

Ethnic Makeup of Afghanistan

Irfan Ali Shah ¹

Abstract: Afghanistan is a multiethnic democratic state with a population of around 32.2 million. It comprises around fifty ethnic groups. The Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek are the major ethnic groups constitute around 90% of the total Afghan population. The four major groups fought fratricidal wars against each other following withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan (i.e. 1990s). Since the fall of Taliban regime (i.e. 2001), these groups are playing dynamic role in the state and society to gain/maintain political power. Afghanistan lacks official scientific population census, consequently, in a politically fragile state like Afghanistan, the number game of population has got much salience: each ethnic group is trying to consider the population of their respective group greater than the other. In the absence of official census, there are available some surveys by private organizations (i.e. Wak Foundation, Asia Foundation, CIA World fact Book and some broadcasting companies) besides estimations made by some eminent Afghanologists/academicians about the ethnic compositions in Afghanistan, though, with varying results. It is critical to find out the ethnic compositions of major ethnic groups in Afghanistan in order to find a sustainable road map to democratic transitions. Hence, keeping in view the available demographic sources, this paper attempts to examine the ethnic make up in Afghanistan, particularly of the major ethnic groups. The methodology used in this paper is textual as well as quantitative.

Keywords: Ethnic Groups, Political Parties, Afghanologist

1 Introduction

There reside more than fifty ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The major ethnicities include: Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara. Pashtun are the largest plurality followed by Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek. Monarchy flourished in Afghanistan during the period 1747-1978. The Durrani-Pashtun dynasty founded and ruled Afghanistan throughout its history, barring two brief spans (1929 and 1992-94) when Tajiks ruled the country. The Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan (1979) have not only made *qawm*² and ethnicity salient, but, ethnic

¹Qurtuba University, Peshawar, Pakistan

²Qawm is a flexible term that refers to kin, clan, village, tribe, ethnic/vocational/confessional group, profession, and/or nation in Afghanistan.

conflicts, also ensued between the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan, in the 1990s. Historically, co-existence has been between various ethnic groups in Afghanistan; however, unequal opportunities and conflict have also occurred.[1] Amir Abdur Rehman (r.1880-1901), the Pashtun ruler, created centralized state with bounded frontiers with coercive force. He deported and suppressed various ethnic groups that led to ethnic polarization. He unified and mobilized the Pashtuns to suppress non-Pashtun particularly Hazara and Nuristani. Displacement and deportation of Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and resettling of Pashtun have been tantamount to ethnic cleansing, at times, for strengthening state building in Afghanistan. It led to ethnic animosity, hatred, and alienation broadening ethnic cleavages. During the period 1929-73, little efforts were made to alleviate ethnic and social tensions.[2]

Cracks began to appear in the socio-political and ethnic hierarchy in the wake of promulgation of Constitution (1964) in Afghanistan. The Constitution provided freedom of press, allowed formation of political parties, and opened a window of opportunity for Afghan ethnic groups to express themselves in politics. The Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara participated in the multi-ethnic political parties such as Jamiat-e Islami, the PDPA, Sitm-e Milli, and Shula-e Javid. Daud Khan (r.1973-78) ended monarchy in 1973, became president, and declared Afghanistan as republic. His Pashtun-dominated political party, National Revolutionary Party gathered support for his Republican regime. His party polarized the ethnicities more between the Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, and stirred political competition. The historical events; The Saur Revolution (1978); and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89) stimulated ethnic divisions further in the wake of penetration of massive foreign arms and cash into the country. Sect appeared as supplementary force along ethnicity in the form of Hizb-e Wahdat. The fueling of ethnicity and sectarianism by Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia, India and Saudi Arabia further intensified ethnic polarization. This led to emergence of various ethnic based alliances, mainly non-Pashtun, to gain political power, in the 1990s. Presently, all four major ethnic groups are struggling hard to attain/maintain political power, and influence the state and society.

2 Ethnicities of Afghanistan

Afghanistan lacks official, scientific population census, though contested and disputed surveys and estimations are available. In 1979, Afghan government (the *Khalqis*)³ tried to conduct the first ever official scientific population census, but the task remained incomplete: the mounting resistance in the countryside obliged them to count 56 percent of the population⁴ that estimated the total Afghan population as 14.6 million.⁵ Organizations, such as Wak Foundation, Asia Foundation, CIA World Fact Book and some broad casting companies have been conducting private surveys to determine ethnic composition in Afghanistan with varying results. In

³Khalq ("Masses" or "People" in Pashto) was a faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Its historical leaders were Presidents Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin. It was also the name of the leftist newspaper produced by the same movement. Supported by the USSR and formed in 1965 when the PDPA was born, The Khalqi wing of the party was made up primarily of Pashtuns from non-elite classes. However, their Marxism was often a vehicle for tribal resentments. Bitter resentment between the Khalq and Parcham factions of the PDPA eventually led to the failure of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan that was formed as a result of the Saur Revolution. It was also responsible for the radical reforms that encouraged the rebellion of the religious segments present in the Afghan society, which led to the creation of the Mujahideen and, eventually, to the Soviet military intervention in December 1979.

