

Afghanistan



To be described as ‘not an adequate strategic partner’ by the ambassador of the country that is both your major ally and principal donor country is not a happy position to be in. For Afghanistan’s President Hamid Karzai it is worse, it is positively dangerous. The fact that he had been a favourite ally of former president George W Bush no longer counted. What counted now was the cost, in cash and in lives, of supporting a ruler who sailed closer and closer to the wind. The US administration made sure that, off the record, its views of the President were common knowledge. After President Obama’s departure from Kabul in March 2010, obviously irritated, the Afghan President made some infelicitous, possibly offensive remarks about US interference in Afghan affairs, coupling them with criticism of the UK’s BBC and other international media for good measure. First of all, President Karzai claimed that if there was any election fraud, it was organised by outsiders, not by Afghans. ‘There was huge fraud, there was vast fraud. The fraud is not by the Afghans. The fraud has been done by the

foreigners.’ Later, it was reported that Karzai had claimed that if the US and other countries continued to put unreasonable pressure on him, he would join the Taliban. Later still, he was reported as having told tribal leaders that they could still exercise a veto over the planned coalition offensive in Kandahar province.

Obama’s brief visit to Afghanistan was clearly meant to show President Karzai (described by former US Ambassador to Afghanistan Peter Galbraith as an ‘under-pressure Pashtun pol with a drug problem’) who was boss. Mr Galbraith has also suggested that President Karzai was mentally unstable, perhaps as a result of drug abuse. Piling on the agony, President Obama reportedly lectured Karzai on every aspect of government, or more specifically, on Mr Karzai’s failure in each area. Resisting an invitation for a joint photo-call before he left, President Obama instead left the Afghan president with a to the point shopping list: the need to introduce good governance, eliminate corruption, crack down on his country’s drug cartels and their leaders and – if that wasn’t enough – ensure that September

KEY FACTS

- Official name:** The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
- Head of State:** President Hamid Karzai (since Jun 2002; elected 9 Oct 2004)
- Head of government:** President Hamid Karzai
- Ruling party:** Members of the national assembly are elected as independent candidates
- Area:** 647,497 square km
- Population:** 29.84 million (2009) (some 1 million Afghans are still in exile in Pakistan and Iran)
- Capital:** Kabul
- Official language:** Pashtu and Dari (named as official languages in the 2004 constitution)
- Currency:** Afghani (Af) = 100 puls
- Exchange rate:** Af45.18 per US\$ (Aug 2010)
- GDP per capita:** US\$461 (2009)
- GDP real growth:** 15.70% (2009)
- GDP:** US\$13.30 billion (2009)
- Inflation:** -9.30% (2009)
- Current account:** -US\$181.00 million (2008) (Afghanistan’s highest export is opium, which is not included in the IMF export figure)
- Foreign debt:** US\$8.50 billion (2004)

2010's elections were an improvement. Worryingly, before Obama's visit, a presidential decree had given Karzai the power to appoint all five members of the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC). The ECC had been the body that had helped expose the fraud in the earlier presidential elections.

The sea change in official US attitudes to the Afghan administration dates back to the autumn of 2009 when exception was taken by the international community – especially those who were engaged in Afghanistan – to the apparent fixing, or at least the attempts to fix, the outcome of the voting in the presidential election. President Karzai reportedly reads the US and European press avidly. Being accused of corruption did not go down well with him, nor did continued allegations that his half brother, Ahmed Walid Karzai, head of Kandahar's provincial council, was involved in the drug business and worse.

General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, made it clear that the success of US military operations in the country depends on the parallel success of effective and reformed government. In the interregnum until Afghanistan's autumn 2010 elections, reports have it that both McChrystal and his Washington overlords have decided that there is no realistic option open to them but to leave President Karzai in place. Karzai's occasional disrespect and irreverence (as long as it is in Pashtun rather than in English) can only strengthen his position in Afghanistan, where tribal leaders have to be seen as 'strong' men. The course left open to the US Administration is to by-pass and short circuit President Karzai where possible. But in the Pashtuns the US is up against a nation

known for its stubbornness, not to mention its cunning.

Elections?

Trying to persuade Afghanistan's disparate electorate that elections are the answer is akin to persuading Western democracies that they should perhaps revert to a system of tribal hierarchies. On 9 October 2004, Afghanistan held its first national democratic presidential election. More than 8 million Afghans voted, impressively over 40 per cent of those voting were women. Hamid Karzai was announced as the winner and inaugurated for a 5-year term as Afghanistan's first democratically elected president.

A further election was held in 2005, for the *Wolesi Jirga* (lower house) of Afghanistan's new bicameral National Assembly and for the country's 34 provincial councils. Turnout for the election was just over 50 per cent of the 12.5 million registered voters. The Afghan constitution provides for indirect election of the National Assembly's *Meshrano Jirga* (upper house) by the provincial councils and by reserved presidential appointments. The first democratically elected National Assembly since 1969 was inaugurated in December 2005.

The second, substantially flawed, national democratic presidential and provincial council elections were held in August 2009; the next National Assembly elections are scheduled for September 2010. Hamid Karzai's main competitor, Abdullah Abdullah, forced a run-off to be scheduled, but then withdrew from the election, saying he objected to discredited local officials remaining in charge of voting stations. In November 2009, officials of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) declared Hamid Karzai President of

Afghanistan for another 5-year term. Unlike previous election cycles, the elections were co-ordinated by the IEC, with assistance from the UN.

The Afghan government's authority seems to be growing, although its ability to deliver necessary social services remains largely dependent on funds from the international donor community. US assistance alone for Afghanistan's reconstruction from 2001 to the end of 2009 totalled over US\$40 billion. Donors pledged continued assistance for the rebuilding of the country at the June 2008 international Afghanistan support conference in Paris. Overall, the international community has made multi-year reconstruction and security assistance pledges to Afghanistan totalling over US\$50 billion. By January 2010, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) of approximately 107,000 Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers, and over 99,000 police, including border and civil order police, had received training. The US and Nato aim to further develop Afghanistan's National Security Forces. The objective is to see 134,000 ANA and 109,000 Afghan National Police (ANP) by October 2010.

