaic state in its region, representing traditionally the case of a weak state in dynamic relations with a strong society. Its population, estimated to be around 27 million, is composed of a number of micro-societies, divided along ethnic, tribal, clan, sectarian, and linguistic lines. It is indeed a country of minorities, whose members' identities have been forged by association with locality and region rather than national landscape. In one form or another most of the micro-societies have substantial cross-border ties with Afghanistan's neighbors. The power and authority of the central government has often been determined by the degree of support that it has managed to enlist from micro-societies and a big power, and the capacity of the state to deter regional actors from influencing and manipulating Afghan groups in pursuit of their conflicting interests. In the meantime, whilst landlocked, traditionally Islamic and one of the six poorest states on the UN poverty index, it is the only country in the world with the dubious reputation of having been invaded by all the three major powers of the last two centuries: Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. As such, it is truly a country of minorities, with weak structures and massively vulnerable to outside interference.

Among Afghanistan's minorities, the Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Hazaras are the largest, making up some 42, 25–30, and 10% of the country's population, respectively.¹ Each of these minorities in itself is a cluster, or in other words, is divided into various sub-groups, operating at times either in alliance with, or in opposition to, one another. The longest period of stability that modern Afghanistan has experienced since its foundation in 1747 was from 1929 to 1973. This rested largely on a Pashtun clan dominating the political and military leadership, the Tajiks providing mostly the intelligentsia and

administrators, and Hazaras constituting mainly the servant class. Of course, in this arrangement, the Hazaras were not the only under-privileged category. There were other groups, most prominently ethnic Tajik Panjshiris, who also suffered from a position similar to that of the Hazaras.

Underpinning the long period of stability was a triangular relationship that had been forged between the monarchy, the local power holders or strongmen, or a variation of what are today popularly called 'warlords', and the religious Islamic (predominantly Sunni) establishment, within which the Afghan micro-societies had been carefully placed.² What has happened in the last three decades of conflict since the seizure of power by a small cluster of pro-Soviet communists in April 1978, and the subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan 20 months later, is the shattering of this triangular structure, with no central authority capable of rebuilding and renewing it as a framework for national unity, stability, and security.³ The government of President Hamid Karzai, who was installed in power in the wake of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in December 2011 in retaliation for Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks on the USA 2 months earlier, has proved to be too incompetent, corrupt and dysfunctional to fulfill the role. As such, it has not only resulted in very poor governance and creation of a political and strategic vacuum that the armed Taliban-led opposition could exploit, but also in depriving the international forces, led by the United States and sanctioned by the United Nations, of a credible Afghan partner to make their civilian and military involvement effective in pursuit of helping the Afghans to rebuild their lives and country.⁴

The issue of ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian identity, and the exploitation of it for political purposes, has now become so pervasive that it seriously threatens the integrity of Afghanistan with or without the Taliban, and with or without the foreign forces. Whereas the Pashtun cluster still regards itself as the rightful rulers of Afghanistan, the conditions for other micro-societies have changed so much that they have grown defiant of the Pashtuns' historical political supremacy. One cluster that has come to exemplify this defiance with rising political and economic strength and effective national and international networks is the Hazaras.

The Hazaras and Historical Repression

The Hazaras, who comprise about 2.5–3 million in Afghanistan's population, are not a homogeneous group. While a large majority of them are Twelve-Imami Shi'ites, some of them are Ismaili Shi'ites and a small number of them belong to the Sunni sect of Islam, which is followed by some 80% of the Afghan population. As such, a great number of them are part of the overall Shi'ite sectarian domain that makes up about 15–20% of the Afghan population, and are of the same sectarian persuasion as the majority of the Iranian people. The cultural and ethnic background of the Hazaras can be traced back to Greco-Buddhist traditions and Mongolian descent.⁵ They are concentrated in central Afghanistan or what is called Hazarajat, which comprises several provinces, with the main one being Bamiyan, where the 5,000 years old Buddha statues used to be located until they were destroyed by the Taliban in a horrendous act of cultural vandalism in March 2001.

