

Short Guide to: Afghanistan

Location: Southern Asia, north and west of Pakistan, east of Iran

Population: 35 million approx

Languages: Afghan Persian or Dari (official) 77% (Dari functions as the lingua franca), Pashto (official) 48%, Uzbek 11%, English 6%, Turkmen 3%, Urdu 3%, plus others.

Major Religions: Muslim 99.7% (Sunni 85-90%, Shia 10-15%) Apart from Muslims, there are also small minorities of Sikhs, Hindus and Christians.

Major Ethnic Groups: Afghanistan is a multi ethnic and mostly-tribal society, consisting of the following ethnolinguistic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Aymāq, Turkmen, Baloch, Pashai, Nuristani, Gujjar, Arab, Brahui, Pamiri and a few others. The Afghan National Anthem and the Afghan Constitution mention a total of 14 ethnic groups.

Culture and society

Islam is practised by the majority of Afghans and governs much of their personal, political, economic and legal lives. Among certain obligations for Muslims are to pray five times a day - at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening. Friday is the Muslim holy day, when most shops and offices will be closed. Government offices and businesses may also close on Thursday, making the weekend Thursday and Friday. During the holy month of Ramadan all Muslims must fast from dawn to dusk and are only permitted to work six hours per day. Fasting includes no eating, drinking, cigarette smoking, or gum chewing.

The Family is very important in the Afghan culture. Men and women's roles tend to be defined along traditional lines, with women responsible for household duties, and men typically the bread winners. Professional women do exist, but mostly in urban areas. Arranged marriages are common, with factors such as tribe, status, network, and wealth influencing the choice. Families traditionally live together in the same walled compound, known as the kala. As with much of the Muslim world, the family is sacred and as such, is highly protected.

Etiquette is key in Afghani society. Young people address elders not by name but by a title. Hospitality is a strong cultural value, and the customs around food are important. As soon as the dishes are cleared, guests ask permission to leave unless they are spending the night. When meeting, two men shake hands and place the right hand on the heart. Direct physical contact is avoided between men and women. If they have not seen each other for a long time, friends and relatives hug, kiss, and speak polite phrases. When someone enters a room, people stand and greet him at length. When they sit down, more greetings are exchanged. It is considered rude to ask a factual question or inquire about anything specific early in the conversation.

Honour and Shame

Honour in Afghan culture defines the reputation and worth of an individual, as well as those around them. The head male of a family is responsible for protecting the honour of the family, and it drives much of the behaviour around the protection of women, dress, social interaction, education and economic activity. If someone's honour has been compromised, they are shamed and may well look for a way to revenge. The role of honour and tribalism has fuelled much of the disharmony in the country's recent history, with a circle of violent retribution acts. Afghans therefore tend to be considered and measured.

Political Situation

Government operation in Afghanistan historically has consisted of power struggles, coups and unstable transfers of power. The country has been governed by various systems, including a monarchy, republic, theocracy, dictatorship, and a pro-communist state. The Soviet union invaded in 1979, and held a decade long presence there, to try and shore up the newly-established pro-Soviet regime. From 1996, the Taliban begin conquering parts of the county, and in 2001 US and coalition forces invade and overthrow the Taliban government. In 2003 the government was restructured as an Islamic republic, and a year later, Hamid Karzai is elected President of Afghanistan, to be replaced by Ashraf Ghani in 2014, the current president. War and persecution has meant Afghanistan has produced many refugees over the years, most notably with the Soviet invasion, and the civil war a few years later. As of 2013, Afghanistan was the largest refugee-producing country in the world, a title held for 32 years. Many are in Pakistan and Iran, or internally displaced.