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# The Social Wandering of the Afghan Kuchis

## *Changing patterns, perceptions and politics of an Afghan community*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kuchis, as nomads are now usually referred to in Afghanistan, occupy a peculiar place among Afghan communities. They constitute, like many nomadic communities in other countries, a particularly disadvantaged group with respect to many social indicators such as access to education, health or livelihood standards. Although many Kuchis are settling down, a growing and unregulated phenomenon taking place at the outskirts of the major Afghan cities, these indicators are still not improving.

At another level, however, the recent trajectory of Afghan nomads has been marked by the political specificity that the post-2001 Afghan institutions have attributed to them under the law. In particular, they have been made a separate electoral constituency. This newly-found political identity has not brought only positive developments. It has enhanced the role of a few powerbrokers in the frequent disturbances related to Kuchi migrations or land claims. Moreover, it has added to the arguments made against the Kuchis by some political and ethnic groups, portraying them as tools of Pashtun nationalists or even Taliban insurgents.

The combination of the two phenomena, difficult sedentarisation and their new politicised role, has arguably given the Kuchis a 'bad name'. Many Afghans now view the Kuchis as a troublesome lot or as outcasts. They are often perceived by city-dwellers as protesters who periodically block the roads, or as late-comers of urbanisation who join the cities but settle in shabby conditions. Afghan rural communities engaged in conflicts with the Kuchis also have negative perceptions of them. The most infamous instances, like the annual confrontation over access to grazing land, get spiced up with a distinct communal or ethnic flavour that creates political tension at the national level.

The Afghan government has taken initiatives and created institutions to improve the situation and guarantee fair political representation to the nomads. But they have had limited beneficial impact on the masses of disadvantaged Kuchis. At the same time, they have somewhat artificially 'fixed' the common political identity of an internally diverse group at the very moment that its livelihoods are differentiating and diverging. As a result, those very nomads who stop being such, at least in the traditional notion of the term, cling most strongly to the

'Kuchi identity'. Likewise, at a time when the nomads' livelihoods and economics have become less central to the Afghan economy, their political assertiveness (or the level of political mobilisation stirred in their name) has increased.

One reason for this can be found in the type of political relations established between a small number of prominent Kuchi leaders and their constituencies. State intervention that led to the allocation of ten reserved Kuchi seats in the lower house of the parliament resulted in the establishment of recognised political representatives for the Kuchis. This has, however, not led to the rise of a Kuchi 'intelligentsia' or group of policy-makers focusing on Kuchi issues. Instead, powerbrokers have used their political legitimacy as a tool for patronage, made more effective by the strained settling conditions for Kuchis. Therefore, 'Kuchi politics' more often aim to further personal agendas, than to achieve lasting improvements in the living conditions of the Kuchi population. Still, many Kuchis have found this patronage increasingly necessary to guarantee basic benefits in the face of competition for access to settlements in urban areas and to the job market, a competition exacerbated by their disadvantaged starting position in terms of education and qualifications.

Afghan nomads have fascinated international scholars in the past; this has led to a substantial body of literature about their livelihoods, customs and social structure in pre-war Afghanistan, and about changes during the long decades of Afghan conflicts. Nowadays, however, relatively few scholars seem to have dealt with the Kuchis' participation in the country's politics. Most efforts have focused on their livelihoods, land property issues and aid strategies. Altogether, both at national and international levels, in post-2001 Afghanistan Kuchis have been mostly read through the lenses of humanitarian concern or ethnic conflicts. However, the links that connect their situation with political and economic exploitation have not been exposed.

This paper explores changes in the identity of the Afghan nomads as they develop a Kuchi identity that rests more on political networks than on shared nomadic livelihoods; how the state's political recognition of a separate Kuchi constituency has influenced this process; and finally the directions in which the Kuchis have been politically mobilised and how far the Kuchis have travelled to develop cohesive tools for action and policy-making.

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Fabrizio Foschini is a Political Analyst with the Afghanistan Analysts Network. He studied History of Asia at the University of Bologna in Italy, and achieved his Ph.D focusing on the modern and contemporary history of Afghanistan, a country where he researched and travelled extensively since 2003. He participated in the EC/UNDP Access to Justice at District Level monitoring program in 2003-04, and later returned to the country for long periods to carry out academic field research in Kabul and Badakhshan province, before joining the AAN office in Kabul in April 2010. Fabrizio has published extensively on Afghanistan and he is fluent in Dari.

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