Since 2002 the ANP has received an estimated, and overwhelming, US\$10 billion in overall international assistance. By late 2009 questions were being asked about the cost-effectiveness of an international aid programme that had been unable to police effectively the June presidential election. There were a number of reasons put forward for the ineffectiveness of the police, but top of the list was the question of corruption. Police salaries – an Afghan policeman's pay would begin at US\$120 per month – were so low as to make the average policeman highly vulnerable to corruption. Corruption was also endemic at more senior levels, where it was not uncommon for corrupt commanders to submit salary claims for more policeman than they actually had on their force. And if recruiting was weakened by pay levels, the casualty rate, for the few recruits who could actually read – in 2009 70 per cent of recruits were illiterate – was unacceptably high. In 2008 an estimated 1,290 policemen were killed, a further 2,393 wounded. The total casualty rate corresponded to almost 5 per cent of the 93,000 force.

Obama arrives

The advent of the Obama administration at least saw a re-invigorated US policy towards the increasingly beleaguered Afghan government. The US orchestrated

KEY INDICATORS

Afghanistan

	Unit	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Population	m	24.32	*25.05	*25.80	*28.14	*29.84
Gross domestic product (GDP)	US\$bn	7.31	7.05	9.89	11.7	13.30
GDP per capita	US\$	300	264	323	429	461
GDP real growth	%	14.0	6.1	5.5	3.4	15.7
Inflation	%	13.2	5.1	13.0	26.8	-9.3
Exports (fob) (goods)	US\$m	471.0	430.0	–	–	–
Imports (cif) (goods)	US\$m	3,870.0	2,960.0	–	–	–
Balance of trade	US\$m	-3,399.0	-2,530.0	-3,400.0	–	–
Current account	US\$m	41.0	-145.0	-379.0	-192.0	-125.0
Exchange rate	per US\$	49.18	49.32	49.53	50.25	45.18

* estimated figure

'surge' included augmented forces from a number of Nato countries, although divisions within the alliance still threatened to endanger Nato policy towards Afghanistan. Although Afghanistan is not the only state or territory offering the opportunity of shelter and succour to rogue Islamic forces, it is beyond doubt the most important. Its strategic importance spills over into both Pakistan and India, where the prospect of a failed Afghanistan, run once again by a Taliban government has become a menacing nightmare. An indication of the failure of US intelligence, not to mention its legal procedures and international relationships, was the case of Abdullah Gulam Rasoul who was held by the US in its Guantánamo Bay detention centre in Cuba for six years. Believing his assertions that he was no terrorist, the US authorities rather naively transferred him to Afghan governmental custody, from which he was immediately released. In early 2009, under the name Mullah Abdullah Zakir, Mr Rasoul reappeared as a Taliban commander in Helmand province.

Nato shift

Probably the most marked change in the direction of Nato – and particularly US – policy in Afghanistan was the realisation that, if the Taliban offensive was to be contained, social rebuilding was as important as effective military response. Air strikes were beginning to be seen – possibly too late – as only half the story. The distinction had to be drawn between policies which succeeded and those (such as the widespread and often inaccurate use of Predator pilotless aircraft), which did the opposite.

Bolstering the police force was a central part of the strategy proposed by US General McChrystal. Many observers considered General McChrystal's targeted police force level of 180,000 (almost double the 2009 level) to be simply unrealistic. In August 2009 there were only 1,000 recruits. Attempts to recruit men for the supposedly elite Afghan Public Protection Force had proved disastrous. Earlier over a hundred recruits had simply deserted. Worse still, after receiving their basic training and being issued with a gun, a number of policemen decided to join the Taliban, where it was reported their pay doubled to US\$300 per month.

Talking to the enemy

In 2010 rumours had circulated that as the war in Afghanistan reached its ninth anniversary a deal between Nato and the

Taliban was under discussion. Given the levels of casualties – 1,000 US and 275 British troops killed in an increasingly unpopular war – this was hardly surprising. What was not clear, however, was how any deal could be structured. The British foreign secretary, David Miliband, had, perhaps tritely, claimed that 'politics will bring it to an end'. He expanded on this line by saying that 'political engagement with those who would directly or indirectly engage our troops is difficult. We have no right to betray our values.'

A report by the BBC suggested that there were five possible components of a deal. The first was the re-integration of lower-ranking Taliban insurgents into civilian life; this would involve payments and employment prospects. It was taken as certain that such a deal would involve a commitment to withdraw foreign troops from Afghanistan. For many Nato member states, troop withdrawal was an attractive option. Politicians could see it as a potential vote winner.

Turning in Osama bin Laden was also a component. It was considered virtually certain that the Taliban know the whereabouts of bin Laden. Some sort of formal severance of the links between al Qaeda and the Taliban was seen as a *sine qua non* of any arrangement. US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, was thought to regard guarantees on women's rights to be a further essential. Finally, what was clear both to Nato and the Taliban was that both sides would need to be able to walk away from the deal holding their heads high. Quite what the effect of such a deal would be on Afghanistan's neighbours was unclear.

In March 2010 the Afghan government announced that talks had taken place with a delegation from the Hezb-i-Islami Taliban group, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who was known to have close links with Pakistan. Mr Hekmatyar was thought to be one of the three senior leaders of the Taliban insurgency, who had gained his spurs fighting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The capture by Afghan and Nato forces of another Taliban leader, Mullah Baradar, turned out to be a strategic blunder, since it transpired that Mullah Baradar had been holding talks with Nato sounding out possible ways towards reconciliation. It appeared that Pakistan was aware of the talks going on with Mullah Baradar. The talks with Hekmatyar and other Taliban were very delicate, and it was thought that there were those in Pakistan opposed to any peaceful solution that excluded Pakistan.

Others were opposed to any Pakistani involvement. For Pakistan it was important that its perceived strategic importance was maintained, at least so that the US still considered it worthwhile to fork out considerable sums in civil and military aid for Pakistan. Saudi Arabia was also thought to be playing a behind the scenes role in tentative discussions between the two sides.