There is no question that Hazaras in general have had a deprived, persecuted and exploited past, with little share in the power structure or administrative and security apparatus or economic wealth of Afghanistan. This is not to deny that individual Hazaras reached positions of prominence in the government and various fields of human endeavor from time to time. For example, a famous Afghan historian, Fayz

Mohammad Katib, was a Hazara (1861–1931). He reached the position of court historian under King Habibullah (1901–1919) and authored the three-volume *Saraj al-Tawarikh* (Torch of Histories), which is regarded as a very valuable historical text and rich source for researchers.⁶ However, most Hazaras lived at subsistence level and were employed as domestic servants or in basic manual jobs. They were the object of widespread discrimination, persecution and exploitation by Afghan ruling elites and their supporters and benefactors. They faced many wars and displacement, and were subjected to terrible suffering especially during the reign of the Afghan ‘Iron Amir’, Abdul Rahman Khan (1880–1901).⁷

However, their lot incrementally improved in the subsequent decades until the 1970s under Zahir Shah’s monarchy (1933–1973), Mohammad Daoud’s republic (1973–1978), and even more so under the Soviet-backed factionalized communist rule of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA; 1978–1992). Not only were more Hazaras educated and assuming professional and business positions, but also several figures from amongst them achieved high offices during much of this period. They most prominently included Abdul Wahid Sorabi and Sultan Ali Keshmand. Sorabi served as minister in various capacities from 1967, as well as Deputy Prime Minister and Vice President from 1998–1991, and Keshmand was Prime Minister from 1981 to 1988 under the PDPA rule. Although most Hazaras remained deprived of the necessary opportunities to play a bigger role in promoting their identity, culture, and sectarian affiliation and participating in national affairs to the extent which could make them feel comfortable as a minority, the arena nonetheless kept widening for them to become politically, socially and economically assertive. They formed their own Shi’ite resistance groups—some in close affiliation with the Iranian Islamic regime—against the Soviet occupation, and later on, in alliances or counter-alliances with various Islamic Mujahideen groups, to fight or support the post-Communist Mujahideen governments after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in May 1989, followed by the collapse of the Soviet protégé government in Kabul in April 1992.

However, the Hazaras, to a large extent, like other non-Pashtun minorities as well as women, faced a dire situation under the highly discriminatory and brutal theocratic rule of the Pakistan-backed Taliban from September 1996 when the militia took over Kabul until 2001. The Hazaras were targeted particularly because they were mostly Shi’ites, whom the *Jihadi* Sunni Taliban regarded as ‘heretics’ and pro-Iranian. In the process, the Taliban not only savagely killed an important Hazara leader, Abdul Ali Mazari, but also took highly punitive measures against the Hazaras in general, although they were not the only minority to be subjected to such harsh treatment. The Taliban succeeded in weakening the Hazara resistance, but could not break it.⁸

Hazaras’ Empowerment

The breakdown of order and the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan from the late 1970s to the turn of the century in general, and from the time of the US-led intervention in October 2001 to the present in particular, have substantially enhanced the potential for such minorities as Hazaras and Panjshiris to achieve an unprecedented degree of assertion in enhancing their interests and in determining Afghanistan’s future. Since the focus of our discussion is the Hazaras, it suffices to say the Panjshiris, whose historical plight has in many ways paralleled that of the Hazaras, played a critical part in the armed resistance to the PDPA rule, Soviet occupation and Taliban rule. And since the fall of the Taliban, they have steered an equally important role in the post-Taliban

transition of Afghanistan. The assassination of their legendary leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was killed by Al Qaeda agents 2 days before the 11 September 2001 events, spurred his followers to cooperate with and facilitate the US-led intervention, which otherwise may have proved very difficult to accomplish.

As for the Hazaras and many of their Shi'ite cohorts, they have become a bigger player than their numerical strength would warrant. Whilst Afghanistan has a long way to go before it can achieve stability, security, and viability—something that from the vantage point of some analysts may prove to be unachievable in the foreseeable future—two factors have been an enormous help to the Hazaras. The first is that they have traditionally been a very hard-working and entrepreneurial people, with potential for a high degree of organization, adaptability, and mobilization. Their bitter historical experiences have taught them that they must remain very vigilant of changing situations and take advantage of every opportunity that comes their way in order to maintain and strengthen their viability as one people. They have learned that it is important for them to be adaptable to different situations and environments, and to network nationally and internationally in order to promote their objectives. The second factor is that the US-led push for democratization and institution of a pluralist political order has been highly beneficial to the Hazaras. The growth of civil society, amongst other factors, has created channels in which the Hazara community can promote and defend their interests.