⁴Retrieved: <http://countrystudies.us/afghanistan/36.htm>

⁵Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2009-2010

Ethnicity	Figures in Million	Percentage
Pashtun	6.5	47
Tajik	3.5	25
Hazara	0.87	6
Uzbek	01	7

Table 6.1: Statistics of Afghanistan Ethnicities

Afghanistan, it is a politically sensitive issue to ask about population figures by region, let alone by ethnic group. Census conductors have generally been forbidden to ask questions about group membership.⁶ On the basis of available surveys and estimations, the four major ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara constitute around 90% of the total population of Afghanistan.

Louis Dupree,⁷ an Afghanologist, estimated the population of Afghanistan as 13.82 million,[3, pp58-65] in 1980, Goodson as 22 million,[4, p14] in 2001 and Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook surveyed 25.5 million (25,493,500),⁸ in 2009-2010. The population of Afghanistan, in 2015, was estimated around 26 million in 2015, while, according to Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan, it is 32.2 million⁹ in 2019. Though regarding total population, some guesstimates can be offered, however, qawm, ethnicity, is a fluid term, in Afghanistan, therefore, determining size of an ethnic group, in Afghanistan, becomes, almost an impossible, gigantic task.

The Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek are considered the four major and important ethnic groups in Afghanistan's socio-political milieu. They constitute around 90% of the Afghan population. They have been playing active role in the politics of Afghanistan since 1960s. Louis Dupree has given his own estimations about these major ethnic groups from the data gathered during 1949-1968: we get the following approximate figures (Table 6.1) [3, pp58-65]

Vartan Gregorian¹⁰ (b.1934) conducted his research during 1960-62 in different countries including Afghanistan, and estimated the major Afghan ethnic groups: Pashtun in between 50-55%; Tajik 30%; Hazara in between 400,000 and one million; Uzbek in between 1-1.5

⁶Ibid, pp23-24

⁷Professor Louis Dupree (1925-1989) was an American archaeologist, anthropologist, and scholar of Afghan culture and history. He along with his wife, Nancy Hatch Dupree, worked together for 15 years in Kabul, collecting as many works written about Afghanistan as they could. They travelled across the country from 1962 until the April 1978 Saur Revolution, conducting archaeological excavations. After receiving his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees, he planned to re-visit the Philippines for research purposes but was rejected by its government, instead he was invited to join an archeological survey in Afghanistan in 1949. This led to his lifelong interest in southwestern Asia, from 1959 and 1983. During his career, Dupree also served as adviser to several governments, including those of West Germany, France, Denmark, Sweden, and Great Britain. He consulted with the United States Department of State and the United Nations. He has worked with the mujahideen forces that were fighting the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan. He spent time in Peshawar, Pakistan, along with his wife, assisting Afghan refugees. He had previously stayed in Pakistan as a Fulbright Scholar and as an advisor on Afghan affairs to the US ambassador in Pakistan.

⁸Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2009-2010

⁹Central Statistics Organization, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

¹⁰Vartan Gregorian is an Iranian-born Armenian-American academic, serving as the president of Carnegie Corporation of New York. He received his PhD in history and humanities from Stanford in 1964, writing a dissertation entitled "Traditionalism and Modernism in Islam." The topic of his dissertation was related to an ongoing research project that he began in 1961, after receiving a Ford Foundation Foreign Area Training Fellowship, which took him to England, France, Lebanon, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. These experiences and his related research refocused his thesis on Afghanistan and formed the basis for his first book, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1840-1946* (1969, 2013, Stanford University Press).