Development strategy

Afghanistan's National Development Strategy (ANDS) covers the five-year period from 2008 to 2013. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) notes that since its launch in April 2008, Afghanistan has experienced a number of challenges, delaying its implementation. The Afghan security situation has worsened, dominated by the Taliban insurgency spilling over the border from Waziristan, in Pakistan.

In May 2008, global food and fuel prices peaked, leading to high inflation and pressure on the budget for additional fuel and food subsidies. The IMF also noted that these threats to macro-economic stability were accompanied by a period of political uncertainty surrounding Afghanistan's leadership. Following the chaos of the first presidential election, Afghanistan's second presidential election, which was planned for April 2009, was delayed to August 2009.

In something of an under-statement, the IMF observed that 'Afghanistan's situation remains complex, dominated by the world's largest narcotics production and weak governance and rule of law'. The IMF correctly notes that while progress had been made in sectors such as education, health, and rural development, Afghanistan's performance in the areas of governance and the provision of basic services is still poor. Progress in consolidating development also varies markedly from one region to another. Governance limitations hamper the implementation of many of Afghanistan's reforms, notably effective and accountable operations in some parts of the country, and also, in the view of the IMF, hinder sustained economic development and poverty reduction. Child mortality has been reduced and school enrolment has increased, but general access to water has progressed very slowly.

Economic performance

The World Bank noted that despite the global economic crisis and domestic political and security problems, and against all

the odds, Afghanistan maintained macro-economic stability in 2008/09.

Afghanistan's economic performance remains largely driven by agriculture, including the cultivation of opium. Due to a drought resulting in poor agricultural harvests, gross domestic product (GDP) growth for 2008/09 decelerated to 2.3 per cent, the lowest figure recorded in the post-Taliban period. Both the IMF and the World Bank project a return to 15 per cent by the end of 2009/10 due to a recovery in agriculture and higher government spending.

Monetary policy is on track, with international reserves reaching a comfortable level at 13 months of imports. The fiscal situation remained steady as domestic revenues increased substantially with the implementation of new policy measures associated with the revised income tax law and improvements in customs administration.

Inflation was brought down from double-digits over the period 2008–09 to zero in December 2009 and was forecast to be at 6 per cent or less by March 2010. Revenue collection performance in the period 2006/08 had been disappointing, but improved in the financial year 2009/10.

The IMF expected Afghanistan's current account deficit including grants to widen to some 3.5 per cent of GDP in 2009/10, from around 1.5 per cent of GDP in 2008/09. However, the current account deficit excluding grants remained high; it was around 65 per cent in 2006/07 and was projected to fall to 54 per cent of GDP in 2009/10. Afghanistan's exchange rate has seen a slight appreciation since March 2009, but still remained close to its five-year average in real effective terms.

Risk assessment

Politics	Poor
Economy	Poor
Regional stability	Poor

COUNTRY PROFILE

Historical profile

1838-42 First Afghan War when Britain invaded Afghanistan to counter the threat to British India from expanding Russian influence in Afghanistan and was defeated by fierce resistance from Afghanistan's many ethnic tribes.

1878-80 Second Afghan War after Britain invaded Afghanistan again, parts of the country were absorbed into British India. Russia also seized parts of Afghani territory.

1907 Russia signed an agreement with Britain, promising no further interference in Afghanistan.

1919 Third Afghan War, after which Britain recognised Afghanistan's independence.

1926 Amanullah proclaimed himself King.

1929 Amanullah fled after civil unrest over his reforms; Mohammed Nadir Shah was proclaimed King. He reunited a fragmented Afghanistan and took steps to modernise the country, though less obtrusively than Amanullah.

1933 Nadir Shah was assassinated and his son, Zahir Shah, became King; his reign lasted 40 years.

1956 Afghanistan built a close relationship with the Soviet Union, gaining arms supplies and undertaking trade.

1964 A constitutional monarchy was introduced, which led to political polarisation and power struggles.

1965 The Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was formed.

1973 General Mohammed Daud deposed King Zahir Shah, who moved into exile in Italy, and Afghanistan was declared a republic.

1978 General Daud was assassinated in the Saur (April) Revolution, a coup by the pro-Communists, led by the PDPA's leader, Nour Taraki, who was declared president.

1979 The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan after the nationalist foreign minister, Hafizullah Amin, deposed Taraki. Amin was executed in December and replaced by the pro-Soviet Babrak Karmal. Numerous Afghan factions formed the Mujahidin and began a guerrilla war against the Soviet occupation forces. Backed by the US, Pakistan, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Mujahidin inflicted heavy losses on Soviet troops.

1985 The Mujahidin gathered in Pakistan, forming an alliance against Soviet forces. Half of the Afghan population was displaced by the war.

1986 Babrak Karmal was replaced by Najibullah Ahmadzai, the head of the Afghani secret police, as head of the Soviet-backed regime.

1988 Afghanistan, USSR, the US and Pakistan signed peace accords.

1989 The Soviet Union withdrew its last troops from Afghanistan. Civil war continued as the Mujahidin refused to co-operate with the Najibullah regime.

1991 The US and Russia agreed to end military aid to both sides.

1992 Afghanistan was declared an Islamic republic after the capture of Kabul by Mujahidin factions and Najibullah was forced to seek the UN's protection in Kabul. Rival militias vied for power.

1993 Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik, was proclaimed president, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who was strongly

backed by the US during the Soviet occupation, was appointed prime minister.

1994 The Pashtun-dominated Islamic fundamentalist Taliban, formed in Kandahar, south Afghanistan, emerged as the major challenge to the Rabbani government.

1995 The Taliban swept through southern Afghanistan.

1996 The Taliban captured Kabul and quickly imposed a strict version of *sharia* (Islamic law). President Rabbani fled to join the anti-Taliban alliance in the north.

1997 Only Pakistan and Saudi Arabia recognised the Taliban as legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. Hostilities increased in the north between the Taliban and the militias of the United National Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (UNIFSA) (also known as the Northern Alliance).

1998 The Taliban captured Mazar i Sharif, the last major city that had been outside Taliban control; around 6,000 civilians were massacred following the city's capture. The US launched cruise missiles at suspected bases of Osama bin Laden, accused of bombing US embassies in Africa.