Arguably, they have been more successful than any other Afghan minority in this respect. The Hazaras are no longer as oppressed, deprived and exploited as they once used to be. They are a powerful force to reckon with in today's Afghanistan. Their growing strength is on display at all sectarian, cultural, political, and economic levels. A distinguished Norwegian Afghan specialist, Astri Suhrke, who is a Senior Fellow at Norway's Chr. Michelsen Institute and Visiting Fellow at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy at the Australian National University, writes that there has been 'considerable improvement in the condition of the Hazara minority in post-Taliban Afghanistan'. Dr Suhrke goes on to say:

For the first time in Afghanistan's history, the 2004 Constitution gives the courts the right to apply Shia jurisprudence in family matters involving Shia Muslims. As the largest group of Shia in Afghanistan, the Hazara consider this a major victory. A Shia personal status law was adopted in 2009. Although some regarded it as an excessive codification of family matters, all Shia MPs supported it as a recognition of minority rights. An area populated by Hazara was declared a new province in 2004 (Daikundi in the central region, adjacent to Bamiyan, the other main Hazara province). During the last [2010 parliamentary] elections the Hazara won 59 of 249 seats in the lower house.... Individual Hazara have held or holding, high political office.... Legal and institutional recognition does not always translate into practice. Like all Afghans, the Hazara live in a country racked by violence, uncertainty and corruption. However, the Hazara have become politically more assertive, are moving into higher education in what appears to be unprecedented numbers, and, in Kabul, many have entered the new middle class that has developed around the international presence.⁹

Politics and Personalities

To elaborate on some of these points, it is important to note that one of the Vice Presidents of President Karzai is a Hazara—Karim Khalili. So too is the Deputy Speaker of the

new Lower House of Parliament, which was inaugurated on 20 January 2011—Ahmad Behzad. In addition, Hazaras occupy at least five posts in Karzai's 27-member cabinet. Khalili is also the head of the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan, and owns his own TV station, with a considerable number of additional outreach activities.¹⁰ Other prominent and influential Hazara figures include: Habiba Sorabi, Sima Samar, and Mohammad Mohaqiq, each of which deserves some detail.

Habiba Sorabi is the governor of Bamiyan—the first woman ever to be appointed to such a position in the history of Afghanistan. Prior to assuming her current post in March 2005, she served as Minister of Women's Affairs in Karzai's Interim and Transitional Governments from 2002 to 2004. She has been very active in promoting and protecting the well-being, identity and culture of the Hazaras in Bamiyan, where New Zealand forces form the core of a fairly successful Provincial Reconstruction Team. She has already unfolded ambitious plans for building a new city and bringing about a cultural revival. She has been exceptionally successful in promoting order and security in her province and serving as a role model not only for Hazara women, but also Afghan women in general. Under a strategy to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the USA and its NATO allies, supported by the Karzai government, regarded Bamiyan safe enough to select it as the first province whose security responsibilities were to be transferred to the Afghan National Army and Police—something which was executed in mid-July 2011.

Sima Samar is the Chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. Before assuming this position, she served as Vice President and Minister of Women's Affairs in Karzai's Interim Government for a little more than a year. She comes from Jaghoor in Ghazni Province, which is a Pashtun majority province, but was dominated by Hazara candidates in the parliamentary elections of 2010. She is a strong advocate for women's rights, justice, and reformation those traditions and cultural norms and practices which have historically confined Hazaras to subordination and deprivation in particular and the Afghan people in general. She exemplifies Hazaras' success in gaining a significant voice in national and international arenas. Her substantial success in advocacy became clear with her parallel appointment in 2005 as UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Sudan.

Mohammad Mohaqiq heads the predominantly Hazara People's Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan (which broke off from Khalili's group) and is a powerful member of the Lower House of the parliament. He has proved to be a very effective Hazara organizer and mobilizer, with a key role in building Shi'ite national and international networks. As a presidential candidate in 2004, he showcased his capacity to call for huge Hazara/Shi'ite public rallies whenever needed.¹¹ Like Khalili, he owns a TV station. He is charismatic and well informed of the complexities of Afghan and world politics. No Afghan leader has been able to achieve as much as him in this respect. He has proved a tireless campaigner and lobbyist in harnessing support for the cause of Hazaras at both national and international levels.