Ethnicity	Percentage
Pashtun	62
Tajik	13
Hazara	12
Uzbek	02

Table 6.2: Statistics from Wak Foundation

Ethnicity	2004	2006	2007	2010	2011	2013	2015	2016	2017	2018	% Age
Pashtun	46	40.9	40.1	42	41	43	40	38	37	37	40.5
Tajik	39	37.1	35.1	31	32	32	34	36	37	37	35.0
Hazara	06	9.2	10	10	11	10	11	9	11	9	9.6
Uzbek	06	9.2	8.1	9	9	7	8	12	9	10	8.7

Table 6.3: Statistics from Asia Foundation ¹⁴

million.[5]

Wak Foundation for Afghanistan ¹¹ conducted an Afghan opinion survey from August to November 1999 with the major objective to utilize people views in solving the national crisis. The data was conducted from Afghanistan and Pakistan: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek and other ethnic groups' supporters were interviewed. Pashtun and Hazara ethnicities have greater number of population in Pakistan than the other ethnic groups residing in the country. The report mentions that total 3000 viewers were interviewed: 2000 from Afghanistan and 1000 from Pakistan. The term viewers, supporters and interviewees were used interchangeably in the report. According to this report, statistics are reported in Table 6.2.

Asia Foundation [13] ¹² has been conducting annual surveys ¹³ of Afghanistan (since 2004). In the below table, the data percentages of each respondent ethnic group are surveyed, while, the average percentage, will highlight some view of the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The data for the years, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2012, and 2014 is non-existent and the reason may perhaps be the political unrest in Afghanistan.

Rober L. Canfield, an American socio-cultural anthropologist, estimated the following figures about the major ethnic groups in 1986.[6, pp12-13] The approximate percentage of each

¹¹Research & Implementation Institute for Afghanistan Rehabilitation, Development, and Drug Control Programme

¹²The Asia Foundation is a non-profit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Established in 1954, having six decades of experience and deep local expertise, its work across the region addresses five overarching goals, strengthen governance, empower women, expand economic opportunity, increase environmental resilience, and promote regional cooperation. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals. In 2016, we provided \$87.8 million in direct program support and distributed textbooks and other educational materials valued at \$9.5 million.

¹³Surveys are a method of gathering information from individuals. Surveys have a variety of purposes, and can be conducted in many ways. It may be conducted to gather information through a printed questionnaire, over the telephone, by mail, in person, by diskette, or on the web. This information is collected through use of standardized procedures so that every participant is asked the same questions in the same way. It involves asking people for information in some structured format. Depending on what is being analyzed, the participants being surveyed may be representing themselves, their employer, or some organization to which they belong. Survey may refer to: survey (Human research) including opinion polls, and survey methodology, a method for collecting quantity information about items in population.

Ethnicity	Figures in Million	% Age
Pashtun	6.5	47
Tajik	4.1	28
Hazara	01	7
Uzbek	01	7

Table 6.4: Statistics from R. Cranfield [6]

Ethnicity	Age	Average %
Pashtun	36-46	41
Tajik	37-39	38
Hazara	6-13	9.5
Uzbek	5-7	6

Table 6.5: Statistics from ABC News

group is given in Table 6.4.

Thomas Barfield (b.1950), the American anthropologist, estimates the Pashtun 40%, Tajik 30%, Hazara 15% and Uzbek 5% of the Afghan population.[7, pp24-28] He even makes up the Aymaq (5%) as half the size of Uzbek and Turkmen (which collectively makes up 10%),[7, pp27-28] but, Larry Goodson considers Aymaq as 10%.[4, p16] For him, the smaller groups constitute 3% of the total population of Afghanistan.[4, p28]

Besides, the broadcasting companies (NBC, BBC and ARD)¹⁵ have conducted surveys in 2004 and 2009 in Afghanistan, the percentage of which are presented in Table 6.5.¹⁶

The figures on the official website of Afghanistan are much different from the various surveys. The percentage of Pashtun is more than double the Tajik, and the number of Baloch are more than Uzbek¹⁷.

However, for World Fact Book¹⁸, the Pashtun constitute 42%, Tajik 27%, Hazara 09%,

¹⁵Founded in 1926 by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), NBC is the oldest major broadcast network in the United States. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) is an American English language commercial broadcast television network that is a flagship property of NBC Universal, a subsidiary of Comcast. The network is headquartered in the Comcast Building (formerly known as the GE Building) at Rockefeller Center in New York City. Besides, The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a British public service broadcaster headquartered at Broadcasting House in London. The BBC is the world's oldest national broadcasting organization and the largest broadcaster in the world by number of employees. The BBC is established under a Royal Charter and operates under its Agreement with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Its work is funded principally by an annual television licence fee which is charged to all British households, companies, and organizations using any type of equipment to receive or record live television broadcasts and 'iPlayer' catch-up since 1 September 2016. The fee is set by the British Government, agreed by Parliament, and used to fund the BBC's radio, TV, and online services covering the nations and regions of the UK. ARD is a joint organisation of Germany's regional public-service broadcasters. It was founded in 1950 in West Germany to represent the common interests of the new, decentralised, post-war broadcasting services in particular the introduction of a joint television network. The ARD is the world's largest public broadcaster, with a budget of €6.9 billion and 22,655 employees. The budget comes primarily from the licence fees every household, every company and even every public institution like city governments are required to pay.