1999 The UN introduced economic sanctions against Afghanistan for harbouring bin Laden.

2001 The Afghan resistance leader, Commander Massoud, was assassinated. The giant statues of Buddha in Bamyán were destroyed by the Taliban. The US and Britain launched air strikes against the Taliban and al Qaeda, following the Taliban's refusal to hand over bin Laden, also blamed for masterminding the 11 September 2001 attacks on the twin towers in New York. Opposition forces seized Mazar i Sharif, then Kabul and other key cities. Afghan groups agreed an interim government in UN-sponsored talks in Bonn, Germany. The Taliban gave up Kandahar, its last stronghold, at the end of the year and Pashtun royalist, Hamid Karzai was sworn in as head of a 30-member interim power-sharing government.

2002 The first contingent of foreign peacekeepers arrived. Hamid Karzai was elected interim president by the *Loya Jirga* (a grand council of tribal leaders). Former monarch, Zahir Shah, returned to Kabul, but made no claim to the throne. He had been in exile for 29 years before his return. Karzai narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in his home town of Kandahar. After 23 years, the Asian Development Bank resumed lending to Afghanistan.

2003 The afghani was re-valued. Afghanistan introduced a law banning armed factions from politics. NATO forces took control of security in Kabul.

2004 Afghanistan ratified a new constitution including a presidential system.

Presidential elections were won by Hamid Karzai with 55 per cent of the vote. President Karzai was sworn in as Afghanistan's first democratically elected leader. Afghanistan was guaranteed US\$8.2bn in aid until 2007.

2005 Parliamentary elections were held where the turnout was 36 per cent in Kabul and 53 per cent across the country. 2006 There was a resurgence of Taliban activity and fighting with coalition forces in the south, culminating in the fiercely fought Operation Mountain Thrust. Responsibility for security in the south passed to NATO. The Paris Club of international creditors forgave the greater part of the country's external debt.

2007 Former King Zahir Shar died. A *jirga* (tribal council) began in Kabul to discuss means of combating the Taliban. Russia cut around US\$10 billion from Afghanistan's outstanding debt, accrued during the Soviet Union's occupation 1979-89; the remaining debt is expected to be cancelled by 2010. The Asian Development Bank approved a loan of over US\$170 million to complete the circular highway connecting Kabul and other major cities, in particular the section between Herat in the west and Mazar i Sharif in the north. The completed road will bypass the warring territory of the south, plus reduce travel times and transport costs. The highway will also facilitate trade with neighbouring countries in the north and west. 2008 The US reported that the Taliban was in control of about 10 per cent of Afghanistan and the government only controlled 30 per cent; the rest of the country was under the control of tribal chiefs. Government officials deny their control was so limited claiming the tribal chiefs supported central government and provided security in its stead.

2009 In addition to the 36,000 military personnel already deployed, the US increased its forces by 17,000 in February to 'meet urgent security needs'. The UN reported that 2,118 civilians had been killed in 2008, an increase of 39 per cent on the 2007 figure. Taliban insurgents were blamed for 55 per cent of the deaths while NATO and Afghan forces were held responsible for 39 per cent. In a UK-Afghan military operation on Taliban strongholds in Helmand province, US\$71 million in heroin and drug manufacturing chemicals were seized, as well as factories making improvised bombs. A UK official estimated that 60 per cent of Helmand police were drug users in a province where police are poorly paid, where work is high risk and corruption is widespread. Japan announced in February that it would pay the salary of around 80,000 police officers until August, as well as funding teacher training and the

construction of schools and hospitals. The Electoral Commission confirmed that general elections were scheduled for 20 August. In April, the presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to increase military co-operation against Islamic extremists operating from strongholds in their shared border areas. In April, the first national park, Band e Amir, featuring deep blue lakes and natural dams of travertine, was established near Bamyan Valley, the site of the giant, 1,500-year old, Buddha statues destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. Peter Galbraith, the UN Deputy Head of Mission was sacked on 1 October following his criticism of what he saw as a flawed presidential election and the rift between himself and the Head of Mission, Kai Eide. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) ruled that a run-off presidential election should take place between Karzai and Abdullah on 7 November. The IEC had determined that President Karzai did not win a majority of the votes cast in the earlier round, following the voiding of votes from disqualified polling stations. In the event, Abdullah Abdullah withdrew from the elections on 1 November, citing his opposition to allowing discredited local officials remaining in charge of voting stations. The run-off presidential election was cancelled and President Karzai was confirmed in office for a second term. In his first speech after taking office he vowed to fight corruption. President Obama committed a further 30,000 US troops to be sent to Afghanistan in December, bringing US military strength to 100,000. Other foreign troops, around 32,000 at the end of 2009, are likely to be increased by 5,000.

2010 In January parliament rejected 17 out of 24 ministers proposed for President Karzai's new cabinet. Karzai nominated 17 new names for his cabinet posts on 2 January; 10 were rejected. On 18 January, 14 approved ministers were sworn in while other candidates were sought. In February, Nato launched a major offensive against the Taliban in the southern province of Helmand. General Stanley McChrystal was sacked by President Obama on 23 June after he criticised US and Afghan leaders in an article in *US Rolling Stone* magazine. General David Petraeus took command of the 130,000 strong international forces. A vital transit agreement was signed with Pakistan on 18 July, allowing access to sea routes and the Indian market. President Karzai's timetable for transfer of control of security to domestic forces by 2014 was agreed at an international conference in July. Dutch troops withdrew on 1 August. Although there had been less than 2,000 troops,

they were praised for their effectiveness in the Uruzgan province.

Political structure

Constitution

On 4 January 2004, Afghanistan ratified a new constitution, establishing an Islamic republic, in which the president rules with a national assembly; women are recognised as equal citizens and have one-fifth of the lower house seats.

Independence date

19 August 1919

Form of state

Islamic republic

The executive

The president is the Head of State, leading a cabinet, with two vice presidents and 29 ministers.