In addition to these Hazara figures, a very influential Shi'ite leader, with whom the Hazaras share a common sectarian allegiance, is Sheikh Mohseni. He is one of Karzai's important religious advisors, and has grown to be a crucial spiritual player in Afghan politics. He proposed the Personal Status Law, empowering a Shi'ite man to refuse sustenance to his wife if she refused to have sex with him. His proposal caused an international outcry, with even Mohaqiq criticizing it, but Karzai nevertheless signed it into Law in early 2010.¹² Mohseni is believed to be more closely linked to Iran than any of the Hazara Shi'ite leaders. He has his own TV station and a brand new and opulent Centre of Shi'ite learning in Kabul. He acts more or less as the Ayatollah

of the Afghan Shi'ites, and is believed to have a large following. Although he is not a Hazara, and there are differences between him, Khalili, and Mohaqiq, his influential Shi'ite religious position allows many Hazaras to make common cause with him.

Business and Trade

Beyond this, the Hazaras now run a large number of lucrative businesses in Kabul and the provinces where they are concentrated. They make up some of the large traders, with extensive partnerships outside Afghanistan—Iran, China, UAE and India in particular. Most of the modern supermarkets in Kabul and in the capitals of some of the provinces are either owned or run by them. Although a majority of Hazaras still live in poverty—like most of the Afghan population—their social and economic conditions of living have taken a steep upward trajectory, with an increasing share in Afghanistan's economy to match their growing political influence. Also, there appears to be more of a gender balance within the Hazara elite than is the case with many other ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

Of course, this should not come as a major surprise, even in light of decades of oppression. Historically, gender and social inequality in Hazara communities have not been as stark, and literacy and education has been a point of pride. Hazara women are given much more liberty to act, and as such are now achieving greater advances than their compatriots in other parts of the country. A great number of Hazara children, including girls, now attend school, with the consequent result of them, as Suhrke suggests, entering higher education in 'unprecedented numbers'.¹³ This is not to claim that the education they receive is of high quality. It is rather to point out that the Hazara children have greater educational opportunity now than ever before, and most of them certainly make use of this opportunity to the best of their ability.

Undoubtedly, the Hazaras now enjoy a substantial share in the power structure, and economic and social life of Afghanistan. Their provinces have proved to be amongst the safest in Afghanistan. At the very least, they are no worse off than many other groups in the country. While there are acts of violence and persecution by the Taliban against them here and there, they are subjected to no more of this than other groups in a zone of continuing conflict and social divisions.

However, despite all this, the Hazaras are still presented by some of their leaders and elements in the Diaspora, supported by various national and international networks and organizations, as the most deprived and oppressed group in Afghanistan. This claim simply does not tally with the realities on the ground. It constitutes a misrepresentation of the progress that they achieved and continue to make in Afghanistan. Under the prevailing circumstances in Afghanistan, few Hazaras can claim that their life and liberty is in any more danger than many other groups in the country.

Emigration

Many European countries and Australia have become a very attractive destination for an increasing number of Hazaras who want to migrate to a second or third country. The Hazaras have formed the bulk of asylum seekers and refugees from Afghanistan in the last 5 years. A good number of them are transferred through smuggling rackets, which operate in Afghanistan, its neighbors and beyond. Some leave their places of origin with independent means to meet the fee of people smugglers, and others receive assistance from networks of their fellow Hazaras from abroad. It should be noted that not all those Hazaras who migrate are necessarily from Afghanistan. Some of them may well be from Pakistan,

especially Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan Province. There are about 1 million Hazaras in Pakistan. They may have descended from several generations of Hazaras who have lived in Pakistan, but now conveniently pass themselves off as Afghan Hazaras. Like the latter, they essentially speak a Dari dialect, Hazaragi, but they can be distinguished in a careful assessment. While Hazaragi is not a language, but rather a dialect, Hazara refugees are now insisting that Hazaragi be recognized internationally as a language in its own right.

