



The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

AFGHANISTAN: A SHREDDED TAPESTRY
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Brief Supplement as of August 2003

Military and political developments from October 2001 led to the creation, at the Bonn Agreement on December 5th 2001, of an Afghanistan interim administration led by Hamid Karzai. This body was able to operate from within Afghanistan itself later that same month. The former king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, also returned to become father of the nation. The country's *loya jirga*, the traditional Afghan grand assembly, then met in June 2002 and agreed to establish a transitional administration under the title of the *Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan* (= TISA), also headed by Hamid Karzai, as Interim President.

The foremost task of the TISA was - and remains - to oversee the return of the country to proper civilian government and administration. A vital step towards this was the inauguration of an independent commission for the drafting of a stable constitution. This commission began work in November 2002. The constitution is now in its public consultation phase and the draft will be published in September 2003. This draft will be discussed by a meeting of a constitutional *loya jirga* in October 2003 and elections for a national assembly (and probably a president) are to follow in June 2004.

To many observers this timetable seems rushed. It is also largely self-imposed, since the constitutional commission set the October 2003 and June 2004 deadlines itself. The Bonn Agreement had stipulated only that the constitutional *loya jirga* should meet by January 2004, and that the subsequent elections be held some time later that year. This rather longer time-frame may have proved beneficial, given that Afghanistan has not been familiar with the democratic process for decades and remains plagued by illiteracy. Intimidation by Taleban elements and other fundamentalist groups opposed to the democratic process is also a problem.

Also, crucially, many of the traditional ethnic and population problems remain, and even the timetable envisaged at Bonn may not provide sufficient leeway to resolve these. The association of the Taleban regime with the majority Pashtun ethnic group and Pashto language has led to a subsequent backlash in favour of the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara ethnic groups, and also in favour of the Dari language. Many Pashtuns believe they are being denied effective representation under the constitutional plans, and their disaffection has for example led to a disproportionately small return of Pashtun refugees. Within the *loya jirga*, where the two official languages (Pashto and Dari) are supposedly of equal status, the preponderance of business has been conducted in Dari. Though this may be inevitable given that language's *lingua franca* position, it is nevertheless perceived by Pashtuns as a slight.

Of the 4-5 million refugees who left Afghanistan under the Taleban regime, some 200,000 per month have been returning since mid-2002. More than 1 million have returned into the capital Kabul alone, where 70,000 houses had been destroyed during recent years. There are certainly grand construction plans, including a mooted new town of 1,000 houses on the outskirts of the capital, but proper statistics for planning purposes remain lacking.

Some of the issues mentioned above may be better understood when the results of Afghanistan's current census are announced. The population was estimated at 26 million in 2000, since when (firstly) outward and (latterly) inward migration have affected this figure. But the census, on which work began in January 2003, will not be complete until 2008, though interim results in 2004 may be of some assistance. However, in the interests of national unity, the census asks no questions concerning the ethnic and linguistic composition of the population. The current general estimate that Pashtuns constitute 44% of the national population, Tajiks 25%, Hazara 10% and Uzbeks 8% is of little use at any particular local level. All in all, the infrastructure for the holding of meaningful elections is decidedly weak.

As regards the territorial administrative structure of Afghanistan, information since October 2001 suggests that the hitherto unknown centre of Nūrestān province may be the settlement of Kāmdīsh (see page 10). Also, a new province named Dāykondī, carved out of part of Orūzgān province and probably centred on the settlement of Dāykondī at 3355N 6555E, may be in the process of creation.

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