National legislature

The National Assembly has two chambers. The Wolesi Jirga (House of the People) (lower) has 249 directly elected members for five-year terms with the number proportional to the populations of the provinces. Under the constitution, the Kuchi (nomad) community is allocated 10 seats; female candidates are also guaranteed seats. According to the constitution, the chamber may set up commissions to inquire into government actions, endorse and enforce legislation not approved by the president (providing it has a two-thirds majority), question ministers, decide on government development programmes and the budget and approve or reject government sponsored appointments. The Meshrano Jirga (House of Elders) (upper house) has 102 members who are either indirectly elected or appointed representatives. Members must be aged over 35 years. One member from each provincial council is elected to serve a four-year term in the upper chamber.

Legal system

The 2004 constitution guarantees an independent judiciary, consisting of a Stera Mahkama (supreme court), high courts and appeal courts.

The president appoints the members of the supreme court, with the approval of the Wolesi Jirga.

Last elections

October 2004 (presidential); 18 September 2005 (parliamentary).

Results: Presidential: incumbent Hamid Karzai won 55 per cent of the vote, Yunus Qanuni 16 per cent, Mohammad Mohaqeq 12 per cent and Abdul Rashid Dostum 12 per cent.

Parliamentary: Turnout was 36 per cent in Kabul and 53 per cent across the country. There is no party breakdown as candidates ran as independents.

Next elections

2015 (presidential); 18 September 2010 (parliamentary)

Political parties

Ruling party

Members of the national assembly are elected as independent candidates

Main opposition party

Jami'at e Islami (Islamic Society of Afghanistan) leads a loose alliance.

Population

29.84 million (2009) (some 1 million Afghans are still in exile in Pakistan and Iran)

Last census: June 1979: 13,051,358 (excluding nomad population)

Population density: 36 inhabitants per square km; urban population 20.3 per cent (ADB 2006).

Annual growth rate: 1.7 per cent 2005 (ADB)

Ethnic make-up

Pashtun (Pathan) (38 per cent), Tajik (25 per cent), Hazara (19 per cent), Uzbek (6 per cent), minority groups include Aimaks, Turkmen, Baluch and others (12 per cent).

The Pashtuns largely reside in south-eastern Afghanistan. Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks are the main communities in northern and central Afghanistan.

Religions

Almost the entire population is Muslim (84 per cent Sunni Muslim, 15 per cent Shi'ite); Hindu, Sikh and Jewish minorities.

Education

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) assists the Afghan government in the education sector's reconstruction by promoting universal primary education, especially for girls and the expansion of primary schooling with access to secondary education.

Unesco has extended its support for a computer centre at Kabul University, including Internet access for the young. It also funds the printing of text-books for all levels of education.

Literacy rate: 51.9 per cent and 21.9 per cent respectively for men and women; adult rates (Unesco 2000).

Enrolment rate: 15 per cent gross primary enrolment of relevant age group (including repeaters), rates for 2000–01 (Unesco 2002).

Health

Per capita total expenditure on health (2003) was US\$26; of which per capita government spending was US\$10, at the international dollar rate (WHO 2006). WHO continues to support the IDPs by providing essential medical supplies to clinics within the camps. There is provision for night health services and nutrition centres for malnourished children. Harsh winters in the region cause acute respiratory infections, while hot dry summers lead to diarrhoeal diseases.

Despite on-going security problems, UN relief agencies and the WHO provide emergency medical supplies and assistance to local hospitals.

Polio is endemic. In 2006, a large outbreak of the disease, in the volatile southern regions, followed a drop in overall numbers of cases in previous years. The UN undertook immunisation against polio of around 1.3 million children in the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand in September 2007. The week-long campaign took place within the war zones while 10,000 health workers were given safe passage to undertake the operation.

Life expectancy: 42 years, 2004 (WHO 2006)

Fertility rate/Maternal mortality rate: 7.4 births per woman, 2004 (WHO 2006)

Child (under 5 years) mortality rate (per 1,000): 165 per 1,000 live births (2002), 49 per cent of children aged under five were malnourished (World Bank).

Head of population per physician: 0.19 physicians per 1,000 people, 2001 (WHO 2006)

Welfare

Many Afghans have fled the country due to war, drought and earthquakes. The UNHCR estimated that, at its peak, more than 3.7 million Afghans survive outside their homeland; between 1.1–1.5 million were internally displaced. Over 520,000 refugees returned in 2005, the largest group, of 453,000, came from camps in Pakistan. International agencies and the government have been working hard for their rehabilitation, as well as for the thousands who returned in previous years. The WFP has been working with the Afghan government to rehabilitate irrigation systems and expand its activities to cover the reconstruction of schools, hospitals, roads and bridges.

In 2005, Japan donated US\$29 million to *New Beginnings Programme* that offers ex-militia soldiers the opportunity of joining the official army or retraining in peacetime occupations such as farming or tailoring. Japan had already donated US\$90 million to the project that required US\$140 million to fund.

Main cities

Kabul (capital, estimated population 2.4 million in 2008), Kandahar (347,253), Mazar-i-Sharif (277,302), Herat (350,154), Jalalabad (143,525).

Languages spoken

The languages spoken by Afghanistan's two largest ethnic groups are Dari (Afghan Persian) (50 per cent) and Pashtu (35 per cent). Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen) (11 per cent), 30

minor languages (primarily Baluchi and Pashai) (4 per cent). Farsi (Persian) is spoken by the Tajiks. Some speak a second language, including English, Russian, French or German.

The use of English began to grow after the arrival of NATO forces in 2005, as many jobs in government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) required a level of use. By 2009 there were several hundred private schools teaching English to thousands of Afghan students.

Official language/s

Pashtu and Dari (named as official languages in the 2004 constitution)

Media

All material is subject to *Sharia* (Islamic law) and regulatory bodies are controlled by the government. However, since 2001 there has been a strong growth in broadcasting and print media, with five TV stations and over 300 newspapers published nationwide; in a country with a low literacy rate the radio is the principal medium for news and information.

Press

Print journalism does not match broadcast journalism for professionalism and research with opinions offered instead of investigation and hard facts. Self-censorship is widely practiced by older writers and violence towards journalists has curbed the focus necessary for news gathering. The market for newspapers and advertising revenue is so small that private newspapers must rely on political factions and individuals for sponsorship.

