

The Hazara Shias

The Hazaras are the third-largest ethnic minority in Afghanistan. Estimates suggest that they make up between 20%-30% of Afghanistan's population - between six to seven million people. Afghanistan is a land of minorities and the Hazaras are one of the larger minority groups beside the Pashtuns and Tajiks.

The Hazaras speak a dialect of Dari (Farsi dialect) called Hazaragi and the vast majority follow the Shi'a sect (Twelver Imami) of Islam. A significant number are also followers of the Ismaili sect while a small number are Sunni Muslim. The culture of the Hazara people has a rich heritage, with many unique customs and traditions. Many of their traditions have been influenced by the Persian, Mongol and other Central Asian cultures.

Being from the Shia sect of Islam makes the Hazaras a minority in predominantly Sunni Afghanistan. Sunni extremists, like the Taliban and ISIS, have long persecuted the Shia minority. They consider them heretics for their views on the succession of Muslim leaders following the death of Prophet Muhammad (s).

The Hazara's Shia faith, coupled with their distinctive central Asian features, have made them constant targets in Afghanistan. They experience violent attacks and discrimination. The region of Hazarajat, where the ethnic group primarily lives, has been neglected by the government and historically has had poor infrastructure, schools, and hospitals. Few Hazaras can attend university or hold high-level jobs, and often live in poverty or work as servants or laborers. Suppression of the Hazaras range from issuing unwarranted taxes to assaults on Hazara women, massacres, looting and pillaging of homes, enslavement of Hazara children, women and men, and replacement of Shi'a clerics with their Sunni religious counterparts.

In the mid-19th century, more than half the Hazara population was either killed or forced into exile by the Pashtun King Amir Abdul Rahman. The king ordered mass execution of Shias after he invaded their homeland in central Afghanistan. Many fled to Iran and Pakistan. Early in the twentieth century they were forced to conceal their identities to obtain state identification.

During the civil war of the 1990s, thousands of Hazaras were massacred. Taliban commander Maulawai Mohammed Hanif is reported to have once said, 'Hazaras are not Muslims, you can kill them.' In 1998, thousands were executed in Mazar-e-Sharif. The last two decades of war have driven many Hazaras away from their home to the borders of Afghanistan, close to Iran and Pakistan.

Now that the Taliban have retaken control of the country, Hazaras in Afghanistan live in constant fear. Hazara communities around the world struggle as they try to overcome the traumas of the past. Many of them still face discrimination in various forms. The world needs to be aware of their suffering and take up their cause.

Sources

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