It is important to be reminded that like Afghanistan in general, the Hazara case has become somewhat of an industry. Some public and academic figures and organizations have drawn on the issue for a variety of purposes, including enhancing their individual and organizational standing, and exercising policy influence. It is time that the case of the Hazaras was dispassionately and fairly understood and assessed. They should be neither victimized nor given undue priority compared with some other groups in Afghanistan whose plight has not been less. Indeed, the situation in Afghanistan is very fluid and unpredictable. It could change in a direction where the Hazaras may find themselves subjected once again to a high degree of discriminatory and even violent treatment, especially if either as a result of a peace deal or use of force, the Taliban succeeded in returning to power. Even so, the Afghan political landscape has changed so much that whatever happens, it will be extremely difficult to make it monolithic under the supremacy of a single group, as has been the case in the past. An important variable that has taken strong root over the last decade is the growth of political pluralism and civil society, making it unviable for one group to achieve political triumph against the others.

Conclusion

The Hazaras are well placed to secure a meaningful share of any new power reconfiguration that may emerge, especially in the wake of the withdrawal of most of the USA and allied troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Whilst the prospects for a return to power of the Taliban and their affiliates may now appear bright, it would be very short-sighted of them to reinstitute the discriminatory and medievalist behavior that characterized their rule and at the same time expect to bring stability and peace to Afghanistan. The Taliban and their supporters, most importantly Pakistan, must have learned that Afghanistan is made up of minorities, with each minority or a combination of them now capable of challenging anything short of a pluralist and nationally consensual system of governance. With non-Pashtun minorities linked to Afghanistan's neighbors other than Pakistan, and with these neighbors willing to help them against Taliban-led political domination, the Hazaras are now in a stronger position than ever to defend themselves against adversarial and discriminatory developments. This is not to suggest that the international community should neglect the historical suffering of the Hazaras or become resistant to the need of some of them who seek asylum outside Afghanistan. What it does say is that the position of the Hazaras has improved considerably over time, especially since the US-led intervention, and that they are in no more a debilitating situation than a number of other minorities in Afghanistan.

NOTES

1. For a detailed account, see Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, pp.18–19; Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, Ch. 1.

2. For a discussion of Afghan history, see Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, Chs. 1–4; Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, Chs. 1–4; Nabi Misdaq, *Afghanistan: Political Frailty and External Influence*, Milton Park: Routledge, 2006, Chs. 1–2; and Angelo Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan: A Modern History*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, Chs. 1–3.
3. For more on the Soviet intervention and withdrawal from Afghanistan, see Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, Ch. 8; Amin Saikal and William Maley, eds, *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. For a discussion on the rise of the Taliban, see Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, New York: Palgrave, 2002; and William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, New York: New York University Press, 1998.
4. Since the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, the state has remained fractured and dysfunctional. See Amin Saikal, ed., *The Afghanistan Conflict and Australia's Role*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2011; and Geoffrey Hayes and Mark Sedra, eds, *Afghanistan: Transition Under Threat*, The Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2008.
5. On Hazara descent and traditions, see Elizabeth E. Bacon, "The Inquiry into the History of the Hazara Mongols of Afghanistan", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 230–247.
6. For a detailed discussion of Fayz Mohammad Katib's historical work on the turbulent period of 1929, see Robert D. McChesney, *Kabul under Siege: Fayz Muhammad's Account of the 1929 Uprising*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999.
7. See Sayed Askar Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.
8. For examples of Taliban suppression of the Hazara community, see Human Rights Watch, *Afghanistan: Massacres of Hazaras in Afghanistan*, 1 February 2001; and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, Ch. 4.
9. Astri Suhrkh, "Life is Getting Better for Oppressed Afghans", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 2011.
10. Ownership of a TV station and other mediums of communication is common for Afghan "strongmen". See Abbas Daiyar, "The So-called Boom of Afghan TV Channels", *Kabul Perspective*, Blog, 28 July 2011. [<http://kabalperspective.wordpress.com/2010/07/28/the-so-called-boom-of-afghan-tv-channels>].
11. Mohaqiq came third in presidential voting, with 11.7% of the vote. He led the balloting in two Hazara-dominated provinces, and came a narrow second among Afghan refugees in Iran.
12. At the same time, many Hazaras defended the Personal Status Law as a significant victory for minority rights and the codification of communal and family rights.
13. For a narrative on the contemporary Hazara Afghan situation, see Phil Zabriskie, "Hazaras: Afghanistan's Outsiders", *National Geographic*, February 2008.