Dailies: State-owned publications, in Dari and Pashtu, include *Daily Anis Eslah*, *Arman-e Melli* and *Eslah*. English dailies include *Kabul Times*. Private newspapers in Dari and Pashtu include *Hewad*, *Eradeh*, *Shari'at*, *Daily Afghanistan* (www.dailyafghanistan.com), *Tolafghan* (www.tolafghan.com) and *Payam e Mojahed* (www.payamemojahed.com). English private dailies include *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* (www.outlookafghanistan.net) and *Daily Cheragh* (www.cheraghdaily.af).

Weeklies: In Dari and Pashtu, *Aina-e-Zan* (Women's Mirror). In English, *Kabul Weekly* is an independent newspaper funded by the UN. *Omaid Weekly* is published in the US and is one of the most widely read Afghani publications in the world.

Broadcasting

National Radio and Television Afghanistan (NRTA) is under the ministry of information and culture.

Radio: There are many radio stations broadcasting regionally. The government-owned Radio Afghanistan is national; it has competition from several foreign radio broadcasting services.

Commercial radio stations including the popular Arman FM (www.arman.fm) with programmes in local languages and English, Radio Killid (www.thekillidgroup.com) and Rana FM (www.ranafm.org).

Television: The popularity of television is growing and some stations are providing local programming. The National Television Afghanistan (NTA) is government run; other national, free-to-air private stations include Tolo TV (www.tolo.tv) which shows foreign and domestic programmes, Ariana TV (www.arianatelevision.com) with news in Pashtu, Dari and English and Ayna TV is based in the northern provinces and broadcasts in four local languages.

Television is also provided by foreign entities including the US-based satellite networks Noor TV (www.noor-tv.com) and Payame Afghan TV (www.payameafghan.tv). Khorasan TV, is a local satellite network with Shamshad and Afghan TV (<http://afghanistantv.org>).

News agencies

National news agency: BNA (Bakhtar News Agency); Pajhwok Afghan News: www.pajhwok.com
Afghan Islamic Press: www.afghanislamicpress.com

Economy

The economy has been in a state of renewal since 2001, after the fall of the authoritarian Taliban regime. Afghanistan has a strong agricultural sector, accounting for around 30 per cent of GDP, although its level of productivity has been blighted by civil conflict, exploitation and underinvestment since the 1980s, leaving a legacy of degraded natural resources (particularly in forests and pastures) and fragmented rural institutions. Consequently, the level of productivity is low with inefficient production systems and poor management so that Afghanistan relies on international food aid to feed its population. It is estimated that introducing modern technologies would increase capacity by 7.5 million hectares of cultivated land, and with proper irrigation 20 per cent could be double-cropped.

Natural resources include minerals and hydrocarbons. Industrial manufacturing, which accounts for around 25 per cent of GDP, is mostly small-scale production of locally required products such as soap, furniture, textiles and shoes. Exports are dominated by hand-woven carpets which provided revenue of over US\$186 million in 2006/07.

The informal economy is dominated by the illegal production and trade in opium, which creates an obstruction to government efforts to raise legitimate revenue through taxation. Around 6,250 tonnes of

(wet) opium was produced in 2009, which was a fall of 1,190 tonnes from the high of 7,440 tonnes in 2007/08. The 2009 drought may have had more of an adverse effect on harvests than counter-narcotic measures. Afghanistan accounts for around 90 per cent of the world's opium trade.

GDP growth in 2007 was 12.1 per cent, which fell to 3.4 per cent in 2008 with the high costs of imported food and petroleum products and the impact of the global economic crisis. However, by 2009 economic activity had picked up and GDP growth climbed to 15.7 per cent as agriculture recovered from a drought and government and coalition forces increased their spending. Inflation fell from a high of 26.8 per cent in 2008 (with a peak of 43 per cent in May 2008) to -9.3 per cent in 2009 as food prices fell and monetary policies introduced by government acted as deflationary pressures. As the currency (Afghani) appreciated in value over 2008–09 the government managed the amount in circulation; money demand remained strong and the Afghani remained close to its five-year average in real terms.

Corruption has been highlighted as one of Afghanistan's most insidious problems. The watchdog charity Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA) reported in July 2010 that a survey had shown corruption was rampant and becoming entrenched in all areas of Afghan life. At the same time international donors voiced their criticism that anti-corruption measures were not producing tangible results and that if economic support was to be channelled through the government's budget (from 33 per cent to 50 per cent as proposed by President Kazai), then measures for a strengthened financial system that cuts corruption and poor governance was required.

External trade

Much of the government's strategy for international trade is predicated on a future with secure, nationwide peace. It sees the future of Afghanistan as a hub for regional trade, with land links to surrounding countries.

The ministry of commerce and industry has undertaken negotiations in regional economic initiatives, which include the Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO) and bilateral negotiations with neighbouring countries including Iran, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Plans include participation in the South Asia Free Trade Area (Safta) and the Central Asian Regional Economic Co-operation (CAREC) programme. Afghanistan is also an observer member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

A suggested oil pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan would create an oil trade linking Central Asia with Pakistan.

Imports

Afghanistan mainly imports capital goods including construction items needed to repair its neglected infrastructure, foodstuffs, textiles and petroleum products.

Main sources: Pakistan (typically 36 per cent of total), US (9 per cent), Germany (8 per cent).

Exports

Opium, Afghanistan's largest, albeit illegal, export is primarily transported north through the Central Asian republics and on to Europe. Measures by foreign governments have been introduced in an attempt to eradicate the crop. Around 10 per cent of Afghan families rely on its production and as opium represents a large proportion of the country's exports this could lead to a serious drop in income if the campaign is successful.

Principal non-opium exports include hand-woven carpets, fruits and nuts, small scale industrial products, pelts and hides and semi-precious and precious stones. Afghanistan has been the world's largest exporter of raisins and a major producer of grapes, melons and other fruit.

Main destinations: India (typically 21 per cent of total), Pakistan (20 per cent), US (19 per cent).