¹⁶ABC news/BBC/ARD Poll, Afghanistan: Where Things Stand, Feb. 9th, 2009. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com> Accessed on 04-1-2019.

¹⁷Retrieved from <http://www.afghanistans.com/Information/default.htm>

¹⁸The World Fact book (also known as the CIA World Fact book) is a reference resource produced by the Central Intelligence Agency with almanac-style information about the countries of the world. The official print version is available from the National Technical Information Service and

Ethnicity	% Age
Pashtun	52
Tajik	21
Hazara	9
Baloch	7
Uzbek	6

Table 6.6: Statistics from Afghanistan Government Official Website

Uzbek 09%, Aymaq 4%, Turkmen 3%, Baloch 2% and others 4%¹⁹ of the Afghan population.

3 Conclusion

Afghanistan lacks official scientific population census. Asking group membership is considered politically sensitive in Afghanistan. However, organizations such as, Asia Foundation, CIA World fact Book, Wak Foundation, and some broad casting companies have made private surveys to determine ethnic composition in Afghanistan with varying results. Besides, some Afghanologists have also estimated the Afghan ethnic compositions. To analyze the ethnic make up in Afghanistan, various major eight available sources particularly about the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan were examined. The study revealed that Pashtun constitute 46.4%, Tajik 27.1%, Hazara 9.6% and Uzbek 6.3% of the total Afghan population. Official human population census is crucial for a democratic country like Afghanistan, because, the country has already witnessed bloody ethnic wars in the 1990s. In the absence of equal share of ethnic resources (in parliament, bureaucracy, army, police, treasury, economic development etc), ethnic wars may be fought again between these ethnic groups. Share determines justice and, in case of Afghanistan, it will initiate the path to development. It is clarified that the four major ethnic groups have been strengthened particularly during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan when the massive arms and cash penetrated the country. In the wake of 9/11, though, Afghanistan is considered a constitution-based democratic country; the major ethnic groups are struggling hard to attain/maintain political power to influence their role in the state and society.

Bibliography

- [1] K. Masahiro, M.Q. Wafayezada, Ethnic Politics, Ethnic Political Parties and the Future of Democratic Peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Human and Socio-Environmental Studies, Vol 23, pp43-70, 2012

the Government Printing Office. Other companies such as, Sky horse Publishing also print a paper edition. The Fact book is available in the form of a website that is partially updated every week. It is also available for download for use off-line. It provides a two- to three-page summary of the demographics, geography, communications, government, economy, and military of each of 267 international entities including U.S.-recognized countries, dependencies, and other areas in the world. The World Fact book is prepared by the CIA for the use of U.S. Government officials, and its style, format, coverage, and content are primarily designed to meet their requirements. However, it is frequently used as a resource for academic research papers and news articles. As a work of the U.S. Government, it is in the public domain in the United States.

¹⁹Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov>. Accessed on 20-01-2019

- [2] S. A. Mousavi, *The Hazara of Afghanistan: n Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study*, Curzon Press, 1998
- [3] L. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1980
- [4] P.L. Goodson, *Afghanistans Endless War: State failure, Regional Politics and the Rise of the Taliban*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, London, 2001
- [5] V. Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1840–1946*, Stanford University Press, 1969
- [6] H. Emadi, *State, Revolution and Superpower in Afghanistan*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1990
- [7] T. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2010
- [8] T. M. Alam, *The Betrayal of Afghanistan: An Analysis of the Afghan Resistance Against Soviet Union*, Ed: M. Y. Effendi, Area Study Centre (Russia, China & Central Asia), University of Peshawar, 2005
- [9] H. B. Bellow, *Races of Afghanistan*. Thacker, Spink, And Co., Calcutta, 1880
- [10] M.S. Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and Its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India*. Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1972
- [11] A. Ghani, *A Brief Political History of Afghanistan*, Ed.: Abdul Jaleel Najfi, Najaf Publishers, Lahore
- [12] A. Rasanayagum, *Afghanistan: A Modern History; Monarchy, Despotism or Democracy? The Problems of Governance in Muslim Tradition*. I.B.Taurus & Co, Ltd, London, New York, 2005
- [13] *Afghanistan: A survey of Afghan People*, Asia Foundation, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2010