

## **Drivers Fear Wrong Turning**

**Author:** [Wahidullah Amani](#)

Motorists told to shift their steering wheels from right to left, but say they can't afford the conversion work.

When it comes to driving, the Afghan government has declared that right is wrong. It has decreed that all vehicles must have steering wheels on the left-hand side.

That's perfectly logical in a country where, as in most of the world, traffic flows on the right. The only problem is that most vehicles currently in Afghanistan have their steering wheels on the right.

Traffic experts contend this is the reason why there are so many accidents in Afghanistan. If only the steering wheels were on the left, all would be well, they say.

Of course, most people would say that the steering wheel's location hardly matters in a country where drivers use any part of road they wish - right, left or middle - and traffic rules are routinely ignored.

But the government is still insisting that in less than 18 months, all vehicles must have their steering wheels on the left.

Afghanistan's director of traffic, Abdul Shakoor Kherkhawa, issued the order last September. "At present, 85 per cent of all traffic accidents are due to these [right-hand drive] vehicles," said Kherkhawa.

Officials estimate that about 100,000 vehicles, or about half of the country's total, crowd the narrow roads and streets of Kabul alone. The overwhelming majority of vehicles in the country are Japanese, with Toyota the most popular make. Many of the right-hand drive models were originally made for the Pakistani market, one of a handful of countries where cars drive on the left.

Khuda Dad Fiqhi, an official with the foreign business bureau of the ministry of commerce, said vehicles with right-hand steering flooded the country illegally during the factional fighting of the early Nineties. He blames the Taliban for licensing such vehicles during their time in power.

While almost everyone agrees with the idea of improving traffic safety, the decree has stirred up a hornet's nest of resistance. Car owners now face the prospect of paying more than 1,000 US dollars to have their steering wheels moved. And car dealers who currently have right-wheel drive vehicles in stock face the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of cars and trucks they can no longer sell.

Mohammad Akram, a taxi driver in Kabul, said he makes only about 500 afghanis a day, or about 10 dollars, and can't afford the conversion. He said he barely makes enough to feed his family.

Akram said that if forced, he will comply with the order, but only if the work is done properly and costs no more than 250 dollars. He noted that he had already borrowed 10,200 dollars to buy his Toyota Corolla, and still owes 6,200 dollars. A costly conversion would bankrupt him, he said.

Ziaudin, another Kabul taxi driver, said the government should do something else to solve the traffic

problems. "The government should not do this," he said, since nearly all the cars in the capital currently have their steering wheels on the right side.

He is also worried that the conversions will not be done properly and could lead to mechanical problems and additional costs in the future.

Most owners of private vehicles accept the need for conversion, but few say they can afford it.

Abdullah Umaid said he paid 200,000 afghanis, or about 4,000 dollars, for his Toyota. "I had only enough money to buy a car," he said. "I do not have more money to convert the steering wheel, and now I am prepared to sell my car, with a loss of 20,000 afghanis."

Aziz Ahmad Faqiri, who just recently bought a car, was also dismayed at the new requirement. "It's a good idea but only if the work is done to international standards and if it cost less" than the estimated 1,000 dollars, he said.

Shah Mahmood, the owner of the Anosh car dealership, is among those with most to lose. He currently has 30 new cars on his lot, worth about 180,000 dollars, all with right-hand steering wheels, and says no one will buy the cars because the government will refuse to renew license plates for any vehicles with right-hand steering after September 2005.

Kherkhawa said his agency is currently seeking to license a number of firms to perform the conversions, which must be paid for by the car owners. The government has said that companies interested in performing the work must ensure that the work is done properly, inexpensively and be completed by September 2005.

So far, only one firm, Afghan Technical Service, has obtained permission to undertake steering-wheel conversions. But it has yet to start doing them, and company officials were unavailable to comment on how much they expected to charge for the work.

Shah Mahmood agrees that moving steering wheels from right to left may result in fewer accidents but feels that "even though it is a positive step, people are poor and cannot afford the expense".

Wahidullah Amani is an independent journalist in Kabul.

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