Agriculture Farming

The population is returning to the countryside and some rural areas have been transformed by the return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran. However, the level of productivity is low with inefficient production systems and poor management so that Afghanistan relies on international food aid to feed its population. A severe drought in 2009 not only reduced harvests but also increased soil erosion. It is estimated that introducing modern technologies increase capacity by 7.5 million hectares of cultivated land, and with proper irrigation 20 per cent could be double-cropped.

Twelve per cent of the total area is cultivated, another 10 per cent is pasture land and a further 5–6 per cent considered by some sources to have agricultural potential.

Most cultivated land is situated in river valleys or plains, which are often fertile; an estimated two-thirds of cultivated land is irrigated. Food output is frequently below what is required to feed the population. In total more than 12,000 out of 22,000 farming villages were abandoned or destroyed during the fighting of the 1990s.

Apart from the opium poppy, the main crops are wheat, fruit and vegetables,

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maize, rice, barley, cotton, sugar beet, sugar cane, oil seeds.

The livestock herd needs rebuilding. Live-stock includes sheep, cattle, goats and poultry, with donkeys, horses, camels, mules and buffaloes kept as draught animals. Sheep provide a major source of protein and animal fat. Some 70 per cent of wool production, along with hides from karakul sheep, is exported.

After the fall of the Taliban, the farmers started to sow poppies again. In 2002, President Karzai banned opium poppy cultivation and trafficking, and offered farmers US\$350 for each 0.2 hectare (ha) to be replanted with alternative crops. This was only a fraction of what the farmers could earn from the poppy crop. Around 6,250 tonnes of (wet) opium was produced in 2009, which was a fall of 1,190 tonnes from the high of 7,440 tonnes in 2007/08 – although the 2009 drought may have had more of an adverse effect on harvests than counter-narcotic measures. Afghanistan accounts for around 90 per cent of the world's opium trade. Until economic and social alternatives are developed, the local population remains dependent on the opium economy. The British army has been assisting the government in its efforts to eradicate poppy cultivation.

Forestry

Wooded land is limited to the eastern Hindu Kush region and along the Pakistani border. Many forests in these areas have been severely reduced due to trees being cut down and the wood smuggled out to surrounding countries.

Tourism

Instability is an impediment to the development of a tourist sector in Afghanistan, although given the right conditions there is considerable potential. Some visitors are arriving and trekking trips have been arranged. Much work needs to be done to restore the necessary infrastructure. Accommodation in Kabul is limited to a few hotels and houses converted into guesthouses.

Environment

In April 2009, the first national park, Band e Amir, featuring deep blue lakes and natural dams of travertine, was established near Bamyan Valley, the site of the giant, 1500-year old, Buddha statues destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.

Mining

Natural resources include copper, chromite, lead, zinc, iron, salt, lapis lazuli, emeralds, talc and barium sulphate. Long-term mineral development projects include copper mining and smelting at Ainak and high-grade iron ore mining at Hajigak in northern Afghanistan.

A Chinese-owned mining company won a tender in November 2007 to develop one of the world's largest copper mines sited in Logar Province. It is estimated that the site has 13 million tonnes of copper. Australia, Canada, China and Russia all contested the tender, ultimately won by China Metallurgical Group with an investment of US\$3 billion. The mine is expected to be operational in 2012 and offer employment to thousands of Afghan workers.

Hydrocarbons

Proven hydrocarbon reserves were in excess of 150 million barrels of oil and 12.7 billion cubic metres (cum) of natural gas, located in 29 fields in the north-western region of the country by Soviet Union in 1959. Since then very little of these resources have been exploited and further exploration, using modern technologies, had been curtailed due to the geopolitical situation and the series of conflicts in Afghanistan, although potentially oil producing sedimentary sections had been located in the south of the country. Limited seismic surveys of the northern oil and gas fields began in late 2004, conducted by the US Geological Survey and by 2006 it estimated that mean volumes were 1.6 billion barrels of oil and 444 billion cum of natural gas (although proven natural gas reserves, by this time, were 49.6 billion cum). Three oil and gas bearing blocks in the north, with proven reserves, were licensed for exploration and production, in March 2009. In 2008 all Afghanistan's oil needs were imported, mainly from Pakistan and Turkmenistan. Gas production from the Jowzjan province, amounted to 2.8 million cum per annum, used exclusively domestically. There are small deposits of coal, estimated at 74 million tonnes located mainly in northern Afghanistan in the region between Herat and Badashkah. Production is typically just 1,000 tonnes per annum.

Energy

The energy sector was badly damaged during the years of upheaval. Afghanistan has installed capacity of 450MW, generated by hydropower, of which only 271MW are available. Some border areas receive supplies from neighbouring countries. Electricity supply is only available to around 6 per cent of the population and interruptions and blackouts are frequent.

A new hydroelectric power turbine was delivered to the Kajaki dam in the Kandahar province, in September 2008 by the combined efforts of NATO forces. When it is fully operational in 2011, following the provision of a new grid of power lines, there will be an increase of 51 megawatts, supplied to the city of

Lashkar Gah and its surrounding province.

Banking and insurance

Afghanistan has six banks (four of which have almost no assets) and two commercial banks – Pashtani and Milli – with assets. In September 2003, two banking laws were passed: the Central Banking Law and the Commercial Banking Law. The first laid the groundwork for the Central Bank to focus on monetary policy, pricing stability and oversight of the commercial markets; the second allowed for private ownership of commercial banks. Standard Chartered (UK), Microfinance Bank of Afghanistan and National Bank of Pakistan opened in 2004.

Central bank

Da Afghanistan Bank (re-opened January 2002).

Main financial centre

Kabul

Time

GMT plus 4.5 hours

Geography

Afghanistan is a landlocked country in south-western Asia. Its neighbours are Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north, Iran to the west, and Pakistan to the east and south. It also has a 76km border with the People's Republic of China to the north-east. The Hindu Kush mountains are in the north-east of the country.

There are three geographic areas: the central highlands (comprising over 60 per cent of the land), the arid southern region (25 per cent of the land) and the fertile northern plains.

