

A Way of Life Ending

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The new constitution includes provisions to help the country's nomads devastated by conflict and drought.

Chaman Gul Kuchi thinks that the time has come to give up the nomadic life he and his forebears have followed for generations.

"Our ancestors didn't know any better. They roamed the desert and spent all their money on animals which would die," said the 60-year old, who now lives, along with 40 other families, in a cluster of mud huts in west Kabul.

"We do not want to buy animals anymore, and we want to settle down," he said.

With the traditional pastoral life of Afghanistan's nomads largely destroyed in recent years, many like Chaman Gul are welcoming provisions in the new constitution that may help people like him achieve a more settled existence.

The document, recently signed by President Hamed Karzai, includes special articles aimed at improving the lot of Kuchis, as the local nomads of Pashtun origins are known, including provisions for housing.

The Kuchis are a community singled out by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA, as one of the largest vulnerable populations in the country.

Not only has the fighting forced many into squalid camps both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the droughts of recent years have taken a terrible toll on their remaining stock.

Chaman's previous pastoral life - moving between Jalalabad in the winter and Kabul in the summer - was made all but impossible and he was forced to sell his flock of 40 sheep.

For the last two years he has eked out an existence as a daily labourer in the capital.

Now Article 14 of the new constitution obliges the state to implement effective programmes for "improving the economic, social and living conditions" of nomads as well as adopting "necessary measures for housing and distribution of public estates to deserving citizens".

Mohammad Omar Babrakzai, the undersecretary at the ministry of borders and tribal affairs, the office responsible for matters relating to Kuchis, fears that the requirements are too vaguely worded.

"It should have been written without the wording 'in accordance with its financial resources'," said Babrakzai. "How could the government not have the financial ability? All lands belong to the government."

But Hashmat Ghani Ahmadzai, the national leader of the Kuchis and one of the community's 11 special representatives at the Constitutional Loya Jirga, insisted that everything promised will follow in due course.

"After the presidential election [scheduled for June] when the budget of the government is allocated and Kuchi numbers are counted [under the new census] the government will take the necessary steps," he said confidently.

Just determining how many Kuchis there are in Afghanistan will itself be a major undertaking. Ahmadzai said the figure could be as high as six million, out of a total population of 20 to 25 million Afghans.

Mohammad Omar Kuchi, 30, who lives in the same cluster of huts as Chaman Gul, is another of those who would seize the chance to settle down for good.

"If the government distributes land for houses to us and assists us with flour then we are ready to provide any sort of service they want," Omar told IWPR.

But others are less anxious to abandon the traditional Kuchi existence.

Rather than pay for his settlement, Wals Mir would rather see the government replace the animals which either he was forced to sell, or have died.

And Nasrullah Khan, a community leader in the Ghazni province, argues that the loss of traditional nomad pursuits will adversely affect the country as a whole.

"If Kuchis give up their nomadic lifestyle then I think it would damage the economy of Afghanistan very much, because it is Kuchis that produce meat, milk, butter and karakul [lambskin]," he said.

Despite these desires, the Kuchis may have little choice but to give up their way of life. Even Mir acknowledges that since powerful people are taking over traditional pastoral land, the Kuchis are no longer able to roam freely.

"In summer our place was in the Panjshir, in the winter Laghman," he said. "Now, the commanders dominate in both places."

Others would like to keep a foot in each world.

"We want land from the government for the constructions of houses," said Babrak Khan who acts as a representative for the Kuchis of the Baghlan province. "But we will also keep our nomadic lifestyle. If we have houses and animals, our lives will be better."

The constitution provides other special provisions for Kuchis, including promoting education for nomads in recognition of the community's high rate of illiteracy, even by Afghan standards.

Seyed Hossein Ishraq Hosseini, the undersecretary at the education ministry, confirmed to IWPR that it is planning special summer and winter classes to fit in with the Kuchis' migrational patterns.

Dormitories may be provided for older students and the government will make increasing the number of Kuchi teachers a priority, he said.

Another constitutional provision requires the president to choose two special Kuchi representatives to sit in the House of Elders, Meshrano Jirga, one of the two chambers of parliament.

But not everyone thought this number of representatives was adequate. Hasti Khan, who represented Kuchis in the north-east of the country at the Constitutional Loya Jirga, threatens a boycott of the upcoming elections if the numbers are not doubled.

“We did not agree at the Loya Jirga to having two representatives for Kuchis in the national assembly, and demanded from chairman Sibghatullah Mujaddidi and the head of the secretariat Farooq Wardak that the Kuchis should have at least four delegates,” he said.

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