Hemisphere

Northern

Climate

The climate is dry with large variations between day and night temperatures as well as swift seasonal changes. Maximum summer temperatures on the plains can reach 46 degrees Celsius (C), while the lowest winter temperatures, in the mountains, reach minus 26 degrees C; Kabul (at altitude 1,800 metres) has an average 16 to 33 degrees C in summer (July–August) and minus 8 to 2 degrees C in winter.

The rainy season is from October–April, although rainfall is very irregular; Kabul averages 335mm per annum.

Entry requirements

Passports

Required by all.

Visa

Required by all; application forms can be obtained via:
www.embassyofafghanistan.org/main/consulate/visa.cfm or local embassies.

Business visas require a letter of introduction stating the purpose of visit and sponsorship information. A visa financial guarantee must be included with the application fee. For a multiply entry visa, a letter of introduction signed by the president of the organisation, must accompany the documentation.

Currency advice/regulations

Import and export of local currency is limited to Af500. Import of foreign currency is unlimited, although export of foreign currency is limited to the amount declared on arrival.

US dollars circulate widely. Travellers cheques are not readily accepted.

Customs

Alcohol is permitted for personal consumption.

All antiquities, carpets, furs and photography films require an export permit.

Prohibited imports

Illegal drugs, pornography; pork products in any form.

Cameras require an import permit.

Health (for visitors)

Mandatory precautions

Vaccination certificate for yellow fever if travelling from an infected areas.

Advisable precautions

Hepatitis A, anti-malarial precautions, polio, tetanus, typhoid. Diphtheria, hepatitis B, TB immunisations are recommended in some circumstances – seek further advice. Water precautions are necessary. There is a risk of rabies.

Emergency medical care is limited and visitors should ensure they have medical insurance that includes emergency evacuation. Hospitals and doctors require immediate cash payment before commencing treatment. The German Medical Diagnostic Center (www.medical-kabul.com), operates in Kabul, offering treatment that includes medical, radiological and pharmacy services. It does not offer emergency, obstetric or dental treatment.

Public hospitals are not up to Western standards and should be avoided. There are a limited number of private hospitals and some international aid groups operate medical facilities in cities and villages. Visitors should travel with all their necessary medications.

Hotels

Accommodation tends to be scarce and spartan. There are only a few international hotels in Kabul, including the Intercontinental Hotel, Bagh-I-Balla, Kabul and the Serena Hotel, Froshgah Street, Kabul.

Credit cards

Only Visa branded credit and debit cards are accepted at very limited outlets.

Public holidays (national)

Afghanistan uses the Persian calendar (although it used the Islamic calendar between 1999 and 2002). The Persian calendar has 12 months which differ from the Gregorian calendar: there are 31 days in each of the first six months of the Persian calendar, 30 days in each of the next five months and 29 days in the last month, except in leap years when it has 30 days.

Persian year 1389: 21 March 2010 to 20 March 2011 (year 1390: 21 March 2011 to 22 March 2012).

Dates of feasts vary according to the sighting of the new moon, so cannot be forecast exactly.

Fixed dates

21 Mar (Naw Roz/Persian New Year), 28 Apr (Islamic Revolution Day), 19 Aug (National Day).

Variable dates

Eid al Adha (three days), Ashura, Birth of the Prophet, First day of Ramadan, Eid al Fitr (three days).

Muslim holidays that occur on a Friday may be observed on Saturday.

Working hours

The weekend is Friday.

Banking

Sat–Wed: 0800–1200, 1300–1630; Thu: 0800–1330.

Business

Sat–Wed: 0800–1200, 1300–1630; Thu: 0800–1330.

Government

Sat–Thu: 0800–1600.

Shops

Commercial shops keep long but varying hours, usually Sat–Thu: 0700–2300.

Telecommunications

Mobile/cell phones

GSM 900/1800 services available in main cities only.

Electricity supply

220 volts AC, 60 cycle electrical system, using European round, two-prong plugs. Supplies may be seriously affected and power cuts frequent.

Weights and measures

Metric system (local units are also in use).

Social customs/useful tips

It is customary to shake hands on meeting and taking leave. Among men, embracing is a traditional form of greeting. Islamic conventions apply. When sitting cross-legged on sofas or cushions, soles of feet must not be shown.

Business meetings are usually conducted in English or Dari. Green or black tea, nuts and raisins are served. The form of greeting is *Salaam Aleykum* (peace be with you), followed by a firm handshake and placing the right hand over the heart.

Several minutes are spent engaging in pleasantries about each other's countries. It is essential to build trust and to be patient.

Women should dress modestly in long skirts or trousers and avoid revealing tops and dresses.

Security

Foreign nationals are advised not to visit Afghanistan unless absolutely necessary. All visitors should register their presence with their diplomatic representative and keep up-to-date with local information on threat levels. Travel within the country should be kept to a minimum to lessen the risk of the threats posed by armed criminals and terrorists and between rival tribal armies.

Kidnapping, which is widespread, is the most serious threat to any visitor; seeking professional advice for security measures may be necessary.

Suicide-bombings have become more common and visitors must observe a high level of vigilance.

There is widespread danger from mines and unexploded ordnance throughout the country.

All street demonstrations and large gatherings should be avoided.

Getting there

The current security situation means that flights may be cancelled and roads closed at any time. It is advisable to check before travelling. The information that follows may also change.

Air

National airline: Ariana Afghan Airlines

International airport/s: Kabul airport (KBL), 16km from Kabul; facilities include a bank, bar and restaurant.

Airport tax: Departure tax: Af200

Surface

Road: There are links to Iran and Pakistan via the Asia Highway and to the CIS via road and rail. Hostilities have periodically closed the Pakistan route; check before travelling.

In 2007, a road bridge spanning the River Pyanj in northern Afghanistan opened, linking Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The bridge, costing US\$37m, was paid for by the US.

The Regional Road Corridor Improvement Project, estimated at US\$18 billion, to improve Central Asian roads, airports, railway lines and seaports and provide a vital transit route between Europe and Asia was agreed on 3 November 2007. Six new transit corridors, between Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, of mainly roads and rail links, will be constructed, or existing resources upgraded, by 2013. Half the costs will be provided by the Asian Development Bank